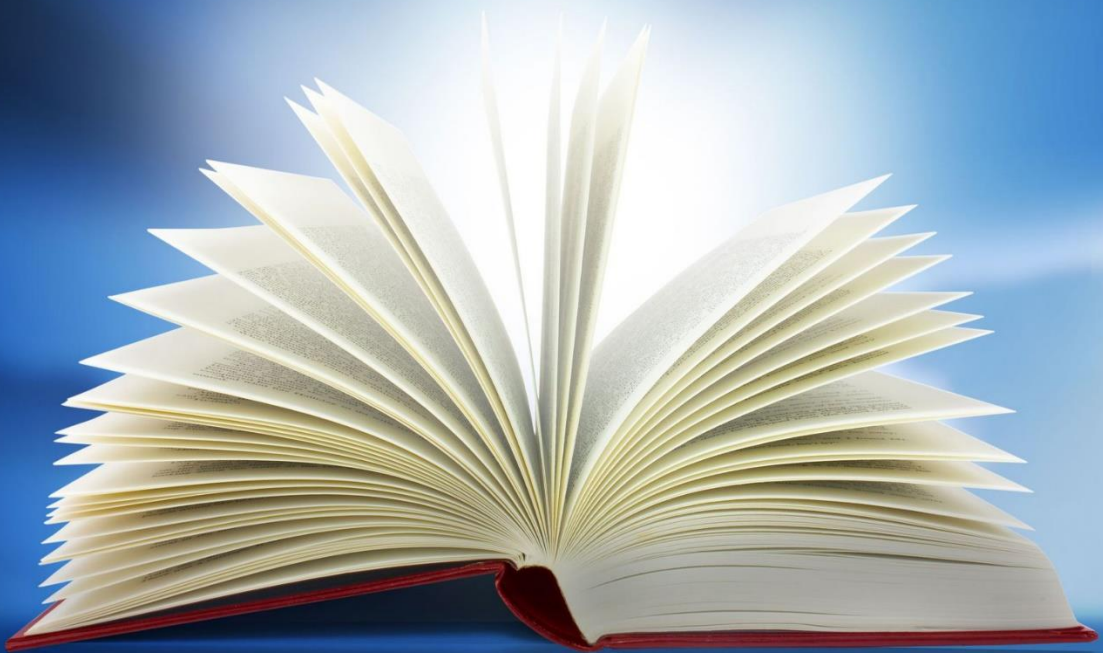


DISCOVERING the BIBLE

An Introduction to
Each of its Books

By R. Herbert



A Tactical Belief Book

DISCOVERING the BIBLE

An Introduction to Each of its Books

R. Herbert

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capital letters represents the Hebrew *Yahweh*, signifying God’s
eternal existence. “Lord” in regular upper and lower case letters
represents the Hebrew *Adonai*, a name stressing God’s power and
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INTRODUCTION

People who have read the Bible for a long time – perhaps for many years – tend to take for granted the background knowledge they have built up about its various books. When they begin to read a given part of the Bible – for example, the first epistle to the Corinthians – they already know who wrote it and the basic situation that was being addressed in the epistle. That knowledge helps them understand each verse a little better as they read it.

But for those who are new, or relatively new, to the Christian faith, it can take a good while to put together the basic background information that helps us understand what each of the Bible's sixty-six books is saying. Even after we have been reading the Bible for a while, our knowledge of the Bible's books may be incomplete.

We may know all about First Corinthians (1 Corinthians), for example, but what about Habakkuk or Revelation? Are we as confident about our knowledge of those books? What is the difference between the book of Zephaniah and that of Zechariah? There may be a number of the Bible's books that are still unknown to us – or perhaps we have “tried” some of them, but not really understood what their background or message was.

For all these situations, and others, we have produced this guide to help in the process of discovering the greatest books of all. *Discovering the Bible* is not a commentary or an in-depth look at the Bible's component books. It is a simple guide giving a brief introduction to each book of the Old and New Testament: who wrote it, why it was written, and what it says.

Sometimes, just knowing what the social conditions were when a book of the Old Testament was written or knowing where a New Testament letter was sent from, or to, can make a great difference to our understanding of what that book says.

But we have kept each introduction simple. Technical matters have been avoided wherever possible in order to focus on the basic

information needed to understand the original setting and the intended message of each biblical book.

In addition, this guide selects a summary verse for each book that can be memorized in order to help remember the overall theme of the work, plus a verse “to think about” with some related scriptures that can be applied in our lives, whether the biblical book is about the way we live or stories about how other people lived. The goal is to show the new reader that every book – even the few that seem to be mainly lists and other records – contains gems of instruction that we can dig out and apply to ourselves.

Above all, we have kept each introduction short – a single page – so it can be read quickly without “bogging down” in unnecessary details before moving on to read the book itself.

Despite its simplicity and brevity, we are confident that if you are only now beginning to read the Bible – or would just like to refresh your knowledge of its individual books – this guide will help you discover, or discover a little more fully, the individual books that make up the “book of books” – the Bible.

PART ONE:
THE OLD TESTAMENT

1. GENESIS:

In the Beginning

Summary verse: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1).

Background: Genesis means “origins” or “beginnings.” But the book of Genesis continues beyond creation and covers a greater period of history than any other book in the Bible – more time than the remaining sixty-five books together.

WHO wrote it? Moses, the greatest prophet in the Old Testament. The data found in the Bible indicate Moses lived around 1400 BC.

WHY was it written? So we would know that God not only made the world and everything in it, but also that people disobeyed God and brought punishment on themselves, requiring a plan from God to rescue and bless the world.

WHAT does it say? This book of origins focuses on the beginning of the world, human failure, and the unfolding of God’s plan for divine restoration. First, Genesis tells us about the creation of the world and everything in it – in a way that anyone could understand at any time in history. Genesis then tells us how the first humans sinned by doing what they wanted to do rather than doing what God commanded. This failure to follow God’s instructions led to numerous catastrophes for humans – from the story of Adam and Eve’s loss of a perfect world to that of the flood in which all but righteous Noah and his family were destroyed. The next major event recorded was when God made a “covenant” or agreement with Abraham to whom he gave the promise that his descendants would become a blessing to all of humanity.

To think about: “... through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me” (22:18; compare Romans 4:17; Galatians 3:7-9).

2. EXODUS:

Freedom to Serve God

Summary verse: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Exodus 20:2).

Background: Exodus is really two books – the first half is a history book and the second half is a book of religious instruction. The first extensive poetry in the Bible, the “Song of Moses,” is also found in Exodus Chapter 15.

WHO wrote it? This is the second book written by Moses.

WHY was it written? To record how the descendants of Abraham were delivered from slavery in Egypt and to list the laws that God gave to guide them in their relationship with him and with one another.

WHAT does it say? The first half of Exodus (Chapters 1-18) describes how Abraham’s descendants – now the “People of Israel” – became enslaved in Egypt and how God raised up Moses to rescue them. The book tells us of the “plagues” God used to force the Egyptians to release their Israelite slaves, their exodus from Egypt, crossing of the Red Sea, and journey to Mount Sinai. The second part of the book relates how God gave the Ten Commandments (arguably the most important laws in world history) and other rules as part of a great covenant between himself and Israel. God also gave instructions for making the tabernacle (a portable temple) and laws for the priests who were to serve in it. Unfortunately, despite God’s deliverance and continued help throughout the period described by Exodus, the book records many instances of the people being ungrateful and even rebelling against him.

To think about: “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession...” (19:5; compare Deuteronomy 7:6-8).

3. LEVITICUS: Laws of Holiness

Summary verse: “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).

Background: Everything recorded in Leviticus takes place in one location – at Mount Sinai. The book is named after the Israelite tribe of Levi from which the priests were chosen and means “that which pertains to the Levites.”

WHO wrote it? This is the third book written by Moses.

WHY was it written? To show the holiness of God and how humans could approach him. This was done by giving instructions to Israel’s priests and by showing the people how to be holy.

WHAT does it say? Holiness – which means to be set apart – is the great theme of Leviticus, and the words holy and holiness occur some 100 times in this book. Most of the instructions given are for aspects of “ritual” holiness such as how to make offerings and gifts of various kinds to God, how to make sacrifices for the removal of sin, instructions for special holy days, and things of that nature. But Leviticus also contains many moral laws. Some of the Ten Commandments are repeated in Chapter 19, and there are other laws which have to do with personal behavior and holiness before God – such as laws concerning improper sexual relations, and the command not to sacrifice one’s children as some ancient nations did. Although the “ritual laws” were replaced in the new covenant described in the New Testament, the moral and behavioral principles scattered throughout Leviticus make the book just as relevant to us today as it was for the ancient Israelites.

To think about: “I am the LORD, who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy” (11:45; compare Luke 1:73-75; 2 Corinthians 7:1).

4. NUMBERS: Wilderness Wanderings

Summary verse: “Take a census of the whole Israelite community by their clans and families ...” (Numbers 1:2).

Background: Numbers is named after the “numbering” or census at Mount Sinai of the Israelites who came out of Egypt and the census in the wilderness of those who grew up after the Exodus, although many other events are recorded in this book.

WHO wrote it? This is the fourth book written by Moses.

WHY was it written? To record the reasons why that generation of the people of Israel was not allowed to go into the land promised to their ancestors because of their rebellion and unbelief.

WHAT does it say? Numbers covers most of the forty years the people of Israel spent in the wilderness. It records the sending into Canaan of Joshua and Caleb along with ten other spies on a forty-day reconnaissance mission – and Israel’s lack of faith in refusing to go into the Promised Land when the spies returned. The tragic consequences of this unbelief and rebellion were that God rejected that generation and what could have been a journey of one or two weeks to Canaan became a forty-year ordeal – a year for each day of the spies’ mission – of wandering in the wilderness. Not surprisingly, this book is often called the Book of Wanderings and the Book of Unbelief. Yet despite the Israelite’s lack of faith in this period, God continued to provide for them, helped them to defeat enemy kings, worked several miracles among them, and protected them from those who wished to curse them and do them harm.

To think about: “For the LORD had told those Israelites they would surely die in the wilderness, and not one of them was left...” (26:65; compare 2 Timothy 2:19).

5. DEUTERONOMY: The Covenant Renewed

Summary verse: “... I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live” (Deuteronomy 30:19).

Background: The events recorded in Deuteronomy occur in the wilderness of Moab, at the end of the Israelites’ wanderings, forty days before the new generation entered the land of Canaan.

WHO wrote it? This is the fifth book written by Moses.

WHY was it written? Deuteronomy means “second law” or “repeated law” and refers to Moses repeating the laws of God to the Israelites before they entered the Promised Land.

WHAT does it say? Because (as the book of Numbers shows) the people had broken their covenant with God by refusing to go into the land, Deuteronomy shows the covenant had to be renewed. The book consists of three sermons and two prophetic poems by Moses which review God’s laws and speak of what Israel’s future would be – depending on whether they chose to rebel and bring curses on themselves or to obey and be blessed. Moses was 120 years old at this point, and the book tells of his commissioning Joshua to lead the conquest of the Promised Land and ends with Moses climbing a high mountain to view the land himself before dying. The final words in the book are the obituary of this great servant of God which states: “Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, who did all those signs and wonders the LORD sent him to do ...” (34:10-11).

