

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY OVERVIEW

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Introduction

This Bible study series was first prepared in 2005 by Dr Paul B Coulter and has since been revised to the current seventh edition. It was originally designed to introduce students and scholars from mainland China to the message of the Bible but can be used by anyone with little background knowledge of the Bible or Christian faith. It begins with God and His creation, centres on Christ the promised Saviour and ends with the challenge to be a follower of Jesus in the 21st Century. The author's prayer is that through following this series you may grow in your knowledge about God, but also that through this process you will come to seek Him and to know Him as more than a distant, unknown creator. I hope that you may know and trust Him as the One who saves, leads and keeps you.

So, you see, it is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to Him must believe that there is a God and that He rewards those who sincerely seek Him

Hebrews Chapter 11 verse 6

Layout of studies

These studies are divided into three modules covering three major sections of the Bible and the story of God's plan for human beings. Each of the three modules contains eight studies accompanied by a section of *Study Aids* designed to provide greater historical or factual detail for students who wish to take their studies of the Bible further. The materials are in English, but a glossary of words that may be unfamiliar to people who have little experience of the Bible and Christian teaching can be found in the *Appendix*.

Page numbers in each section of the materials are prefixed by a number or letter indicating that section:

SECTION	PREFIX
<i>Overview</i>	O. [pages numbered 0.0, 0.1, 0.2 etc.]
<i>Module 1 – Old Testament</i>	1. [pages numbered 1.0, 1.1, 1.3 etc.]
<i>Module 1 – Old Testament, Study Aids</i>	1S. [pages numbered 1S.0, 1S.1, 1S.2 etc.]
<i>Module 2 – Jesus</i>	2. [pages numbered 2.0, 2.1, 2.3 etc.]
<i>Module 2 – Jesus, Study Aids</i>	2S. [pages numbered 2S.0, 2S.1, 2S.2 etc.]
<i>Module 3 – New Testament</i>	3. [pages numbered 3.0, 3.1, 3.3 etc.]
<i>Module 3 – New Testament, Study Aids</i>	3S. [pages numbered 3S.0, 3S.1, 3S.2 etc.]

Finding your way around the Bible

The Bible may be one book, but it contains 66 books and is separated into two sections:

- The Old Testament* – 39 books originally written in Hebrew and (in a few places) the related language Aramaic. These books are also recognised by Jews as originating from God. They tell the story of God's actions in the history of the nation of Israel and the words God gave to them. These books all predate the beginning of the Common Era and the life of Jesus Christ.
- The New Testament* – 27 books originally written in a form of Greek by followers of Jesus Christ. They tell about the life of Jesus and the growth of the movement He began as well as containing instructions to Christians about what they should believe and how they should live.

Editions of the Bible in modern language are translations. Some languages have only one version of the Bible and some have none at all, but in English there are many different translations. Most are intended to capture

the meaning of the original words, but they have different approaches ranging from staying as close as possible to the original words to greater freedom to change words to make the meaning more accessible in modern speech.

Quotations in these studies have been based on the *New Living Translation* (© 2015, Tyndale House Publishers), because in most places it strikes a good balance between accuracy of translation and ease of understanding for people whose first language is not English. Other excellent English Bible translations that may be useful to readers with a good standard of English include the *New International Version* (© 2011, Biblica) and the *English Standard Version* (© 2001, Crossway Bibles). Students whose first language is not English will also benefit from having a Bible in their own language so that they can learn Biblical terms in their heart language.

When you are new to the Bible it can be difficult to find your way around it. The names of people and places are from Hebrew, Greek or other ancient languages and may be unfamiliar as they are no longer commonly used. If you are unsure where to find a particular Bible book, you can look up the index at the beginning of your Bible. All Bible books are divided into chapters, which are subdivided into verses (these divisions are not original, but do make it easier to find a specific passage). The format of Bible references is usually like this:

Book (Chapter):(verse)

For example, John 11:35, refers to verse 35 of chapter 11 in the book entitled John, which is the shortest verse in the Bible, reading: *“Then Jesus wept”*. To find out why Jesus wept and what happened next, you need to read more widely and discover the whole story of the Bible.

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Overview of Series

Module 1: The Old Testament

This eight-part series examines the message of the Old Testament, beginning with God's Creation of the universe and mankind's rejection of God's rule, then following the story of God's relationship with Israel.

