



# UNDERSTANDING SCRIPTURE

## How to Read and Interpret the Bible

### A SHORT DESCRIPTION OF EACH OF THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT BOOKS

#### THE OLD TESTAMENT

**THE PENTATEUCH** | *The first five books of the OT describe the beginning of the world and the beginning of the Jewish nation. The Jewish people call these books the Law and Moses is considered their author.*

**GENESIS** is the book of beginnings. Genesis 1-11 cover creation, the fall of man, the Flood, and the growth of the nations. In Genesis 12, God chose Abraham to be the father of the Jewish race. The rest of Genesis is the story of Abraham and his descendants Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph (the Patriarchs) and the birth of the Jews.

**EXODUS** gives the history of the Jewish people from their stay in Egypt until the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai. God chose Moses to lead the people out of bondage and gave him the laws that were to be the foundation of the nation. These laws are summarized in the Ten Commandments.

**LEVITICUS** gives additional, detailed instruction about Israel's worship, especially the priesthood and sacrifices. God called his people to be holy and to live for him.

**NUMBERS** describes Israel's time in the wilderness, from Mt. Sinai, where God gave the Law, to Kadesh Barnea, where only two spies wanted to obey God and enter the Promised Land, as well as the forty years of wilderness wandering that resulted from Israel's disobedience.

**DEUTERONOMY** is a series of speeches given by Moses to the Israelites as they were about to enter the Promised Land. Moses reminded the people of the laws God had given them, of their disobedience to God, and of their need to obey God in the Promised Land by keeping his law.

**THE HISTORICAL BOOKS** | *The historical books tell the history of Israel from the time the nation entered the Promised Land until about 400 B.C.*

**JOSHUA** describes the conquest of the land under Moses' successor, Joshua. Under his leadership, the land was settled and divided among the twelve tribes.

**JUDGES** covers the period between Joshua's death and the crowning of King Saul. During this era, God raised up leaders known as judges to lead the Israelites against their enemies. After each victory, however, the people forgot God.

**RUTH** is a story about family loyalty that is set during the time of the judges. Because of her loyalty to her mother-in-law, Ruth became part of the family of God, though she was a Gentile. Ruth was an ancestor of Jesus.

**1 SAMUEL** covers the history of Israel from the birth of Samuel, the prophet who anointed Israel's first two kings, to the death of Saul.

**2 SAMUEL** describes the reign of King David, beginning with the civil war that followed Saul's death. David established Jerusalem as his capital.

**1 KINGS** begins with the reign of Solomon and the building of the temple. After Solomon's death, the kingdom was divided into two nations: the northern kingdom (Israel--ten tribes) and the southern kingdom (Judah--two tribes).

**2 KINGS** is the continued history of Israel and Judah. Because of her unfaithfulness, Israel was defeated by the Assyrians and taken captive in 722 B.C., and Judah was taken captive by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.

1 CHRONICLES was written from a priestly viewpoint (probably that of Ezra the scribe). First Chronicles emphasizes David's important role in developing worship in Israel and the need for obeying God to receive his blessing.

2 CHRONICLES describes Solomon's reign, the temple that he built, and the worship that took place there. The last chapters (2 Chron 10-36) are devoted to the history of Judah.

EZRA tells about the return of the Jews from Babylon under Zerubbabel and their worship in the rebuilt temple. The last four chapters (Ezra 7-10) describe the second group of exiles who returned with Ezra and his religious reforms.

NEHEMIAH returned with the third group of exiles and helped rebuild Jerusalem's walls. After Ezra's public reading of the law (the Pentateuch), the people confessed their disobedience to God and promised to obey him in the future. These were the last historical events recorded in the OT.

ESTHER is the story of Esther, a Jewish girl who became queen of Persia and who was able to prevent a plot to destroy the Jews. The Feast of Purim celebrates Israel's deliverance through Esther's faithfulness and God's grace.