To think about: “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (6:5; compare Mark 12:30-31).

6. JOSHUA: War and Peace

Summary verse: “So Joshua took the entire land, just as the LORD had directed Moses ... as an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal divisions. Then the land had rest from war” (Joshua 11:23).

Background: The Hebrew name Joshua (Yehoshua) means “salvation.” It is a form of the same name as that of Jesus (Yeshua).

WHO wrote it? Although some traditions say Joshua wrote this book around 1300 BC, most scholars agree that it seems to have been compiled at some later time.

WHY was it written? To record the conquest of the Promised Land and the commands to Israel to remain faithful.

WHAT does it say? The book of Joshua begins at the onset of the conquest (1:2-3) and ends with its completion (23:14). This victory was accomplished through military campaigns in which Israel fought more than thirty armies over a seven-year period. Joshua himself is shown as a skilled military tactician and commander. Nevertheless, we are told that God repeatedly encouraged him in his leadership, and he in turn encouraged and guided the Israelites. Already 85 years old at the beginning of the conquest, Joshua led Israel for a further twenty-five years – until he was 110. This great leader’s final recorded deed was to renew the covenant between Israel and God, telling the people: “Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness ...” (24:14).

To think about: “Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful” (1:8; compare Psalm 119:15, 48, 97).

7. JUDGES:

Disobedience and Deliverance

Summary verse: “... another generation grew up who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel” (Judges 2:10).

Background: After the death of Joshua, Israel fell away from obeying God and entered a relatively dark age that lasted several hundred years.

WHO wrote it? No author is mentioned, but the book may possibly have been compiled by the priest Samuel around 1000 BC.

WHY was it written? To show Israel’s repeated turning from God and his ongoing mercy in rescuing them.

WHAT does it say? The book of Judges tells us that “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit” (21:25). It was a period characterized by an ongoing cycle of rebellion, retribution, repentance, and restoration. First the people would turn from God, then, after he allowed them to be conquered by outside invaders, they would eventually seek God and he would have pity on them – raising up a leader who would deliver them. Although these leaders are often called “judges,” they were not like judges in a court of law, but rather strong leaders who guided the nation and often led the people against their enemies. Not all the judges of this period are named, but of the seventeen whose names are given, the most famous are Deborah, Gideon, Samson, and Samuel. The best of the judges initiated at least temporary revivals in worship in what would otherwise have been a predominantly dark and often evil era.

To think about: “But when they cried out to the LORD, he raised up for them a deliverer...” (3:9; compare Psalm 107:1-31).

8. RUTH:

Strength, Loyalty, and Kindness

Summary verse: “But Ruth replied, ‘Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God’” (Ruth 1:16).

Background: Many people think the book of Ruth is a simple “love story.” In reality it is not a love story in the modern sense of “romantic love,” but a story of godly love and kindness.

WHO wrote it? No author is mentioned, but the book may possibly have been composed by the priest Samuel around 1000 BC.

WHY was it written? To show God’s acceptance of all people and his faithfulness to all who walk in his ways.

WHAT does it say? This beautiful book, set in the days of the Judges, tells the story of the Israelite widow Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth, for whom the book is named. Naomi’s strength, Ruth’s loyalty, and the kindness of the man Boaz who eventually became Ruth’s husband are central themes in the story. Because Ruth was a Moabite, a pagan people who were enemies of the Israelites, she technically had no place in Israel, yet the book shows her virtuousness led to her acceptance and to becoming the great-grandmother of King David and an ancestor of Christ himself. Ruth’s loving loyalty is shown in the first half of the book (Chapters 1 and 2) and rewarded in the second half (Chapters 3 and 4).

To think about: “May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge” (2:12; compare Psalm 5:11; Romans 2:6-7).

9. 1 SAMUEL: The Transition to Kingship

Summary verse: “... appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have” (1 Samuel 8:5).

Background: 1 and 2 Samuel were originally one book in the Hebrew Bible. It was known as the “Book of Samuel,” but the book is split into two parts in most modern Bibles.

WHO wrote it? According to Jewish tradition the book of Samuel was written by the prophet Samuel himself, around 1000 BC, though some sections – such as the account of Samuel’s death (1 Samuel 25:1) – were clearly added later.

WHY was it written? To tell the story of the prophet Samuel and to record the history of the transition from the time of the judges to the beginning of Israelite kingship.

WHAT does it say? 1 and 2 Samuel give a continuous narrative that records the transition from the period of judges to the early years of the Israelite monarchy – from the priest Eli and prophet Samuel to the kings Saul and David. But the book is not purely a historical account. It also shows us the spiritual weaknesses and strengths of its characters and contains many important lessons. 1 Samuel also tells the story of Samuel himself – one of the greatest prophets of the Old Testament who is compared to Moses in Jeremiah 15:1 and mentioned in the “Faith Hall of Fame” in Hebrews 11:32.

To think about: “.... The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (16:7; compare Psalm 44:21; Jeremiah 17:10).

10. 2 SAMUEL: The Reign of King David

Summary verse: “Then David knew that the LORD had established him as king over Israel and had exalted his kingdom for the sake of his people Israel” (2 Samuel 5:12).

Background: The entire book of 2 Samuel centers around the reign of King David. Ruling at the half-way point between Abraham and Christ, David’s reign began to fulfill the promises given to Abraham and foreshadowed the rule of the future Messiah.

WHO wrote it? According to ancient traditions, 2 Samuel was composed by the prophets Nathan and Gad (approximately 1000 BC) who are mentioned in the book, though it may have been compiled at a later time.

WHY was it written? To tell the story of ancient Israel’s greatest king and to show that God promised him an eternal dynasty.

WHAT does it say? 2 Samuel records the long reign of David, first as king over Judah and then over all of Israel. It recounts his leadership and military successes in establishing his kingdom, yet it also documents his failures as an individual, a father, and a king. Despite his occasional sins and shortcomings, 2 Samuel shows that David always repented and that he remained faithful to God to the end of his life. The book also records God’s promises to David of an eternal dynasty – a promise that could not have been fulfilled physically, but that would be fulfilled in David’s eventual descendant, Jesus Christ.

To think about: “Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever” (7:16; compare Luke 1:31-33).

11. 1 KINGS: Divided Kingdoms

Summary verse: “So the LORD said to Solomon, ‘Since this is your attitude and you have not kept my covenant and my decrees, which I commanded you, I will most certainly tear the kingdom away from you ...’” (1 Kings 11:11).

Background: Like 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings were originally one book which was split into two when the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek (which, unlike Hebrew, included vowels and took more than one scroll for the translated book).

WHO wrote it? The author of this book is unknown. Jewish tradition claims it was Jeremiah, while some scholars suggest other prophets or the scribe Ezra as possibilities.

WHY was it written? To describe the breakdown of the kingdom of David through the eventual failures of his son Solomon and his successors. The work of the prophet Elijah is also recorded.

WHAT does it say? The first half of 1 Kings describes the reign of King Solomon – his initial obedience and his construction of the temple in Jerusalem. But this first part of the book also shows Solomon’s gradual turning from God through the influence of his many pagan wives. The second half of the book describes the split in the kingdom – between Judah in the south and the other tribes of Israel in the north. Sadly, of all the kings of these divided kingdoms listed in 1 Kings, only Asa (15:9-24) and Jehoshaphat (22:41-50) were obedient to God and blessed by him.

To think about: “... LORD ... there is no God like you ... you who keep your covenant of love with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way” (8:23; compare Deuteronomy 7:9).

12. 2 KINGS: Defeated Kingdoms

Summary verse: “Therefore the LORD rejected all the people of Israel; he afflicted them and gave them into the hands of plunderers ...” (2 Kings 17:20).

Background: 2 Kings features stories of many unique events and people – including the prophet Elisha and the miracles done through him.

WHO wrote it? As with 1 Kings, Jewish tradition attributes this book to Jeremiah, while some scholars suggest other prophets or the scribe Ezra as possible authors. Various dates are thus possible.

WHY was it written? To show the continued turning from God that led to the eventual captivity of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Empire of Assyria and the captivity of the southern kingdom of Judah by Babylon.

WHAT does it say? During these times many prophets were sent by God to warn the two kingdoms of their punishment if they did not repent. Two kings – Hezekiah and Josiah – were obedient and revived true religion, but their successors soon turned to pagan gods and led the downward moral and ethical spiral that ended with the captivity and slavery of the people of the kingdoms of Israel (c. 850 BC) and Judah (c. 586 BC). Yet despite the sins of Israel and Judah, God continued to work with them and to bring about their eventual freedom.

To think about: “But the LORD was gracious to them and had compassion and showed concern for them because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob ...” (13:23; compare Isaiah 54:10).

13. 1 CHRONICLES: Genealogies and Histories

Summary verse: “All Israel was listed in the genealogies recorded in the book of the kings of Israel and Judah ...” (1 Chronicles 9:1).

Background: Like the two books of Samuel and Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles were originally one book in the Hebrew Bible, but were divided into two parts in translations made later.

WHO wrote it? Possibly the scribe Ezra around 450 BC. The book was clearly compiled from earlier historical records (see, for example, 29:29).

WHY was it written? To provide additional information regarding the genealogy and history of the Jewish people, and especially the royal house of David.

WHAT does it say? The first nine chapters of 1 Chronicles give a detailed genealogy from Adam to King David. The rest of the book covers the same period as 1 and 2 Samuel (the reigns of Saul and David), but the perspective is very different. While the books of Samuel are written from a political perspective, 1 Chronicles is written from a religious perspective – Chronicles is often a commentary on the books of Samuel and Kings. 1 Chronicles also pays special attention to the preparations made for building the temple. The book ends with the death of David and the beginning of the reign of his son Solomon who continued David’s line.

To think about: “Yours, LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, LORD, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all” (29:11; compare 1 Timothy 1:17).

14. 2 CHRONICLES: From Glory to Grief

Summary verse: “... The LORD is with you when you are with him. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will forsake you” (2 Chronicles 15:2).

Background: In the original order of the Hebrew manuscripts, Chronicles is the final book of the Hebrew Scriptures. In later translations such as our English Bibles, it was moved to its present position to give a chronological flow to the Old Testament books.

WHO wrote it? Possibly the scribe Ezra or one of his contemporaries around 450 BC.

WHY was it written? To add further details and commentary on the events recorded in 1 and 2 Kings – the history of the Jewish people from King David to the Babylonian captivity.

WHAT does it say? 2 Chronicles details the reigns of Solomon and the subsequent kings who ruled Judah after the division of Solomon’s kingdom. The account focuses on the few kings who were obedient to God – especially Asa, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah. Some of these kings brought about revivals of the true religion, though they were all followed by evil kings whose reigns ultimately led to Judah’s overthrow by Babylon, the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, and the captivity of the Jewish people. Yet despite Judah’s overall unfaithfulness, God continued to influence events on behalf of his people, and the book ends with the decree of the Persian king, Cyrus, allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild their temple (36:23).

