

Overview: The Old Testament

The Five Books

The first five books of the Bible tell the origins of the Jewish race and culture.

Genesis:	The book of beginnings describes creation, the first rebellions against God and God's choosing of Abraham and his offspring.
Exodus:	God rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and led them to the desert of Sinai. There he gave Moses the laws to govern the new nation.
Leviticus:	God set up laws for the Israelites, mostly regarding holiness and worship.
Numbers:	Because of their rebellion and disobedience, the Israelites had to wander in a wilderness for 40 years before entering the promised land.
Deuteronomy:	Just before his death, Moses made three emotional farewell speeches, recapping history and warning the Israelites against further mistakes.

History Books

The next 12 books continue the history of the Israelites: They moved into the land of Canaan and established a kingdom that lasted almost 500 years.

Joshua:	After Moses' death, Joshua commanded the armies that conquered much of the territory in the promised land.
Judges:	The new nation fell into a series of dismal failures. God raised up leaders called "judges."
Ruth:	This story of love and loyalty between two widows shines out brightly in an otherwise dark period.
1 Samuel:	Samuel became a transition leader between the time of the judges and that of the kings. He appointed Israel's first king, Saul. After his own failure, Saul tried violently to prevent God's king-elect, David, from taking the throne.
2 Samuel:	David, a man after God's own heart, brought the nation together. But after committing adultery and murder, he was haunted by family and national crises.
1 Kings:	Solomon succeeded David, with mixed success. At his death, a civil war tore apart the nation. Successive kings were mostly bad, and the prophet Elijah had dramatic confrontations with King Ahab.
2 Kings:	This book continues the record of the rulers of the divided kingdom. None of the northern kings followed God consistently, and so Israel was finally destroyed by an invader. The southern kingdom, Judah, lasted much longer, but finally Babylon conquered Judah and deported its citizens.
1 Chronicles:	The book opens with the most complete genealogical record in the Bible, then adds many incidents from the life of David (often the same as those in 2 Samuel).
2 Chronicles:	Often paralleling the books of Kings, this book records the history of the rulers of Judah, emphasizing the good kings.
Ezra:	After being held captive in Babylon for decades, the Jews were allowed to return to their homeland. Ezra, a priest, emerged from one of the first waves of refugees.
Nehemiah:	Nehemiah returned from the Babylonian captivity after the temple had been rebuilt. He concentrated on restoring the protective wall around Jerusalem and joined Ezra in leading a religious revival.
Esther:	This story is set among captive Jews in Persia. A courageous Jewish queen foiled a plan to exterminate her people.

Books of Poetry

Almost one-third of the Old Testament was originally written as poetry. These books concentrate on questions about pain, God, life and love.

Job:	The most godly man of his day suffers the greatest personal tragedy. The entire book deals with the question “Why?”
Psalms:	These prayers and hymns cover the full range of human emotion; together, they represent a personal journal of how to relate to God. Some were also used in public worship services.
Proverbs:	The proverbs offer advice on every imaginable area of life. The style of wise living described here leads to a fulfilled life.
Ecclesiastes:	A life without God, “under the sun,” leads to meaninglessness and despair, says the Teacher in a strikingly modern book.
Song of Songs:	This beautiful poem celebrates romantic and physical love.

Books of the Prophets

During the years when kings ruled Israel and Judah, God spoke through prophets. Though some prophets did predict future events, their primary role was to call God’s people back to him.

Isaiah:	The most eloquent of the prophets, Isaiah analyzed the failures of all the nations around him and pointed to a future Messiah who would bring peace.
Jeremiah:	Jeremiah led an emotionally tortured life, yet held to his stern message. He spoke to Judah in the last decades before Babylon destroyed the nation.
Lamentations:	All Jeremiah’s warnings about Jerusalem came true, and Lamentations records five poems of sorrow for the fallen city.
Ezekiel:	Ezekiel spoke to the Jews who were captive in Babylon. He often used dramatic stories and enacted parables to make his points.
Daniel:	A captive in Babylon, Daniel rose to the office of prime minister. Despite intense political pressure, he lived a model life of integrity and left highly symbolic prophecies about the future.
Hosea:	By marrying a loose-living wife, Hosea lived out his message: that Israel had committed spiritual adultery against God.
Joel:	Beginning with a recent catastrophe in Judah (a locust plague), Joel foretold God’s judgment on Judah.
Amos:	A country boy, Amos preached to Israel at the height of its prosperity. His grim warnings focused on materialism.
Obadiah:	Obadiah warned Edom, a nation bordering Judah.
Jonah:	Jonah reluctantly went to Nineveh and found Israel’s enemies responsive to God’s message.
Micah:	Micah exposed corruption in every level of society, but closed with a promise of forgiveness and restoration.
Nahum:	Long after Jonah had stirred Nineveh to repentance, Nahum foretold the mighty city’s total destruction.
Habakkuk:	Habakkuk addressed his book to God, not people. In a frank dialogue with God, he discussed problems of suffering and injustice.
Zephaniah:	Zephaniah focused on the coming day of the Lord, which would purge Judah, resulting in a remnant used to bless the entire world.
Haggai:	After returning from the Babylonian captivity, the Jews began rebuilding the temple of God. But before long they set aside that task to work on their own homes. Haggai reminded them to put God first.
Zechariah:	Writing around the same time as Haggai, Zechariah also urged the Jews to work on the temple. He used a more uplifting approach, describing how the temple would point to the coming Messiah.
Malachi:	The last Old Testament prophet, Malachi faced a nation that had grown indifferent. He sought to stir the people from apathy.