**THE BOOKS OF POETRY** | *The poetic books have much to say about the problem of suffering, the need for praise, and how to live daily in relation with God.*

JOB concerns the struggle between the experience of suffering and faith in the love and justice of God. God allowed Satan to test Job by making him suffer. Job's three friends offered various reasons for his suffering. After God spoke to Job, he realized that he must trust in God's sovereign love in the midst of his troubles.

PSALMS was Israel's songbook. It contains sacred songs, poems, and prayers, written by David, Solomon, and others. The poems describe how people felt in times of thanksgiving, joy, sorrow, and trouble.

PROVERBS is the best example of wisdom literature in the Bible. The theme of this book is stated in Proverbs 1:7: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge." Proverbs teaches

how to obey God in our dealings with each other.

ECCLESIASTES examines all that life has to offer. The author discovered that life apart from God is meaningless and urged us to fear God and obey him. Only then will we find purpose.

SONG OF SONGS is a poem about the beauty of love between a man and a woman. God intends that such love be a normal part of marriage in his good creation.

**THE MAJOR PROPHETS** | *In this context, major refers to the length of the books, not to their importance. Through the major prophets, God warned Israel that he would judge her if she did not turn from sin and worship and obey the Lord. These prophets lived from about 740 to 540 B.C.*

ISAIAH prophesied from 740 to 680 B.C. and is the most frequently quoted prophet in the NT. The first 39 chapters of Isaiah contain a number of prophetic poems concerning God's impending judgment against foreign nations and Israel. During Isaiah's ministry, the northern kingdom was taken captive by Assyria. Even Judah was threatened (Isaiah 36-37), but God miraculously protected his people. Isaiah 40-66, called the Book of Comfort, reveals the return of the people from Exile in Babylon, the coming of the Messiah, and everlasting deliverance for God's people.

JEREMIAH was the last prophet God sent to Judah before they fell to the Babylonians and Jerusalem was destroyed. Jeremiah announced God's coming judgment and called the people to repentance.

LAMENTATIONS is a funeral song (probably written by Jeremiah) concerning the destruction of Jerusalem. Although mourning deeply over the city, the prophet knew that God's judgment was a result of the people's sin. In calling the people to repentance, he reminded them that God's compassion never fails.

EZEKIEL was taken to Babylon in 597 B.C. as a captive. There he prophesied to the exiles about the coming destruction of Jerusalem (which occurred in 586 B.C.) and about God's judgment of other nations. Ezekiel emphasized God's Lordship over all nations. He wrote about a new covenant in which God would give his people a new heart and they would be indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

DANIEL, another prophet exiled to Babylon, served in the king's court but remained faithful to God. His visions depict the future, triumphant outworking of God's redemptive plan for history. Daniel predicted the return from exile, the coming of the Messiah, and other future historical events.

**THE MINOR PROPHETS** | *The minor prophets are twelve prophets who wrote from 800 to 400 B.C. during the period of Assyria's power (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah), the period of Assyria's decline (Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah), and the postexilic era (Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi). These writings are grouped together and referred to as minor because they are shorter than those of the major prophets, not because they are of minor importance.*

HOSEA was written in the final days of the northern kingdom before the Assyrian captivity. Hosea likened his wife's unfaithfulness to Israel's unfaithfulness to God, her covenant husband. Hosea proclaimed God's love and compassion for Israel, his bride, and his desire for her repentance.

JOEL, a prophet to Judah, likened God's current judgment of a terrible locust plague to the coming Day of the Lord, when God would judge all people. Joel urged repentance and promised that one day God would pour out his Spirit on all flesh.

AMOS was a man of Judah whom God sent to prophesy against the northern kingdom at the height of its power under Jeroboam 2. Amos accused the wealthy of mistreating the poor, condemned their outward show of worship, and predicted their future judgment.

OBADIAH predicted God's judgment on the nation of Edom, the people who were descended from Esau. In the past this nation had persecuted Israel, but in the future Israel would be delivered; God's kingdom would triumph.

JONAH, a contemporary of Amos, was sent by God to warn the people of Nineveh to repent. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, Israel's main enemy. Because of Jonah's preaching, the Ninevites repented. This taught Jonah that God loves all people, not just Israel.