To think about: “For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him ...” (16:9; compare Proverbs 3:5-8).

15. EZRA: Returning and Rebuilding

Summary verse: “This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: ‘The LORD, the God of heaven ... has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple ...’” (Ezra 1:2-3).

Background: Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book telling different aspects of the same story.

WHO wrote it? Apparently – at least partly – Ezra himself around 450 BC.

WHY was it written? To document the royal decree that freed the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple and their religion after their captivity in Babylon. The events of Ezra took place during an international upsurge in religious and philosophical belief – including the rise of the Buddha in India (560-480 BC) and Confucius in China (551-479 BC).

WHAT does it say? In 539 BC, King Cyrus of Persia overthrew Babylon and allowed the captive Jews to return to their homeland. The book of Ezra continues where 2 Chronicles left off, telling of the return of two groups from Babylon – the first (led by Zerubbabel) to rebuild the temple (Chapters 1-6), and another (led by Ezra) some years later to rebuild the religious aspects of the Jews’ society (Chapters 7-10). Although the actual rebuilding of the temple took only seven years, Ezra documents the opposition of enemies that delayed the work over a period of 21 years. He also shows how the prayers of the Jews were answered by God granting them favor in the eyes of the Persian kings and governors.

To think about: “So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer” (8:23; compare Matthew 6:16-18).

16. NEHEMIAH: Rebuilding and Restoring

Summary verse: “So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart” (Nehemiah 4:6).

Background: Nehemiah was the “cupbearer” of Artaxerxes I or II, a king of Persia who ruled around 450 or 400 BC.

WHO wrote it? Apparently – at least partly – Nehemiah himself.

WHY was it written? While the book of Ezra deals with the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem and the religious restoration of Judah, Nehemiah deals mainly with the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s protective walls and Judah’s political and moral restoration.

WHAT does it say? The events described in Nehemiah took place in the same period as those recorded in Ezra. The book tells how Nehemiah learned that Jerusalem was without walls and how he asked the Persian king’s permission to rebuild them. The king appointed him to do this, and Nehemiah led a group of Jews back to Judah. Despite the opposition of Israel’s enemies and some of the Jews themselves, Nehemiah rebuilt the city walls and reformed the Jewish community. He returned to Persia, but later revisited Jerusalem to correct various social problems and violations of the law of Moses. Nehemiah shows the great dedication of many of the Jews to both prayer and action – doing everything they themselves could do after praying for God’s help.

To think about: “They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat” (4:8-9; compare Matthew 6:15). Like Nehemiah, we must do our part and then we can ask God to do the rest.

17. ESTHER: Intrigue and Deliverance

Summary verse: “Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor ... So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen ...” (Esther 2:17).

Background: The king called Ahasuerus in this book is most likely Xerxes I (485-465 BC), fourth king of Persia after Cyrus.

WHO wrote it? The author of this book is unknown, though the firsthand details included suggest the possibility of Mordechai.

WHY was it written? To record the deliverance of the Jewish people from a plot to destroy them, and to explain the origin of the resulting festival of Purim.

WHAT does it say? The book of Esther tells the story of a pivotal event that occurred around the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. The Jews who did not return to Jerusalem at this time, but who were scattered throughout Babylon and other parts of the Persian Empire, were greatly endangered by the Persian official Haman who plotted to have them all killed. The young Jewish woman Esther and her relative, Mordechai, were instrumental in saving the Jews through a combination of Esther’s beauty and charm and Mordechai’s wisdom. Although God is not mentioned directly in this book, his divine providence throughout the story is clear in many of the things that are recorded. The book also recounts the origins of the festival of Purim that was established to celebrate the deliverance of the Jewish people.

To think about: “... who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?” (4:14; compare Romans 8:28).

18. JOB:

Insight into Suffering

Summary verse: “Mortals, born of woman, are of few days and full of trouble” (Job 14:1).

Background: The book of Job seems to be set in the patriarchal age (the time of Abraham and his descendants). It is possibly the first book in the Bible to have been written.

WHO wrote it? The author of Job is unknown, though it could have been the man Elihu mentioned in the book or another witness to Job’s conversations with his friends.

WHY was it written? To show that suffering may have a purpose beyond our understanding and that trust in God is ultimately rewarded.

WHAT does it say? The book of Job tells the story of a righteous man who lost everything except his trust in God. Job first loses his children and possessions and then is physically afflicted. Three of Job’s friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, along with a man named Elihu, travel from nearby countries to comfort him. Yet the advice these friends give is often flawed as they presume Job has brought his suffering upon himself through sin. Throughout the arguments back and forth, Job maintains his own innocence and suggests that God has unfairly punished him. Yet Job maintains his trust in God, and at the end of the book God speaks to him. Job repents of his rash statements as he comes to see that God’s purposes and plans are often far beyond human understanding. Job is finally restored to health with a new family and many more physical blessings.

To think about: “Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him ...” (13:15; compare Psalm 9:10; Isaiah 26:3).

19. PSALMS:

Prayers and Praise

Summary verse: “Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs... give thanks to him and praise his name” (Psalm 100:2-4).

Background: The book of Psalms is the Bible’s largest book and was written over a long period – from the time of Moses (around 1400 BC) to the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (400 BC).

WHO wrote it? The book of Psalms attributes seventy-three of the psalms (about half the total number) to King David. Other authors include Solomon (72 and 127) and Moses (90).

WHY was it written? The psalms were originally accompanied by musical instruments and served as a temple hymnal as well as a guide to personal worship.

WHAT does it say? The Hebrew title of Psalms literally means “book of praises,” but the book contains many other types of material including prayers, thanks, prophecies, and even complaints addressed to God. There is also a great variety in the style and length of the compositions – including the longest chapter in the Bible (Psalm 119) and the shortest (Psalm 117). No other biblical book is as poetic or as eloquent in its praises and prayers to God. Psalms is the book of the Old Testament most quoted (almost a hundred times) in the New Testament. It is the book Jesus quoted more often than any other, and he constantly used its messianic prophecies to explain his own purpose and ministry.

To think about: “... they pierce my hands and my feet ... They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment” (22:16, 18; compare John 19:18, 23-24).

20. PROVERBS: Instruction in Wisdom

Summary verse: “The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: for gaining wisdom and instruction; for understanding words of insight” (Proverbs 1:1-2).

Background: The Hebrew name for Proverbs means “comparison,” “similarity,” or “parallel.”

WHO wrote it? Most of the proverbs in this book were written by the wise King Solomon, though some were composed by other individuals such as Agur (Chapter 30) and Lemuel (Chapter 31).

WHY was it written? Solomon is said to have composed some 3,000 proverbs (1 Kings 4:32). About 800 of those proverbs (along with some by others) were preserved in the book of Proverbs.

WHAT does it say? Proverbs constantly talks about wisdom – the ability to live life “skillfully” and for the best outcome. As a result, the proverbs give practical advice for everyday situations regarding wise interaction with others and with God. Wisdom is said to be an attribute of God himself and is often personified as a woman who urges the hearer to follow her for a happy and peaceful life. The book also frequently uses the concept of two “ways” or “paths” of life which represent following or rejecting wisdom. There is a great variety in the different types of proverbs included in the book, but most make some kind of comparison or contrast between the behavior of the wise and that of the “fool” – a Hebrew term signifying a morally destitute person.

To think about: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction” (1:7; compare 8:13; 14:27).

21. ECCLESIASTES: The Search for Meaning

Summary verse: “I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens ...” (Ecclesiastes 1:12-13).

Background: The Hebrew title of this book means “one who addresses an assembly” or “the teacher.” It signifies the formal teachings of its author to the congregation of Israel.

WHO wrote it? Probably King Solomon (970 to 931 BC), who was the only son of David to become king in Jerusalem (1:1, 12).

WHY was it written? To summarize the author’s quest for the meaning of life and his conclusions.

WHAT does it say? Ecclesiastes contains a number of proverbs and wise sayings, but it is mainly an autobiographical composition. It is often said that God is not the focus of this book and Ecclesiastes does begin with a very naturalistic vision of life viewed from a purely human perspective (1:2). But after considering the “vanity” or meaninglessness of all human pleasures, pursuits, and accomplishments as ends in themselves, Ecclesiastes ultimately reaches the conclusion that the only true meaning in life is to be found in God’s purposes and way of life. The great lesson of this book is that seeking happiness in physical things alone can only end in frustration, disappointment and dissolution. True happiness and contentment is found when our lives are centered not on the physical, but on God and a desire to walk in his ways.

To think about: “... here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind” (12:13; compare Joshua 4:24; Deuteronomy 5:29).

22. SONG OF SONGS: A Royal Romance

Summary verse: “... love is as strong as death ... It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame” (Song of Songs 8:6).

Background: This book is written like scenes in a drama with three main players: the king, his bride, and a “chorus” composed of the bride’s attendants – the “daughters of Jerusalem.”

WHO wrote it? The Song of Songs is said to have been written by King Solomon (970 to 931 BC) himself (1:1).

WHY was it written? As a literal or allegorical love song.

WHAT does it say? On the surface, the Song of Songs is simply a love song celebrating the love of Solomon for a young shepherdess. But the language of the song is so full of symbols and Oriental imagery that it is difficult to tell at times if a purely physical relationship is being celebrated or one that is a metaphor for the relationship between God and his people. This latter possibility seems all the more likely because Solomon had over a thousand wives and concubines and the undivided focus placed on the shepherdess in this work seems unlikely. In any event, the book contains many beautiful poetic expressions and descriptions and can certainly be read as the story of a physical romance involving the passionate relationship between the two lovers. Along with the book of Esther, the Song of Songs is one of the two Old Testament books that do not mention God directly. Yet this book remains a celebration of the marriage relationship and possibly also a symbol of God’s love for his people.

To think about: “My beloved is mine and I am his ...” (2:16; compare Genesis 2:24; Mark 10:9).

23. ISAIAH:

The Prophet of Salvation

Summary verse: “This is what the LORD says: ‘Maintain justice and do what is right, for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed’” (Isaiah 56:1).

Background: Isaiah was an early prophet who prophesied in Jerusalem and Judah at the time that the northern kingdom of Israel was overthrown by the Assyrians around 722 BC.

WHO wrote it? Although many feel that parts of this book are the work of a later writer or writers, the composition has great conceptual unity, and Christ quoted sections from all of its parts as being the words of Isaiah.

WHY was it written? To warn God’s people, and to show them God’s salvation. Isaiah means “Yahweh is salvation” and the Hebrew word for salvation occurs some twenty-six times in Isaiah compared to only seven times in all the other prophets combined.

WHAT does it say? There is a clear structural division in the book of Isaiah. Chapters 1–33 consist of warnings of future judgment and subsequent restoration for Judah and other nations. Chapters 34–66 are written from a later perspective in which God’s judgment is complete and restoration is about to occur. The book’s many messianic prophecies have often led to Isaiah being called the “Fifth Gospel.” Isaiah is quoted sixty-five times in the New Testament and many of its phrases – such as “a voice in the wilderness,” “a lamb to the slaughter,” and “swords into plowshares” – have become part of our culture.