- Part 1** Creation
- Part 2** Fall
- Part 3** Justice and Grace
- Part 4** Abraham: God's people
- Part 5** Moses: God's rule
- Part 6** David: God's land
- Part 7** Prophets: God Speaks
- Part 8** Exile and Return

Module 2: The Life of Jesus

This eight-part series examines the birth, life, teaching, miracles, death and resurrection of Jesus. It introduces us to His claims about His identity and mission and challenges us to respond to Him.

- Part 9** The Silence Broken
- Part 10** Jesus' Birth
- Part 11** Greater Than John
- Part 12** Jesus' Mission
- Part 13** Jesus' Message
- Part 14** Responses to Jesus
- Part 15** Holy Week
- Part 16** He is Risen!

Module 3: The New Testament

This eight-part series follows the spread of the gospel message beginning in Jerusalem and advancing across the world as well as helping us to understand what it means to be a Christian in the 21st century.

- Part 17** Simon Peter
- Part 18** Acts and Holy Spirit
- Part 19** Paul
- Part 20** New Covenant
- Part 21** Church
- Part 22** Faith in the World
- Part 23** End of Ages
- Part 24** Christian Living

Is the Bible Reliable?

The Bible's uniqueness

Among the many books that have been written, the Bible is unique for several reasons:

- **Continuity** – it contains 66 books written over a period of 1500 years by over 40 different writers (including kings, peasants, philosophers, fishermen, statesmen and scholars) in different locations and cultures using three different languages (Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek) and in different emotional moods (from misery and depression to joy and thanksgiving), yet the whole book has a tremendous continuity and tells one story of God's plans for mankind.
- **Circulation** – the Bible is listed by Guinness World Records as the most widely printed and distributed book in history. It has been translated into more languages than any other book and was the first major book to be printed in Europe.
- **Continuance** – through many different periods of history the Bible has faced opposition and criticism but it has survived and is still read today by millions of people across the world.
- **Content** – the Bible is one of the best available sources for studying ancient history and contemporary human thinking. The lives of the people we read about in the Bible can easily be related to our own experiences and there is great honesty about the weaknesses of the authors. Some of the teachings recorded in the Bible are among the most radical the world has ever heard. It also contains historical references that can be tested against archaeological evidence and claims about the future some of which have already been fulfilled since they were first written.
- **Consequence** – no other book has been more quoted in the literature of the Western world and the Old Testament laws have shaped our modern legal system. More importantly, millions of people worldwide say that the Bible has transformed their lives.

How we got our Bible

People often ask the question: who decided which books should be included in the Bible? How did we end up with the 66 books that are recognised as forming the Bible?

A] Old Testament (OT)

The 39 books of the Old Testament were written down by people from the nation of Israel (later the Jews) who trusted God. They were preserved within the nation by faithful people who loved God. Copies of the individual books were made and distributed, with scrolls kept in each Jewish meeting place (synagogue). After AD 70, when Jerusalem was destroyed by a Roman army, a group of leading Jewish scholars met to confirm which books were already recognised as coming from God. They produced a list identical to our Old Testament except in a different order.

Christians accept these Israelite texts as true and trustworthy because Jesus recognised them as being God's word. He referred to all three major divisions of the Old Testament: Law, Psalms and Prophets (see Luke 24:44, Luke 11:51). The New Testament writers also repeatedly claim that the Old Testament is historically accurate and the word of God (see for example Matthew 21:42, 22:29, 26:54, 56; Luke 24; John 5:39, 7:38, 10:35; Acts 17:2, 11, 18:28; Romans 1:2, 4:3, 9:17, 10:11, 11:2, 15:4, 16:26; 1 Corinthians 15:3-4; Galatians 3:8, 22, 4:30; 1 Timothy 5:18; 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20, 21, 3:16).

B] New Testament (NT)

The 27 books of the New Testament are also accepted by Christians as God's word. Their names were first listed together by a group of Church leaders at a meeting called the Synod of Hippo in AD 393, but this group was only confirming which books already met two criteria:

a) *They were written by the apostles or people in their circle of authority.*

The most important principle for including these books was that they were written by people who knew Jesus, who followed Him closely, and who had been given authority by Him. The Bible calls these people apostles. One of the main New Testament writers, Paul, does not fit this description perfectly since he did not know Jesus during His life on earth. He was, however, appointed specially by Jesus in a special encounter described in the book of Acts and is described as an apostle in the NT. Peter confirmed the status of Paul's writings as being Scripture equal to the OT in authority (2 Peter 3:16). Some New Testament books, for example Luke, Acts and Mark, were not written by apostles, but their authors were close to apostles and wrote under their approval.

b) *They had already been widely accepted throughout the Church as God's word.*

The books that formed the New Testament were already widely known across the Church and the leaders who compiled the list were not deciding which books to include but simply acknowledging the books that were already recognised as being from God.