MICAH prophesied the downfall of the northern kingdom and future judgment on disobedient

Judah. Micah predicted that glory would return to Zion through the coming of the Messiah.

NAHUM predicted the downfall of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, as God's judgment for her cruelty. The prediction was fulfilled in 612 B.C. when Babylon conquered Assyria.

HABAKKUK, a prophet to Judah, learned that God would use Babylon to punish wicked Judah and then in turn would judge Babylon. Habakkuk concluded that no matter what happened, he would trust in God's unfailing love and faithfulness.

ZEPHANIAH was a prophet in Jerusalem during the reign of Josiah. He announced the coming of the Day of the Lord, when God would punish Judah and the nations, and prophesied a future restoration of Israel.

HAGGAI, a contemporary of Zechariah, encouraged the Jews who had returned from exile to finish rebuilding the temple. Haggai promised that God once again would fill the temple with his glory, as he had in the days of Solomon.

ZECHARIAH was also a prophet who returned from exile and whose apocalyptic visions served as an encouragement to God's people to complete the temple. The final chapters of this book (Zechariah 9-14) are visions of the Messiah's future coming, his rejection, and his ultimate victory.

MALACHI, the final prophet of the Old Testament, rebuked the Jews for their careless worship and urged them to return to God and obey his law. Malachi predicted the coming of the Messiah, who would cleanse and purify his people.



## THE NEW TESTAMENT

**THE GOSPELS** | *The first four books recount the life of Christ, His ministry, Sacrificial Death, and Resurrection. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the Synoptic Gospels, because many of the same events and teachings appear in all three.*

MATTHEW wrote his gospel for Jewish readers to show how Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecy and to prove by this that Jesus was the promised Messiah and King.

MARK, the shortest gospel, was written by John Mark for Gentile readers and includes material received from Peter. This gospel is a fast-moving, vivid report of Jesus' ministry from his baptism through the resurrection. It emphasizes Jesus' actions rather than his teachings.

LUKE was a Gentile physician who wrote to educated Gentiles, perhaps for those who had been associated with the synagogues but who had not converted to Judaism. Luke presented a complete, orderly account of Christ's life from his birth to his ascension. Luke emphasized the works and teachings of Jesus that explain the way of salvation and the universal appeal of the Gospel.

JOHN, which is usually understood to have been written by the apostle John, is a more reflective gospel that focuses on Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. John wrote so that his readers might "believe that Jesus is the Christ" and therefore have life in His Name (20:30-31). John included many details not found in the other Gospels.

## THE HISTORICAL BOOK

ACTS was written by Luke as the second volume of his two-part work Luke and Acts. Acts is an account of the early church as it grew from a small, group of disciples to a group of believers spread throughout the Roman Empire. Acts centers around Peter (with the Jews) and Paul (with the Gentiles).

**THE EPISTLES** | *The 21 letters of the New Testament were written by five or six authors to individuals or to churches. These authors are James, John, Jude, Paul, Peter, and the author of Hebrews. Paul wrote 13 or 14 of the epistles. His writings include teaching about the Christian faith and to put that faith into practice in daily living.*

ROMANS is one of the most important books in the Bible because it comprehensively explains God's plan of salvation for Jews and Gentiles (1:16-17). In Romans, Paul taught the great doctrines of Christianity in a systematic fashion.

1 CORINTHIANS was written by Paul to the church at Corinth during his third missionary journey. The Corinthian church was plagued with problems in Christian conduct. Paul emphasized the Corinthians' need to grow in sanctification--the continuing development of a holy, Godlike character.

2 CORINTHIANS was written as a response to untrue accusations made against Paul by false teachers. In this intensely personal epistle, Paul defended his apostleship and urged the Corinthians to prepare for his upcoming visit by completing their collection for the church in Jerusalem and by dealing with the false teachers.

GALATIANS was written by Paul to the churches in Asia Minor to remind new Christians that salvation comes by faith alone in Jesus Christ, not by obedience to the Jewish ceremonial law, as was falsely being taught by some. Paul urged his readers to live lives controlled by the Spirit, lives that produce the fruits of righteousness.