To think about: “He will be the sure foundation for your times, a rich store of salvation and wisdom and knowledge; the fear of the LORD is the key to this treasure” (33:6; compare Proverbs 2:4-6).

24. JEREMIAH:

Prophet of Warning and Hope

Summary verse: “Take warning, Jerusalem, or I will turn away from you and make your land desolate so no one can live in it” (Jeremiah 6:8).

Background: Jeremiah prophesied during the reigns of the last five kings (including some of the worst rulers) of Judah – from around 626 BC until the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC.

WHO wrote it: The prophet Jeremiah is said to have dictated his prophecies to his scribe, Baruch the son of Neriah (36:4), who may have compiled the book.

WHY was it written? To warn the people of Judah that their sins would be punished, but also to offer them the hope of restitution and a new covenant with God (31:31-34).

WHAT does it say? The book of Jeremiah contains biography, history and prophecy. During the final years of the kingdom of Judah, Jeremiah was given the difficult role of prophesying that because of their sin the people of Judah must accept and not resist their overthrow by Babylon. As a result, the prophet was viewed as a traitor, opposed by false prophets, persecuted, and imprisoned. Yet Jeremiah continued to call the people to turn back to God through parables, announcements, oracles, and even by “acting out” object lessons in his own life. The book of Jeremiah contains many warnings of dire punishments, yet – especially in its later chapters – it also promises God’s acceptance and blessing if the people will truly turn back to him.

To think about: “You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart” (29:13; compare Proverbs 8:17).

25. LAMENTATIONS: A Book of Tears

Summary verse: "... pour out your heart like water in the presence of the LORD ..." (Lamentations 2:19).

Background: In 587 BC the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar II, attacked and destroyed Jerusalem and carried its people away to captivity in Babylon.

WHO wrote it? The prophet Jeremiah, often called the "Weeping Prophet" because of this book.

WHY was it written? Lamentations was written as a sequel to the book of Jeremiah, lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem that Jeremiah himself had prophesied.

WHAT does it say? The sections of this book deal with the destruction of Jerusalem (Chapter 1), God's anger with the city (Chapter 2), Jeremiah's suffering and prayer for God's mercy (Chapter 3), the results of Jerusalem's sins (Chapter 4), and a prayer for the people's restoration (Chapter 5). Throughout the book and at its conclusion, Jeremiah's mourning over Jerusalem is accompanied by confession of its people's sins and prayers for God's restoration (5:21). Lamentations is written in "acrostic" form – with the verses of most sections beginning with each of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The book has thus sometimes been called "The A-Z of Sadness." Yet despite the fact that Jeremiah clearly shows that the inhabitants of Jerusalem had brought great suffering upon themselves, he offers heartfelt prayers on behalf of those same people who had rejected and often persecuted him.

To think about: "Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail" (3:22; compare Psalm 78:38-39).

26. EZEKIEL: Visions of a Watchman

Summary verse: “Then the nations around you ... will know that I the LORD have rebuilt what was destroyed and have replanted what was desolate...” (Ezekiel 36:36).

Background: Ezekiel was a priest who was taken to Babylon and prophesied during the seventy years the Jews were held in captivity there. His activity overlapped the end of Jeremiah’s and the beginning of Daniel’s ministry.

WHO wrote it? Apparently Ezekiel, who is characterized as a prophetic “watchman” in the book (3:17; 33:7; etc.). The book was perhaps written around 587–571 BC.

WHY was it written? To remind Judah of the cause of its captivity, to stress God’s judgment on the Gentile nations as well, and to give hope that the Jewish people would be restored if they repented.

WHAT does it say? By means of parables, symbols, actions and visions, Ezekiel first shows the coming judgment of God on the nations that surrounded ancient Judah. The prophet then moves on to describe his visions regarding the restoration of Jerusalem and Judah, including the famous vision of the Valley of Dry Bones (Chapter 37) intended to show that God can breathe life into even “dead” populations such as that of Judah. Ezekiel looks forward to a time of national and ultimately millennial restoration, but he also includes numerous calls to repentance and obedience as necessary for restoration to occur and for national and individual survival (18:32; 36:25-28; etc.).

To think about: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you” (36:26; compare 1 Corinthians 3:16; Hebrews 8:10).

27. DANIEL:

Old Testament Book of Revelation

Summary verse: “... His dominion is an eternal dominion; ... He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth ...” (Daniel 4:34-35).

Background: Daniel was one of the Jews deported to Babylon where he was selected and trained for royal service. He was given a Babylonian name, Belteshazzar, meaning “[the god] Bel protects his life.” Most of the book is written in the ancient Aramaic used in Babylon.

WHO wrote it? Daniel, whose ministry spanned the whole seventy years of Judah’s captivity, wrote parts, if not all of this book (8:27; 9:2). One of only a few characters in the Bible of whom nothing negative is recorded, Daniel is said to have been “greatly esteemed” by God and men (9:23; 10:11, 19; etc.).

WHY was it written? The book of Daniel has many similarities to the book of Revelation in the New Testament. Both works reveal events leading up the establishment of the kingdom of God and encourage God’s people in difficult times.

WHAT does it say? Daniel consists of both history and prophecy. The book tells of pivotal events occurring in the life of Daniel by which he was able to rise to great power through God’s intervention. It also describes important dreams and visions Daniel received concerning successive major kingdoms of the ancient world (Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome) and their ultimate replacement by the kingdom of God (7:13-14).

To think about: “Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever” (12:3; compare Matthew 13:43).

28. HOSEA:

Mercy for the Unfaithful

Summary verse: “... like an adulterous wife this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the LORD” (Hosea 1:2).

Background: Hosea prophesied to the northern tribes of Israel (which he often refers to as “Ephraim” or “Samaria”) at the same time Isaiah was prophesying to the southern tribe of Judah.

WHO wrote it? Hosea – whose name means “salvation” – is not mentioned elsewhere in the Bible, but the Jewish Talmud records the tradition that he was the greatest prophet of his generation. He apparently lived around 750 BC.

WHY was it written? To show the people of Israel that their worship of idols was spiritual adultery and unfaithfulness to God. Hosea also charges the Israelites with sins such as lying, coveting, and ingratitude, yet he points the way back to God’s mercy.

WHAT does it say? Hosea used both words and actions to show the people of Israel their sinfulness. The prophet was instructed by God to marry an unfaithful woman whose adultery symbolized the spiritual adultery of Israel. The children born to this marriage (such as Lo-Ammi, meaning “not my people”) were named to reflect this situation. But then Hosea was instructed to be reconciled to his wife as a symbol of God’s desire for reconciliation with his people. Despite this offer of mercy, Hosea shows that Israel continued to reject God and would be punished for their sins. This aspect of his message is summed up in his words: “Return, Israel, to the LORD your God. Your sins have been your downfall!” (14:1).

To think about: “... it is time to seek the LORD, until he comes and showers his righteousness on you” (10:12; compare Jeremiah 29:13).

29. JOEL:

Punishment or Blessing?

Summary verse: “... Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming ... The day of the LORD is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it?” (Joel 2:1, 11).

Background: Joel was an early prophet to Judah. He may have lived in the ninth century BC and may have been a contemporary of the great prophet Elisha in Israel.

WHO wrote it? Apparently Joel (whose name means “Yahweh is God”) himself (1:1). Nothing is known of this prophet, apart from what is said in his book, however.

WHY was it written? To urge repentance (2:12-17) and describe God’s punishments (1:2-2:11) and blessings (2:18-27; 3:17-20).

WHAT does it say? Using symbols of destruction such as locusts, plagues, famines, invading armies, and celestial signs, Joel describes a coming “day of the LORD” which will bring judgment on Judah and all the nations. But Joel also prophesies a future time of physical and spiritual blessing for those who repent and turn to God. In the New Testament (Acts 2:17-18), on the day of Pentecost the apostle Peter quoted Joel’s prophecy regarding the giving of the Holy Spirit as one such blessing: “... I will pour out my Spirit on all people ... Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days” (2:28-29). Joel makes clear that the judgment of God is severe, but also that his desire is not to punish – that people must choose between punishment or blessing.

To think about: “... Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity” (2:13; compare Jonah 3:9-10).

30. AMOS:

Seek Good, Not Evil

Summary verse: “Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the LORD God Almighty will be with you ...” (Amos 5:14).

Background: Amos was a shepherd from Judah who was sent by God as a prophet to prophesy against the northern tribes of Israel some thirty years before their overthrow by the Assyrians.

WHO wrote it? Apparently Amos himself, around 750 BC. Like Joel, the only time the name of this prophet appears in the Old Testament is in his book.

WHY was it written? To warn the people of Israel and the nations around them that despite their apparent prosperity and security, they would be punished by God if they did not turn from their evil ways.

WHAT does it say? Amos speaks out about a number of evils such as insincere religion, self-righteousness, pride, greed, idolatry, and the oppression of the poor by the rich. The prophet warns those guilty of these sins of God’s coming judgment, and like Joel, he uses the term “the day of the LORD” in this context. The prophet’s words to Israel show the horrendous fate that awaited the northern tribes and their neighbors if they did not turn from evil. The central idea in Amos is thus the concept that God judges all peoples according to their deeds, and the people of God will not be treated any differently if they do not actively seek what is good. Amos also speaks of God’s future restitution of Israel.

To think about: “He who forms the mountains, who creates the wind, and who reveals his thoughts to mankind, who turns dawn to darkness, and treads on the heights of the earth – the LORD God Almighty is his name” (4:13; compare Psalm 89:8-12).

31. OBADIAH:

The Destruction of Edom

Summary verse: “The pride of your heart has deceived you, you who live in the clefts of the rocks and make your home on the heights ...Though you soar like the eagle and make your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down,’ declares the LORD” (Obadiah 1:3-4).

Background: Obadiah probably lived in the southern kingdom of Judah and may have written his book around 590 BC.

WHO wrote it? Thirteen individuals named Obadiah (“servant of Yahweh”) are mentioned in the Old Testament, but it is not clear which, if any of them, composed this book.

WHY was it written? To record God’s prophecies against the nation of Edom which was near Israel in the mountainous region to the southeast of the Dead Sea.

WHAT does it say? Obadiah is the shortest book – and the only one-chapter book – in the Old Testament. But this single chapter contains detailed references to the way in which the Edomites, the descendants of Jacob’s brother Esau and long-time enemies of Israel, betrayed and persecuted Judah and Jerusalem. In 597 BC when the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II attacked Jerusalem, the Edomites helped the Babylonians pillage the city. As a result, Obadiah says, “Because of the violence against your brother Jacob ... you will be destroyed forever” (1:10). Historically, the Edomites were indeed displaced and became known as the Idumeans, who were eventually crushed by Rome and no longer exist as a people.

To think about: “... As you have done, it will be done to you; your deeds will return upon your own head” (1:15; compare Matthew 16:27; 2 Corinthians 5:10).

32. JONAH:

Repentance Honored

Summary verse: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me” (Jonah 1:2).