Is the Bible reliable?

There are two aspects to this question. Firstly, is the Bible that we have what was originally written? We have good reason to believe that it is. The quantity of manuscripts is greater and their dates closer to the time of writing than for any other ancient text. When manuscripts from earlier dates have been discovered, the differences between them and the later manuscripts that were previously known have been found to be minimal. The majority of the New Testament is also quoted in the writings of Christians living in the second and third centuries, suggesting that it was already well known and established as Scripture by this time.

Much has been written about the historical reliability of the Bible, but a number of points can be made:

- Old Testament prophecies can be seen to have been fulfilled at later points in history, both before and during the lifetime of Jesus.
- The writers of the New Testament either: a) claimed to be eye-witnesses to events they described (see 1 John 1:1-4; 2 Peter 1:16-18); b) have been identified since early times as eye-witnesses of the events (the Gospels named after Matthew and Mark are attributed to these men, the latter of whom is said to have based his account on the memories of Simon Peter, by early Christian writers); c) to have interviewed eye-witnesses (e.g., Luke 1:1-4).
- The honesty with which the lives of Old Testament kings and New Testament apostles are recorded ('warts and all') indicates that these are not works of 'propaganda' or mythical stories. The people in the Bible read like real people and their responses to events resonate across the centuries with our experience.
- The texts are full of cultural and geographical references that have consistently over time been substantiated by archaeological finds, even in some cases when the historical consensus was once that the Bible could not be reliable (e.g., dates of domestication of camels or the development of writing).
- The New Testament contains no reference to the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, supporting the suggestion that almost all of its books were written before that date.
- The existence of the Jewish people, despite all the opposition they have faced, and their massive contribution to the world as well as the seemingly intractable problems of the Middle East testify to the significance of these peoples in history, which is explained by the history recorded in Scripture.
- There are references to Christians and their beliefs in the writings of Jewish rabbis and Roman officials which are often not detailed but which fit well with the New Testament accounts. Historians from both cultures also refer to Christians and their beliefs.

None of these points can prove that the Bible is, as it claims to be, the word of God, but they certainly support those claims and suggest that they are worthy of serious consideration.

Isn't the Bible full of contradictions?

People often make this claim, especially when confronted with some of the Bible's more challenging claims, but when asked to point out one of these contradictions they cannot. Some passages in the Bible do seem at first glance to be contradictory, but further investigation reveals that there is an alternative explanation. This is particularly true of the four Gospels, which often record the same event from different perspectives or record similar but distinct events in the life of Jesus. The differences between these records do not imply inaccuracy or fabrication, rather they complement each other to build a more accurate and clearer record of the life of Christ as seen through four different pairs of eyes, just as four different biographies about one celebrity could be quite different but all true.

Other apparent contradictions can be dismissed if we understand the original Greek or Hebrew version of the text. The apparent differences appear because of inaccurate or difficult translations into English. Still others are due to a poor understanding of the culture or literary style in which the Bible was written. Another important point to realise is that the Bible contains diverse types of writing, including poetry, which is not intended to be understood literally, and wisdom literature, which contains sayings that are not intended to be universally applicable but to be used with wisdom depending on the situation. A final point to note is that the Old Testament describes the same God as the New Testament, but the requirements God gave to His people and their system of worship changes from the nation of Israel under the Law of Moses to the Church after Jesus Christ. This is not a matter of contradiction, but of developments in God's plan of salvation.

Conclusion

No one could prove by argument beyond all reasonable doubt that the Bible is God's word to mankind. The Bible is, however, a special book which is not a collection of myths and is reliable as a historical text. It claims to be God's word to human beings and it has all the qualities we might expect in a book that really is from God. Understanding this is only the beginning to taking the Bible seriously. You must still read the Bible for yourself, considering its claims and making your own response. One thing you should not do is to ignore it. The claims of the Bible are too important for that and its credentials are too impressive to be dismissed.

God Revealing God

The belief that God is personal and reveals Himself to mankind is foundational to the Christian faith. Christianity does not claim to rest on the opinions of people about God or on principles that can be discovered in our experience or in nature. Rather, it claims to rest on God's progressive revelation of Himself to mankind throughout human history. We can think of this revelation in four ways, each more specific and detailed than the previous one:

1. Creation

God created the Universe, and it bears the marks of His creativity. When we see the wonder of the Universe and the immense diversity and complexity of life it should lead us to conclude that there might or even must be a designer. Comparison with our own limited intelligence and capacity for creativity, we should understand that the creator God is personal and powerful above humankind. The more we discover about nature, the more we should marvel at the One who made it (see Romans 1:19-20).