EPHESIANS was probably written to a group of churches in Asia Minor that included Ephesus. In this epistle, Paul focused on the doctrines of union with Christ and the church as the body of Christ. Paul urged Christians to achieve unity in doctrinal and practical matters by speaking the truth in love and by standing against Satan, the Christian's enemy.

PHILIPPIANS is a joyous epistle that Paul wrote to the church in Philippi to thank them for their gifts and to encourage them to stand firm when persecuted. Paul reminded the Philippians of Christ's humility and suffering on their behalf, and he urged them to rejoice with him in the Lord.

COLOSSIANS was written to the church at Colosse to correct two types of false teaching: (1) a Jewish emphasis on ceremonial law and feast days and (2) a philosophy that included claims to secret knowledge and the worship of angels. In contrast to the emptiness of human philosophy, Paul emphasized the complete adequacy of Christ -

Jesus alone deserves our worship and obedience.

1 THESSALONIANS is one of Paul's earliest letters and was written to a church that he started on his second missionary journey. Paul encouraged the persecuted young Christians to live godly lives, and corrected some of the false ideas, especially ideas concerning Christ's second coming.

2 THESSALONIANS was written after First Thessalonians. Paul encouraged the Thessalonians to remain true to Christ, even when persecuted. He also provided additional teaching about eschatology. He described the apostasy that will precede Christ's coming and urged the Thessalonians to stand firm in the faith.

1 TIMOTHY is a personal letter to Timothy about the administration of the Ephesian church. Paul wrote it between his 1st and 2nd imprisonments. It includes a discussion of the qualifications for elders and warnings against false teachers.

2 TIMOTHY, which was written from prison, is Paul's last known letter. In this letter, Paul encouraged Timothy to remain faithful in the face of increasing persecution and false teaching and to preach sound doctrine and live a godly life.

TITUS also received instructions from Paul about the qualifications for church leaders, as well as warnings about false teachers who professed to know God but who denied him by their deeds. Paul emphasized the need for believers to live holy lives (sanctification).

PHILEMON is a short letter in which Paul urged a fellow Christian, Philemon, to accept the return of his runaway slave Onesimus, who had become his brother in Christ.

HEBREWS is an unsigned letter but many point to Paul, Barnabas as the authors. Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians to remind them that Christ was greater than angels, Moses, the Old Testament priests, and the Law. The author urged his readers to be faithful to their commitment to Christ in the face of persecution.

JAMES was the half brother of Jesus. He reminded Christians that they must do more than just say they belong to Christ — they must live and act accordingly. True saving faith will produce

Christian actions.

1 PETER is Peter's message of hope to encourage Christians who were suffering persecution from outsiders. Peter encouraged his readers to behave in a godly manner, knowing that their salvation is certain, and to look for the coming glory.

2 PETER is a more general letter than 1 Peter. It warns Christians of the dangers of false teachers inside the church, encourages them in their Christian growth, and exhorts them to be watchful because Christ is coming again.

1 JOHN was written to assure believers of the reality of the Incarnation and to warn against false teachers who claimed to be perfect and who taught that Jesus was not really a man. John stressed the need for Christians to love God and each other.

2 JOHN was addressed either to a church or to a particular woman and encourages Christians to love one another and to beware of false teachers.

3 JOHN was written to Gaius, a leader in the church, to praise him for welcoming traveling teachers sent by John. Another leader, Diotrephes, rejected both John and these teachers.

JUDE was written by one of Jesus' half brothers, Jude, who warned of false teachers and urged Christians to keep themselves in God's love until Christ returns.

## **APOCALYPTIC OR PROPHETIC BOOK**

REVELATION is the only New Testament book that is primarily prophetic. The Revelation is the unveiling of Jesus Christ in the end times and given to the apostle John in a vision. In the final confrontation between God and Satan, Christians must stand firm and will be vindicated when Christ returns, destroys the wicked and ushers in the new heaven and new earth.