Background: In the cuneiform writing of ancient Mesopotamia the name of Nineveh was “Place of Fish.” When Jonah did not go to Nineveh as commanded, the story tells us that God had him swallowed by a fish – showing the prophet he could not escape God’s will that he should go into the “place of fish.”

WHO wrote it? Evidently Jonah himself (2:2-9), perhaps around 760 BC.

WHY was it written? Jonah was called to warn the inhabitants of Nineveh – the largest city in the world at that time – of God’s punishment. His book shows God’s willingness to honor repentance – both Jonah’s (2:2-10) and that of the people of Nineveh (3:10).

WHAT does it say? Jonah’s reluctance to preach to Nineveh is perhaps understandable, as it was the capital of the Assyrian Empire that threatened and would eventually destroy his native land. But God showed his compassionate attitude toward these repentant Gentile enemies: “... should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left – and also many animals?” (4:11). The later book of Nahum contains the sequel to the story of Nineveh when it slipped back into its sins.

To think about: “... you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity” (4:2; compare Psalm 103:10).

33. MICAH:

A Message of Mercy

Summary verse: “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

Background: A contemporary of Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah, Micah prophesied around 750 BC.

WHO wrote it? Evidently Micah (Hebrew, “Who is like Yahweh?”) himself.

WHY was it written? To condemn the sins of Israel and Judah (“Samaria” and “Jerusalem”), describe the punishments God would send upon them, yet offer hope in God’s future restoration.

WHAT does it say? Micah is a carefully structured book. It has three major divisions (Chapters 1–2, 3–5, and 6–7), each of which is introduced by the word “Hear” or “Listen.” Each section also alternates between accusations of sin, predictions of doom, and expressions of hope. Micah accuses not only his country’s people and their leaders, but also their false prophets: “If a liar and deceiver comes and says, ‘I will prophesy for you plenty of wine and beer,’ that would be just the prophet for this people!” (2:11). The book also contains important prophecies regarding a time when “The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem” (4:2). In these futuristic visions the world will know peace, and Jerusalem will be ruled by a descendent of David out of Bethlehem (4:1-7; 5:2).

To think about: “Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy” (7:18; compare Luke 6:36).

34. NAHUM: Woe to Nineveh

Summary verse: “... Although they have allies and are numerous, they will be destroyed and pass away. Although I have afflicted you, Judah, I will afflict you no more” (Nahum 1:12).

Background: The Hebrew name Nahum is a shortened form of Nehemiah. It means “comfort” or “consolation.”

WHO wrote it? Evidently Nahum himself, though nothing is known of him and he is not mentioned in any other biblical book.

WHY was it written? To proclaim God’s judgment on the great city Nineveh, capital of the Assyrian Empire that attacked Judah and took Israel captive. A sequel to the book of Jonah, Nahum was probably written somewhere between 663 BC and 612 BC, a century or so after the earlier prophet’s time.

WHAT does it say? Although the Assyrians were used to punish Israel and Judah, Nahum shows that God is not an unjust judge and that he would also bring punishment on the Assyrians for their own sins (1:3). In depicting Nineveh’s downfall, Nahum makes reference to the great cruelty of the Assyrians: “Woe to the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims!” (3:1), “... who has not felt your endless cruelty?” (3:19). But the book combines this message of destruction for Nineveh with one of restoration for Judah and Israel: “The LORD will restore the splendor of Jacob like the splendor of Israel, though destroyers have laid them waste ...” (2:2). Nahum is a very poetic book and contains vivid word pictures of Nineveh’s attempts to defend itself and its ultimate destruction.

To think about: “The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him” (1:7; compare 1 Peter 5:7).

35. HABAKKUK: Woe to Babylon

Summary verse: “Because you have plundered many nations, the peoples who are left will plunder you. For you have shed human blood; you have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in them” (Habakkuk 2:8).

Background: Habakkuk was probably written around 600 BC – a few years before the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonian Empire.

WHO wrote it? Evidently Habakkuk, though nothing is known of this individual apart from his title “the prophet.” Because of the liturgical aspects of the final part of the book, the author may have been a priest or have been connected with the temple.

WHY was it written? To confirm Judah’s punishment at the hands of the Babylonians, the judgment that would also come on Babylon, and to stress the ultimate justice and fairness of God.

WHAT does it say? Habakkuk not only records the certainty of God’s punishment of Judah, but also his judgment against Babylon. The prophet lists some of the evils of the Babylonian Empire, including, uniquely, its environmental destruction (2:17). The book is structured around questions Habakkuk asks God: Why does God seem to allow evil to go unpunished? (1:3); Why does God allow the wicked to destroy those less wicked than themselves? (1:13). God answers these honest questions, and the book ends with a psalm-like prayer (notice the musical notations in the opening and closing words of Chapter 3) praising God and reaffirming the prophet’s trust in him.

To think about: “... the righteous person will live by his faithfulness” (2:4; compare Romans 1:17; Hebrews 10:36-39).

36. ZEPHANIAH:

The Day of God's Anger

Summary verse: “Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the LORD’s anger” (Zephaniah 2:3).

Background: The only prophet thought to have been of royal descent, Zephaniah was possibly a great-grandson of King Hezekiah of Judah. He prophesied during the reign of Josiah (640-609 BC).

WHO wrote it? Zephaniah (“Yahweh has hidden” or “Yahweh has protected”), whose genealogy is given in the introduction to the book. The prophet seems to have been a contemporary of Isaiah.

WHY was it written? To condemn injustice and corruption and to warn of God’s sure judgment on Judah and the nations.

WHAT does it say? Like Isaiah, Zephaniah criticizes Judah for its corruption and injustice and warns of a day of God’s anger which would bring punishment to Judah and to many other nations. Yet the book also looks beyond God’s chastening to a time when a repentant Judah would be accepted again, along with other peoples: “Then I will purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him shoulder to shoulder” (3:9). Perhaps more than other prophets, Zephaniah shows the extent of God’s love in this restoration – as when he writes: “... He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing” (3:17).

To think about: “The LORD ... is righteous; he does no wrong. Morning by morning he dispenses his justice, and every new day he does not fail, yet the unrighteous know no shame” (3:5; compare Romans 1:18-20).

37. HAGGAI: Build My House

Summary verse: “Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored,’ says the LORD” (Haggai 1:8).

Background: Haggai was one of a group of Jews, led by Zerubbabel, who returned to Jerusalem about 520 BC after they were liberated by the Persian kings who overthrew Babylon.

WHO wrote it? Haggai, who is mentioned numerous times in the book and twice in the book of Ezra (Ezra 5:1; 6:14).

WHY was it written? To urge the returning Jews to finish the rebuilding of the temple of God that had been begun some sixteen years earlier but had never been completed.

WHAT does it say? The second shortest book in the Old Testament, Haggai carries a brief but powerful reminder to the leaders and people of Jerusalem to complete the temple they had begun. The Jews were apparently focused on building their own homes, but are reminded several times to “give thought to your ways” and not to neglect God’s house which he promised to bless (2:9). The book also stresses the importance of Zerubbabel who was a descendent of King David through both branches of David’s family – those of Solomon and Nathan. Zerubbabel “sealed” both these branches of David’s family together (2:23) and became the ancestor of both Joseph (Matthew 1:12) and Mary (Luke 3:27), the parents of Jesus.

To think about: “Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘Give careful thought to your ways’” (1:5; compare Lamentations 3:40; 2 Corinthians 13:5).

38. ZECHARIAH:

Return to Me

Summary verse: “...this is what the LORD says: ‘I will return to Jerusalem with mercy, and there my house will be rebuilt...” (1:16).

Background: Like Ezekiel, Zechariah was of priestly lineage. Like Haggai, he prophesied in Jerusalem after the Jews returned.

WHO wrote it? There are almost 30 individuals with the name Zechariah (“Yahweh remembers”) in the Old Testament. This Zechariah was born in Babylon and brought to Jerusalem as a youth in the return led by Zerubbabel around 520 BC.

WHY was it written? As a younger contemporary of Haggai, Zechariah continued that prophet’s urging of the people of Jerusalem to rebuild the temple of God.

WHAT does it say? Through a series of visions, which make this the longest of the Minor Prophets, Zechariah outlines God’s support of the high priest Joshua and the civil leader Zerubbabel in their efforts to rebuild the temple and the society of post-exile Judah. The first part of the book (Chapters 1-6) offers encouragement to the people rebuilding the house of God. The second part (Chapters 7-14) was composed after the temple’s completion and calls on God’s people to return to him in their lives and in their treatment of the poor and vulnerable. The second part of the book also has a strong focus on Israel’s coming Messiah – both at his first coming (9:9) and second coming (9:10; etc.). The book ends with a detailed description of the “day of the LORD” and God’s end-time involvement in human history.

To think about: “... ‘Return to me,’ declares the LORD Almighty, ‘and I will return to you,’ says the LORD Almighty” (1:3; compare Hosea 6:1).

39. MALACHI:

Honor and Respect

Summary verse: “... If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?” says the LORD Almighty” (Malachi 1:6).

Background: Malachi appears to have prophesied in the time of Nehemiah, after the Jews’ return from Babylon. He was probably the last prophet of the Old Testament era, some 400 years before the birth of Jesus in the New Testament era.

WHO wrote it? Apparently Malachi (“my messenger”), though the prophet is only mentioned in the first verse of this book.

WHY was it written? To call those who had returned from Babylon to repent of their many social problems and spiritual sins.

WHAT does it say? Malachi is structured as a number of questions and answers directed by God to the people of Israel. Beginning with “‘I have loved you,’ says the LORD. But you ask, ‘How have you loved us?’” (1:2), Malachi outlines Israel’s lack of love and respect for God and stresses the nation’s failure to honor God’s name and his law. The book ends, therefore, with a sobering warning (4:5-6). But Malachi also foresees both John the Baptist’s ministry and that of Christ (3:1) and stresses that God will call a people who will honor his name: “‘My name will be great among the nations, from where the sun rises to where it sets’ ... says the LORD Almighty” (1:11).

To think about: “Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name” (3:16; compare Hebrews 6:10).

PART TWO:
THE NEW TESTAMENT

40. MATTHEW: The King and the Kingdom

Summary verse: “... Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matthew 1:1).

Background: Some 400 years separate the Old and New Testaments, and Matthew’s Gospel bridges that gap by showing the life of Jesus fulfilled more than seventy Old Testament prophecies. This was either the first or second Gospel written – perhaps between AD 64-70 or after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

WHO wrote it? Matthew, also called Levi – a tax collector before he was called by Jesus to be one of the twelve disciples (9:9).

WHY was it written? Matthew’s Gospel was originally written for Jewish readers and focuses on Jesus as the descendant of King David and the promised Messiah. It also places great stress on Jesus’ message of the “kingdom of heaven.”

WHAT does it say? Matthew often does not arrange his material chronologically, but by themes. His main theme is that of the kingly descent and role of Jesus as the promised Messiah and the news of his kingdom – the kingdom of heaven (called the kingdom of God in the other Gospels) which he mentions 55 times. Matthew shows this message was central to the preaching of John the Baptist (3:1-2), then that of Jesus (4:17), and finally of his disciples (10:7). Other themes in Matthew include Jesus’ conflict with the Pharisees and other religious leaders of that day, his stress on the importance of *both* justice and mercy, and that God’s law is fulfilled by love.