Overview: The New Testament

History Books

The word *gospel* means “good news.” Almost half of the New Testament consists of four accounts of the life of Jesus and the Good News he brought to earth. Each of these four books, or Gospels, has a different focus and a different audience; taken together, they give a complete picture of Jesus’ life and teaching. About a third of their pages are devoted to the events of his last week on earth, including the crucifixion and resurrection.

Acts continues the history into the period after Jesus left the earth.

Matthew:	Written to a Jewish audience, this Gospel links the Old and New Testaments. It presents Jesus as the Messiah and King promised in the Old Testament. Matthew emphasizes Jesus’ authority and power.
Mark:	Mark probably had pragmatic Roman readers in mind. His Gospel stresses action and gives a straightforward, blow-by-blow account of Jesus’ work on earth.
Luke:	A doctor, Luke was also a fine writer. His Gospel provides many details of human interest, especially in Jesus’ treatment of the poor and needy. A joyful tone characterizes Luke’s book.
John:	John has a different, more reflective style than the other Gospels. Its author selected seven signs that pointed to Jesus as the Son of God and wove together everything else to underscore that point.
Acts:	Acts tells what happened to Jesus’ followers after he left them. Peter and Paul soon emerged as leaders of the rapidly spreading church.

The Letters

The young church was nourished spiritually by apostles who set down their beliefs and messages in a series of letters. The first 13 such letters (Romans through Philemon) were written by the apostle Paul, who led the advance of Christianity to non-Jewish people.

Paul’s Letters

Romans:	Written for a sophisticated audience, Romans sets forth theology in a logical, organized form.
1 Corinthians:	A very practical book, 1 Corinthians takes up the problems of a tumultuous church in Corinth: marriage, factions, immorality, public worship and lawsuits.
2 Corinthians:	Paul wrote this follow-up letter to defend himself against a rebellion led by certain false apostles.
Galatians:	A short version of the message of Romans, this book addresses legalism. It shows how Christ came to bring freedom, not bondage to a set of laws.
Ephesians:	Although written in jail, this letter is Paul’s most optimistic and encouraging. It tells of the advantages a believer has in Christ.
Philippians:	The church at Philippi ranked among Paul’s favorites. This friendly letter stresses that joy can be found in any situation.
Colossians:	Written to oppose certain cults, Colossians tells how faith in Christ is complete. Nothing needs to be added to what Christ did.
1 Thessalonians:	Composed early in Paul’s ministry, this letter gives a capsule history of one church, as well as Paul’s direct advice about specific problems.

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2 Thessalonians:	Stronger in tone than his first letter to the Thessalonians, the sequel goes over the same topics, especially the church's questions about Christ's second coming.
1 Timothy:	As Paul neared the end of his life, he chose young men such as Timothy to carry on his work. His two letters to Timothy form a leadership manual for a young pastor.
2 Timothy:	Written just before Paul's death, 2 Timothy offers Paul's final words to his young assistant.
Titus:	Titus was left in Crete, a notoriously difficult place to nurture a church. Paul's letter gave practical advice on how to go about it.
Philemon:	Paul urged Philemon, owner of a runaway slave, Onesimus, to forgive his slave and accept him back as a brother in Christ.

Other Letters

Hebrews:	No one knows who wrote Hebrews, but it probably first went to Christians in danger of slipping back into their old, rule-bound religion. It interprets the Old Testament, explaining many Jewish practices as symbols that prepared the way for Christ.
James:	James, a man of action, emphasized the right kind of behavior for a believer. Someone who calls himself or herself a Christian ought to act like it, James believed, and his letter spells out the specifics.
1 Peter:	Early Christians often met violent opposition, and Peter's letter comforted and encouraged Christians who were being persecuted for their faith.
2 Peter:	In contrast to Peter's first letter, this one focused on problems that sprang up from the inside. It warns against false teachers.
1 John:	John could fill simple words, such as <i>light</i> , <i>love</i> and <i>life</i> , with deep meaning, and in this letter he elegantly explains basic truths about the Christian life.
2 John:	Warning against false teachers, John counseled churches on how to respond to them.
3 John:	Balancing 2 John, this companion letter mentions the need to be hospitable to true teachers.
Jude:	Jude gave a brief but fiery exposé of heretics.
Revelation:	A book of visions and symbols, Revelation is the only New Testament book that concentrates on prophecy. It completes the story, begun in Genesis, of the cosmic battle between good and evil being waged on earth. It ends with a picture of a new heaven and new earth.