To think about: “... Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (22:37; compare John 14:15, 21).

41. MARK: The Servant and His Work

Summary verse: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

Background: Mark is widely believed to be the first of the four Gospels to have been written, although tradition states that it followed Matthew. A date before AD 67 for this book seems likely.

WHO wrote it? John Mark, often just called Mark, was a young disciple in whose mother’s house the early church met (Acts 12:12). He was the cousin of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10) and accompanied Barnabas and Paul on some of their missionary travels (Acts 12:25; see also 2 Timothy 4:11).

WHY was it written? Mark appears to have originally been written for a Roman audience and tells the story of Jesus’ ministry from their perspective, stressing the role of Jesus as the servant of his people.

WHAT does it say? Mark’s Gospel stresses the works of Jesus rather than his words – only four of his parables are recorded, but nineteen of his miracles. This Gospel emphasizes the rapid, ongoing nature of Jesus’ work, frequently using words such as “immediately,” “straight away,” and “soon after” to convey this. More than the other Gospel writers, Mark pays particular attention to the emotions of Jesus, such as his compassion. Almost 40 percent of this Gospel focuses on Jesus’ final journey to Jerusalem and the week of his arrest and crucifixion.

To think about: “... The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (1:15; compare Acts 8:12; 28:30-31).

42. LUKE: The Son of Man

Summary verse: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10).

Background: The longest of the four Gospels (and longest New Testament book), Luke was probably written before AD 70.

WHO wrote it? Luke was a Gentile (Colossians 4:10-14), a physician, and clearly an educated individual given his vocabulary and the polished style of his writing. He may have been a convert of the apostle Paul and was with Paul on some of his journeys and during his imprisonment in Rome.

WHY was it written? Probably written to a Greek-speaking audience, Luke’s Gospel seeks to portray Jesus in terms of his humanity and his concern for all people.

WHAT does it say? Luke records the ancestry of Jesus back to Adam and writes his account from a broad perspective – showing interest in Gentiles, women, children, social outcasts, and others often shunned or looked down upon by the Jews of that time. This Gospel mentions the temple more than the others and has more references to Jerusalem than the other three Gospels combined. Luke records many details about Christ’s humanity, his birth and early life, as well as his crucifixion and resurrection, not found in the other Gospels. He also focuses on the words of Jesus, recording more parables than the other accounts, and on prayer – beginning and ending his Gospel with instances of prayer in the temple.

To think about: “Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up” (18:1; compare 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18; Colossians 4:2).

43. JOHN: The Son of God

Summary verse: “... 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” (John 20:31).

Background: Originally a young disciple of John the Baptist, John the son of Zebedee was called as one of the twelve disciples of Christ (1:29-40). He became the disciple “Jesus loved,” and he and his brother James were named “Sons of Thunder” by Jesus. John lived to a good age and was apparently the last apostle to survive.

WHO wrote it? Along with Peter and James, John was one of the three most prominent early followers of Jesus. He wrote five books of the New Testament, and his account of Jesus’ ministry was the last of the four Gospels to be written, perhaps between AD 90-100.

WHY was it written? John’s Gospel was written to add information or viewpoints not included in the earlier accounts of Jesus’ ministry. It is also more universal in its approach.

WHAT does it say? John’s Gospel is arranged topically rather than chronologically and focuses on the significance of selected acts of Jesus rather than the actions themselves. It is sometimes called the “Gospel of Faith,” as it mentions belief and believing almost 100 times. John is also unique in referring to God the Father about 100 times, and he stresses the deity of Jesus more than the other Gospel accounts do. John particularly focuses on the relationship between God the Father and Jesus, and between Jesus and his followers.

To think about: “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me’” (14:6; compare 1 Corinthians 8:6; Colossians 2:9-10).

44. ACTS OF THE APOSTLES: The Early Church

Summary verse: "... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Background: Acts records the Great Commission that Jesus gave his followers before his ascension. The rest of the book details the initial fulfillment of that mission by the early church.

WHO wrote it? Acts was written by the evangelist Luke who accompanied the apostle Paul on some of his journeys and was a firsthand witness of much of what is recorded in the book.

WHY was it written? Acts is a sequel to Luke's Gospel, recording the establishment of the New Testament church in the thirty years from the resurrection of Jesus to Paul's imprisonment in Rome during the reign of Nero, around AD 62.

WHAT does it say? Acts 1:8 (above) perfectly summarizes the structure of the book, recounting the coming of the Holy Spirit and the outward spread of the gospel in successive stages. In the first twelve chapters of Acts the focus is on the apostle Peter, but throughout the final sixteen chapters the focus switches to the work of Paul. The book describes the apostle's three missionary journeys throughout the eastern Mediterranean, his arrest in Jerusalem, his journey to Rome and imprisonment there. Having taken the gospel into the very heart of the Roman Empire, Paul firmly advanced the process of carrying it "to the ends of the earth."

To think about: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (2:38; compare Titus 3:4-7).

45. ROMANS: Salvation Explained

Summary verse: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23).

Background: Rome was one of the largest cities in the ancient world and the capital of the vast Roman Empire. A church was established there very early – probably by some who were in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:10).

WHO wrote it? The apostle Paul, who was sent by Christ to the Gentiles, wrote this letter, probably around AD 56-57.

WHY was it written? The church at Rome was not founded directly by the apostles, and Paul wrote to its members to explain the core aspects of proper Christian belief and behavior.

WHAT does it say? Generally agreed to be Paul’s greatest work, Romans has been called “the gospel according to Paul” (16:25), as it systematically covers the themes of salvation and Christian living. First, Paul shows that we all are guilty of sin and deserving of death, but that Christ’s sacrificial death makes us right before God (“justification”). He then explains how we are justified by faith, not by our own righteousness or good works, and that this enables us to go on to a new life lived in obedience to God (“sanctification”). The goal of this new life is to become more like Christ himself and to become fully like him at his return (“glorification”). Along the way, Paul shows how God first worked through ancient Israel alone, but that he now offers salvation directly to all of humanity (10:12-13).

To think about: “... the gospel ... is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile” (1:16; compare Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 2:11-12).

46. 1 CORINTHIANS: Problems and Questions

Summary verse: “I appeal to you, brothers and sisters ... that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought” (1 Corinthians 1:10).

Background: The Greek city of Corinth was a large, decadent seaport known for its pagan idolatry and immorality. The believers there were mainly Gentiles converted by Paul on his second missionary journey. After Paul left Corinth, the church fell into a number of problems regarding Christian doctrine and living.

WHO wrote it? The apostle Paul, from Ephesus during his third missionary journey, between AD 53-55, to the church he had founded in Corinth.

WHY was it written? This epistle is Paul’s response to a report from the “household of Chloe” (1:11) alerting him to problems in the church at Corinth. Beginning at Chapter 7, he also replies to the Corinthians’ questions on Christian faith and practice.

WHAT does it say? 1 Corinthians consists of two parts. In the first section (Chapters 1-6) Paul addresses the problems in the church at Corinth and firmly corrects them. In the second part of the epistle (Chapters 7-16) he answers the Corinthians’ questions. In the course of this section Paul covers such important topics as marriage (Chapter 7), idols (8), financial support of the church (9), the Lord’s Supper (11), spiritual gifts (12-14, including the great Chapter 13 on love), and the resurrection (15).

To think about: “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (10:31; compare 1 Peter 4:10-11).

47. 2 CORINTHIANS:

Reconciliation and Recommendation

Summary verse: “You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all” (2 Corinthians 3:2 ESV).

Background: After 1 Corinthians had been sent to the church in the Greek city of Corinth, it appears that false teachers had begun to reject Paul’s authority and to stir up the people against him.

WHO wrote it? The apostle Paul, probably from Philippi around AD 56-57, during his third missionary journey.

WHY was it written? To acknowledge the repentant attitude that some in the Corinthian church exhibited after receiving his earlier letter to them, and to stress his credentials as a true apostle of Christ as opposed to the false teachers who were attacking him.

WHAT does it say? Although problems remained in the Corinthian church after it received Paul’s first letter, he acknowledges the improvements that they had made in several areas. Paul then continues (Chapters 1-7) to expound the comfort and consolation God gives us in various kinds of difficult circumstances. In this section Paul also stresses the value of reconciliation. In Chapters 8-9, he appeals to the Corinthians to help the poor in the church in the longest discussion of giving in the New Testament. In the final chapters (10-13) Paul discusses and vindicates his authority as an apostle called by God in contrast with the “false apostles” who were troubling the Corinthians.

To think about: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (5:17; compare Ephesians 4:22-24).

48. GALATIANS: The Gospel of Freedom

Summary verse: “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1).

Background: Galatia was an area in the central part of Roman Asia Minor – modern day Turkey. This letter was sent to congregations in the southern part of that region.

WHO wrote it? The apostle Paul, perhaps around AD 48-49 or 53-56, from Ephesus.

WHY was it written? Paul wrote this letter when the congregations in Galatia were being affected by Jewish Christians who accepted the teachings of Jesus but demanded that Gentile converts must also fulfill the requirements of the law of Moses, especially circumcision.

WHAT does it say? In what has been called Christianity’s “Declaration of Freedom,” Paul shows the superiority of the new covenant with Christ over the old covenant and the law of Moses. He chastises the Galatians for leaving the gospel they were taught and firmly stresses that we are made right with God (“justified”) by faith in Jesus Christ alone (2:16) and that works can never save us. He makes it equally clear this does not give us freedom to serve our own desires (“the flesh”), but to live holy lives (“sanctified”) with the help of the Holy Spirit working in us (5:13-25).

To think about: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law” (5:22-23; compare Ephesians 4:1-3; 5:9).

49. EPHESIANS: The Gifts of God

Summary verse: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8 ESV).

Background: Paul visited the great city of Ephesus in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) on his first missionary journey and spent three years there on his third. Due to his teaching, the gospel spread through the whole area.

WHO wrote it? Along with Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon, Ephesians is one of Paul's four "prison epistles" (3:1; 4:1; 6:20) and is believed to have been written from Rome AD 61-63.

WHY was it written? Ephesians was probably not intended for the congregation at Ephesus alone, rather as a letter to all the Christians in that area. As a result, the epistle is written as a general treatise on Christian doctrine and practice.

WHAT does it say? Ephesians has two clear halves: in the first three chapters Paul expounds key aspects of Christian belief, and in the last three chapters he focuses on Christian behavior. Paul begins Ephesians with praise for God's blessings (1:3) and throughout the letter he stresses God's spiritual gifts. He describes his own ministry as being based on God's gift of grace (3:7) and reminds his readers of the gifts Christ gives to all believers (4:8). Ephesians emphasizes Christian unity, purity, maturity, victory, faith, and love, closing with the encouragement to “put on the full armor of God” (6:10-11).

To think about: “For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (2:10; compare 1 Timothy 6:17-19; Hebrews 13:16).

50. PHILIPPIANS: Rejoice!

Summary verse: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4).

Background: Philippi was located in Macedonia, north of Greece, and Philippians was written to the believers there – in what was perhaps one of Paul’s favorite congregations, the first church he established in Europe during his second missionary journey.

WHO wrote it? The apostle Paul, from Rome during his imprisonment there, around AD 60-62. The letter was delivered by the returning Epaphroditus after taking an offering from Philippi to help Paul in Rome.

WHY was it written? As a “thank you” letter for the Philippians’ support (1:5; 4:10–19), and to encourage them regarding the problems they faced of external persecution (1:27-30) and internal conflict (2:1-4).

WHAT does it say? The Philippians were mainly Gentiles and Paul does not quote the Old Testament at all in this letter. Despite being imprisoned, Paul’s joy shines through the epistle and is one of its major themes – the words joy or rejoice are mentioned sixteen times in the course of the letter. But the nature of Paul’s joy can be seen in that he mentions Christ eighteen times in the first chapter alone! Christ’s relationship with the believer is central to Philippians, and each chapter has its own focus. In Chapter 1 Christ is portrayed as our life, in Chapter 2 he is our example, in Chapter 3 our hope, and in Chapter 4 our strength and provider.

To think about: “... God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus” (4:19; compare Romans 8:32).

51. COLOSSIANS: Exalting Christ

Summary verse: “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is ...” (Colossians 3:1).

Background: The city of Colossae lay to the east of Ephesus in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). The church there was established by Epaphras (1:7) who was evidently from that area (4:12). At the time Colossians was written, it seems Paul had not visited the city (2:1).

WHO wrote it? Colossians was written by the apostle Paul, from Rome around AD 60-61, at the time of his imprisonment there.

WHY was it written? Colossians was written to the churches at Colossae and the surrounding area (4:16) to refute certain heresies and to further the believers’ knowledge of the Christian faith.

WHAT does it say? Like Ephesians (to which more than half its verses are similar), Colossians has two parts: the first part (Chapters 1-2) is doctrinal, and the second (Chapters 3-4) practical. The heresies Paul refutes in the first part of his letter appear to come from Judaism (3:11) and an early form of gnostic philosophy that offered its followers “hidden knowledge” – which Paul counters with Christ, “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom” (2:2–3). In fact, Paul focuses on the person of Christ and our relationship with him throughout Colossians. The letter refers to Christ directly or indirectly over seventy times: exalting him and stressing our spiritual participation in his death and resurrection, as well as showing what this means for our relationships with others.

To think about: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord ... It is the Lord Christ you are serving” (3:23-24; compare Romans 12:11).

52. 1 THESSALONIANS: Christ's Return

Summary verse: “For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first” (1 Thessalonians 4:16).

Background: The thriving seaport of Thessalonica was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, north of Greece. A church was established there by Paul on his second missionary journey.

WHO wrote it? 1 Thessalonians was written by the apostle Paul around AD 50-51. This was probably Paul's first epistle.

WHY was it written? To encourage and guide the Thessalonian church – a congregation greatly beloved by Paul (2:8, 17-3:2).

WHAT does it say? The overriding theme of 1 Thessalonians is the return of Jesus Christ at the “day of the Lord.” Paul's words on this topic are found throughout the book, because he returns to the subject in every chapter (1:10; 2:19–20; 3:13; 4:13–18; 5:2–4, 23–24). But Paul does not urge his readers to focus on Christ's return at the expense of the development of Christian virtues. The apostle mentions faith, hope, and love at both the beginning and the end of his letter (1:3; 5:8), and, like the return of Christ, Paul mentions love in every chapter of his epistle (1:3; 2:8; 3:6, 12; 4:9; 5:8, 13). Paul commends the Thessalonians for the expressions of their belief and the good works they were doing (1:6-10) and repeatedly encourages them to do these things “more and more” (4:1, etc.).

To think about: “...encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing” (5:11; compare Hebrews 10:24-25).

53. 2 THESSALONIANS:

Wait and Work Patiently

Summary verse: “So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter” (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

Background: Some time after writing 1 Thessalonians, Paul heard that the believers in Thessalonica were thinking that Christ’s return was imminent or had perhaps even occurred. Paul needed to write the Thessalonians again to correct these errors.

WHO wrote it? The apostle Paul, during his second missionary journey, probably from Corinth around AD 52-53.

WHY was it written? To encourage the Thessalonians and to correct doctrinal misunderstandings regarding the timing of Christ’s return and practical problems relating to that misunderstanding.

WHAT does it say? Almost half the verses in Paul’s second epistle to the Thessalonians deal with the return of Christ. But Paul now corrects the misunderstanding that the return of Jesus was imminent. He points out that certain end-time events relating to an antichrist or “man of lawlessness” must occur before Christ returns (2:3). He combats the idea being taught by some that Jesus had already returned (2:1-2) and chastises those who had stopped working (3:11-12), apparently because they thought the end was very near. But Paul also commends and encourages the Thessalonians for their strength under persecution and argues for patience in waiting for the Lord and in doing his work.

To think about: “... never tire of doing what is good” (3:13; compare 2:15-17; 1 Corinthians 15:58; Galatians 6:9).

54. 1 TIMOTHY: Fight the Good Fight

Summary verse: “Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Timothy 4:16).

Background: The “Pastoral Epistles” – 1 Timothy, Titus, and 2 Timothy – represent Paul’s final three known letters. Written in or around the time of his imprisonment in Rome, they were sent to pastors under his guidance to help them in their work.

WHO wrote it? The apostle Paul wrote this letter from Macedonia (north of Greece) to Timothy around AD 63-64 – perhaps between his first and final Roman imprisonments.

WHY was it written? Paul states specifically that he writes so Timothy “... will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God’s household, which is the church of the living God ...” (3:14-15).

WHAT does it say? Paul’s instructions to Timothy begin with a charge to combat false doctrines (1:3-11) and to fight the good fight of faith (1:18-19). He offers counsel regarding matters of worship (2:1-15) and qualifications for the church leaders Timothy is to appoint (3:1-12). Paul then returns to the matter of right doctrine (4:1-11) – the word doctrine is found more in this book than any other in the New Testament. He encourages Timothy to be an example to others and to exercise the spiritual gifts he had been given (4:12-16) and then instructs him regarding various categories of brethren (5:1-6:2). Paul ends with words regarding contentment and, once again, encouragement to fight the good fight (6:6-12).

To think about: “... godliness with contentment is great gain” (6:6; compare 6:7-10; Philippians 4:11-13).

55. 2 TIMOTHY: The Fight Well Fought

Summary verse: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7).

Background: After an initial imprisonment in Rome, Paul appears to have been released and then, after more missionary work, imprisoned again and executed under the Emperor Nero.

WHO wrote it? The apostle Paul, from his prison cell in Rome, around AD 66-67 shortly before his execution (4:6-8). This is Paul’s last known letter.

WHY was it written? In his final imprisonment Paul was deserted by many who knew him (1:15), so he asked Timothy to come to Rome and to bring needed clothing and texts. Paul’s letter also offered guidance and encouragement for Timothy.

WHAT does it say? Guarded by a Roman soldier, Paul calls Timothy a “good soldier of Jesus Christ” (2:3) and uses a number of military metaphors throughout this letter (1:14; 2:3-4; etc.). Although facing probable execution, Paul’s letter shows concern for the welfare of the churches he had founded, and for Timothy himself. The apostle urges endurance (2:1–13), condemns foolish doctrinal controversies (2:14–26), and warns of terrible times that would come in the last days (3:1–9). In his final words Paul renews his charge to Timothy to do the work of the ministry (4:1-5), acknowledges that the end of his own life is near (4:6), and boldly reaffirms his faith in God’s purposes (4:18).

To think about: “... the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline” (1:7; compare Acts 1:8; 1 Corinthians 2:4).

56. TITUS: Order in the Church

Summary verse: “... further the faith of God’s elect and their knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness” (Titus 1:1).

Background: Titus was converted by Paul (1:4) and although he is not mentioned in the book of Acts, he is mentioned thirteen times in Paul’s epistles and worked closely with the apostle. Paul had left Titus in Crete to establish churches there.

WHO wrote it? The apostle Paul, about AD 63, between his first and second Roman imprisonments and between writing his first and second letters to Timothy.

WHY was it written? Like 1 and 2 Timothy, Paul’s letter to Titus was written to offer guidance and encouragement in the work of the ministry, but with specific instructions for the churches in Crete.

WHAT does it say? False teachers were apparently already active in Crete (1:10–16), and Paul’s letter primarily combats that problem. His descriptions of the qualifications for elders (1:5–9) and of Christian conduct (2:1–10; 3:1–2) – which constitute the bulk of the letter – appear to be contrasts with the false teachers. For example, self-control is mentioned five times in the three short chapters of Titus and this seems to be a particular area where the errant teachers were failing (2:12). As he had done with Timothy, Paul calls Titus “my true son” (1:4) and provides the young missionary with much fatherly advice in dealing with the problems in the churches in his care, as well as offering him encouragement.

To think about: “They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him...” (1:16; compare Luke 6:46; 1 Corinthians 10:31).

57. PHILEMON: Useless to Useful

Summary verse: “... I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains” (Philemon 1:10).

Background: Philemon was a convert of Paul and a member of the Colossian church. A wealthy man, Philemon had a large home (1:2) and was the owner of the slave Onesimus who had run away from him and had been converted by Paul in Rome.

WHO wrote it? The apostle Paul, about AD 60-61. Along with Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians, Philemon is one of the “Prison Epistles” written while Paul was imprisoned during his first captivity in Rome.

WHY was it written? Paul wrote to Philemon to encourage him to take back his runaway slave, Onesimus (meaning “useful” – 1:11).

WHAT does it say? This short single-chapter letter (Paul’s shortest) encourages the Christian Philemon to take back his runaway slave Onesimus, not as a servant, but as a brother in the faith (1:16). Paul commends Philemon for his love, faith, and good works (1:5-7), urges him to accept Onesimus and forgive him any debt (1:18), and gently reminds Philemon of the fact that he himself owes Paul virtually “everything” (1:19). Paul addresses Philemon as a “dear friend” and as a “fellow worker” (1:1), a title he also uses later in this same letter to speak of the Gospel writers Mark and Luke (1:24). Before sharing greetings from others, Paul closes with the hopeful note “Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers” (1:22).

To think about: “...you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord’s people” (1:7; compare 3 John 1:5-8).

58. HEBREWS: The One Who Is Better

Summary verse: “... Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith...” (Hebrews 12:2 ESV)

Background: Hebrews is the first of the “General Epistles” said to have been written for “general” audiences, although it is quite different from the other epistles in this category.

WHO wrote it? The author of Hebrews is unknown. Although possibly the apostle Paul, the Greek of this letter is very unlike that of his epistles and certain verses could hardly have been written by Paul (2:3, etc.). But the author knew Paul’s teachings well and could have been one of his associates such as Apollos (Acts 18:24) who was educated in the Alexandrian style found in this letter.

WHY was it written? Hebrews was probably written before AD 70 to encourage Christians not to abandon their faith in Christ.

WHAT does it say? Hebrews begins by stressing that Jesus is fully God (1:1–14) and fully human (2:5–18). It continues by showing that he is superior to all God’s previous revelations: better than the prophets (1:1–2), the angels (1:5–14), Moses (3:1–19), the priests (4:14–5:10), Melchizedek (6:19–7:19), the high priest (7:23–8:5), and better than every aspect of the old covenant (7:22; 8:6–9:15; 10:1–18). This framework is used to show that Jesus is superior to any of the problems and distractions of this life and to encourage believers to endure just as the great individuals of faith did in the past (11:1–39).

To think about: “We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end” (3:14; compare 4:14; 10:19–39; 12:1–13).

59. JAMES:

Perseverance and Faith

Summary verse: “Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial ... that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him” (James 1:12).

Background: This letter was written in the years before the Jewish rebellion against Rome in AD 66. Poverty had become widespread and hatred of the oppressive rich began to build within Jewish society and in other parts of the Roman Empire.

WHO wrote it? Apparently, James “the Just” – the brother of Jesus (Matthew 13:55; Galatians 1:19) – rather than the disciple “James the son of Zebedee.” James became a leading figure in the church in Jerusalem (Acts 12:17; 15:13-21; 21:17-19; etc.).

WHY was it written? James wrote to encourage scattered Jewish Christians (1:1) to persevere and to continue to put their faith into practice despite difficult social conditions.

WHAT does it say? James has much to say about trials, but the trials he addresses are primarily those of poverty and oppression (2:6-7; 5:4-6). He alternates between social and economic problems and the right responses to them, such as avoiding the temptation to strike back in some way at the oppressor (2:11; 3:14; 4:2). James thus focuses on many of the teachings Jesus gave in the Sermon on the Mount, and almost half the material in his epistle is similar to almost half of that in Jesus’ mountain-top sermon. James also emphasizes the application of faith in our lives, stressing that true faith always produces the fruit of good works (2:14-26).

To think about: “... faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (2:17; compare 2:14-16, 18-26; Ephesians 2:8-10).

60. 1 PETER: Suffering and Hope

Summary verse: “To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps” (1 Peter 2:21).

Background: While James was concerned with the proper response of Christians to difficult socio-economic conditions, Peter speaks to his readers about how to respond properly to the persecution of Christianity that developed in the decades after the founding of the church.

WHO wrote it? The apostle Peter, one of the original twelve disciples and one of the inner circle (with James and John, the sons of Zebedee) who became a pillar of the early church (Galatians 2:9). The epistle was probably written with the help of Silas (5:12).

WHY was it written? “...I have written to you briefly encouraging you and testifying that this is the true grace of God ...” (5:12).

WHAT does it say? 1 Peter covers a number of doctrines and also has much to say about Christian life and responsibilities. But its underlying theme is one of hope in the face of suffering. The Christian’s suffering is tied to that of Christ, which is mentioned in every chapter of this letter (1:11; 2:21; 3:18; 4:1; 5:1), and Peter stresses that if we suffer wrong for doing right God will reward us (3:14; 4:14). Peter also stresses submission throughout his letter – submission to God, to governments, to the church, to employers, to marital partners, and to one another – and service to all.

To think about: “... use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms” (4:10; compare Mark 10:45; Galatians 5:13-14).

61. 2 PETER: Grow, Guard, and Watch

Summary verse: “...make every effort to confirm your calling and election ...” (2 Peter 1:10).

Background: 2 Peter is often said to probably not be the work of the apostle Peter because the style is so different from that of 1 Peter. But 1 Peter 5:12 tells us that Silas assisted in the writing of that letter and no such statement is made regarding 2 Peter – which doubtless explains its different style and much less polished Greek.

WHO wrote it? The author identifies himself as Simon Peter (1:1), mentions that he was an eyewitness to Christ’s transfiguration (1:16–18), and that he had written an earlier letter to the same people (3:1). Peter probably wrote this letter shortly before AD 68.

WHY was it written? Peter’s second letter was written to urge Christians to continue to grow, to be on guard against false teachers in the church, and to watch for and not doubt Christ’s return.

WHAT does it say? 2 Peter’s aims are seen in the letter’s structure: to encourage Christian growth (Chapter 1), to guard against false teachings (Chapter 2), and to urge believers to be watchful for Christ’s return (Chapter 3). Within this framework, Peter makes many smaller points, often illustrated with popular proverbs and sayings as well as with colorful images. Some of the material in this letter is very similar to parts of the epistle of Jude, from which it was likely borrowed. Throughout, Peter urges his readers not to forget and to keep in mind the truth they have learned (3:8, 15; etc.) and to continue to grow (1:5-7; 3:18; etc.).

To think about: “... grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ...” (3:18; compare Colossians 1:9-10).

62. 1 JOHN: Fellowship and Obedience

Summary verse: “We proclaim ... what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3).

Background: This epistle was probably written between AD 85-95 at a time when many false doctrines were troubling the church and false teachers who had gained power in some areas were even denying fellowship to Christians who would not follow them. It was evidently sent to a widespread, rather than a specific, audience.

WHO wrote it? Although this letter does not tell us who its author was, early Christian tradition is virtually unanimous that it was John, the disciple whom Jesus loved (John 13:23), and who, along with Peter and James, was one of the inner group of disciples.

WHY was it written? To correct false doctrines regarding the nature of Christ and our fellowship with him, the need for obedience and truth, and the certainty of eternal life.

WHAT does it say? All three epistles of John share the common themes of love, truth, obedience, and fellowship, but each letter looks at these qualities from a slightly different perspective. 1 John stresses that spiritual fellowship – our relationship with God and with each other – must be based on obedience to God’s will (1:6-7; 2:3, 6; 3:6; 5:2-4; etc.), although it also makes clear that true fellowship requires conformity to moral and doctrinal truth (2:21-24; etc.), and love (3:11-18; etc.) based on obedience (5:2-3).

To think about: “... this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us” (3:23; compare Galatians 5:6; Colossians 1:4).

63. 2 JOHN: Fellowship and Truth

Summary verse: “It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth ...” (2 John 1:4).

Background: This letter is addressed to the “chosen” lady and her “children” (1:1), a phrase that either refers to an actual woman or, metaphorically, a church congregation. It is probable that the letter was written in the last part of the first century, AD 85-95, perhaps from Ephesus.

WHO wrote it? The letter says only that it is from “the elder” (1:1), a term sometimes used by the apostles (1 Peter 5:1). Early church tradition attributes the letter to the apostle John, and it is similar in vocabulary and themes to 1 John and 3 John.

WHY was it written? Among other things, John’s second epistle was written to stress the role of truth in fellowship. John also wanted to urge believers not to support false teachers.

WHAT does it say? John’s second epistle stresses another aspect of fellowship – that it can only exist in the presence of truth, especially the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ (1:9-11). John looks at two sides of this spiritual reality – first (vs. 9), that only the one who has truth (“continues in the teaching” of Christ) has fellowship with God; and second (vs. 10-11), that we ourselves must not extend fellowship to those who pervert the truth (“If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching ...”). As in all his epistles, John also stresses the importance of obedient love.

To think about: “... And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love” (1:6; compare John 14:15).

64. 3 JOHN: Fellowship and Love

Summary verse: “They have told the church about your love ...” (3 John 1:6).

Background: This letter was sent to the individual Gaius, who appears to have been a leader of one or more churches in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). It is probable that the letter was written in the last part of the first century, AD 85-95, perhaps from Ephesus.

WHO wrote it? Like 2 John, this letter says only that it is from “the elder” (1:1), a term sometimes used by the apostles (1 Peter 5:1). Early church tradition attributes the letter to the apostle John, and it is similar in vocabulary and themes to 1 John and 2 John.

WHY was it written? John needed to censure an autocratic individual who had taken control of one of the churches, and he writes to stress the role of love in true fellowship.

WHAT does it say? The apostle commends Gaius for his love for believers (1:5-6). In contrast he states that Diotrephes, “who loves to be first,” will not welcome believers and puts them out of the church (1:9-10). John thus looks at two aspects of spiritual fellowship. He links the works of Christian fellowship – “what you are doing for the brothers and sisters” – with our love for others and for God. He also provides an example where those who do not express love are devoid of true fellowship and even try to withhold fellowship from others. John shows that such behavior is not only the opposite of fellowship, but it is also the opposite of love. As in all his letters, truth is also an important focus of John’s teaching.

To think about: “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth” (1:4; compare 2 John 1:4).

65. JUDE:

Contend for the Faith Delivered

Summary verse: “... contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God’s holy people” (Jude 1:3).

Background: There are many similarities between 2 Peter and Jude (for example, compare 2 Peter 2 with Jude 4–18), but literary borrowing was not uncommon in the ancient world, especially when religious texts were quoted or used.

WHO wrote it? Jude, the brother of both James (1:1) and Jesus (see Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3 where he is called “Judas”— the Greek form of the Hebrew name Jude/Judah).

WHY was it written? Jude was written to encourage Christians to preserve the original teachings they had learned (1:3) and to keep themselves from sin (1:21). It was probably sent to a Jewish or mixed Jewish/Gentile audience sometime before AD 68.

WHAT does it say? Jude began to write his letter to discuss general matters of salvation with his readers, but because of widespread false teaching he changed his purpose to combat that (1:3). He challenges his readers to focus on the opportunity of salvation they have received and urges them to keep to the original gospel and to reject the false teachings and behavior of apostates. He uses stories from the Old Testament and from some nonbiblical Jewish apocalyptic writings (1 Enoch and the Testament of Moses) in making his points. Jude closes with a benediction that is one of the most inspiring in the Bible (1:24-25).

To think about: “keep yourselves in God’s love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life” (1:21; compare John 15:9; Titus 2:13).

66. REVELATION: Kingdom Come!

Summary verse: “The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place ...” (1:1).

Background: Toward the end of the first century, persecution of Christianity increased greatly in the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian from AD 81-96. During this time John, the last surviving apostle, was exiled to the Greek Island of Patmos.

WHO wrote it? The book of Revelation was written by the apostle John, probably around AD 95, on the Island of Patmos.

WHY was it written? To encourage Christians to endure despite great persecution, and to record visions of events culminating in the establishment of the kingdom of God.

WHAT does it say? Revelation is structured symbolically with seven sections, each comprising seven visions. After the seven letters to the churches (1:20-3:22), the book continues with seven scenes in heaven (4:1-5:14), seven seals (6:1-8:5), seven trumpets (8:6-11:19), seven signs (12:1-14:20), seven plagues (15:1-16:21), and seven final visions (17:1-22:5) before the book’s conclusion. Many interpretations exist for these visions, but it seems that some were fulfilled at the time they were written, some in the course of history, and some remain to be fulfilled (1:19). However the time frame of the visions is understood, it is clear that they all share the underlying theme of enduring persecution in the hope of the return of Christ and the rule of the kingdom of God.

To think about: “Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done” (22:12; compare Romans 2:6-7).

AFTERWORD

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