2. Conscience

God has also written His law on the hearts of humankind (see Romans 2:14-15). Human beings were made to know God and given the ability to make decisions based on reasoning about foreseen consequences rather than simply on instinct. One factor in our decision making is our conscience, which is an internal voice that causes us to feel guilt when we do something wrong. This 'natural law' has shaped human culture, so that there are similarities between moral standards across the world. The conscience is not a reliable guide to right and wrong, since it has been distorted by sin and we can deny it until we do not hear it any longer, but the existence of morality is a pointer to the reality of God.

Creation and conscience can be described as 'general revelation' because they are available for all people. They may lead us to conclude that there may be a powerful, personal creator and to realise that we are guilty before the standards of this 'God', but they cannot tell us more than this. To know God more fully, we need 'special revelation' consisting of words.

3. Covenant

The Bible is the record of God's covenants with human beings and the words that surround them: commands, promises, warnings and invitations. God spoke directly to one nation beginning with a man called Abraham. He revealed His Law to Moses and spoke repeatedly to the nation of Israel through prophets, who were His appointed spokespeople. The record of God's word given to the nation of Israel is contained in the Old Testament of the Bible. Through the Bible we can know what God is like and what He expects from us. Christians believe that the whole Bible is the inspired word of God, meaning that the Holy Spirit of God guided those people who wrote it to record His words (Hebrews 1:1).

4. Christ

The ultimate revelation of God to mankind is not a book, but a person: Christ Jesus. Jesus was not merely a person who spoke about God or who brought a message from God (like the Old Testament prophets), He was God living as a human being. As such, He was the perfect revelation of God, and He can be called the "Word" (see John 1:1-18). He not only revealed the ultimate truth, He is the ultimate truth behind the Universe (see John 14:6)! Christ taught and gave authority to the apostles to lay down the foundational teaching of the Christian Church, and we have this recorded in the New Testament books. The Bible is now complete because the apostles have completed the teaching of Christ. The Holy Spirit now lives in Christians, representing Christ and making the truth of the Bible live in our lives.

God, the creator of all things, is separate from His creation and independent of it in the sense that He does not need anything from it to sustain His being. He does not, however, remain distant from His creation, but is active in the created universe and especially through human history and in the lives of individual human beings. He is so committed to us that He became one of us in the person of Jesus Christ. This truth has other implications:

- **The Bible is the ultimate authority for beliefs and practice**

Because they believe that the Bible is God's word spoken through His people to His people, Christians base their beliefs on the Bible. They read, study and teach the Bible and if they discover that the Bible teaches something different from their present ideas or practices they should change in submission to its authority (see 2 Timothy 3:14-17). Christians also believe they can learn a great deal from the writings of other Christians throughout the centuries, but the Bible has authority over every other teacher.

- **Every part of the Bible must be read in the context of the whole Bible**

We have the complete Bible and we must read it as a whole. It would not make sense to read the Old Testament as if Jesus had not lived. Jesus is the key to the whole Bible: the Old Testament looks forward to Him and can only be understood through Him, while the New Testament reveals and explains Him. When a Christian reads the Old Testament, he looks back through the lens of Christ. He should try to understand the text as it was written, seeing what it meant for the first readers, but then he must realise its place in preparing the scene for Jesus. To understand any subject, a Christian should read through the Bible and see how God's revealed truth about it develops over time, noting especially whether God expected something different for Israel than He now expects for Christians. It is not that God changes, but that Israel was called to be a distinct nation on earth, whereas Christians are scattered through many nations, and that some truths could not be completely revealed until Jesus had died and risen again.

- **Jesus Christ is the only Saviour**

Christianity is an exclusive religion in that it claims that there is no other route to God other than through Christ Jesus. This should be obvious from the above understanding that Jesus was the ultimate revelation of God and when we grasp that His death was the only way for sin to be forgiven. In fact, Jesus Himself made the absolute claim that He is the Way, the Truth and the Life and no one can come to the Father except through Him (John 14:6). The apostle Peter said: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). This is not to say that everyone who will be saved will have known of and trusted in Jesus (Abraham, Moses and David, for example, will be saved but never heard His name), but that no one will be saved except through the sacrificial death of Christ. No one who has rejected Him can be saved and everyone should hear about Him. This is why Christians preach the good news about Jesus to every nation on earth.

The Bible's big story

The Bible tells the story of God, who rules over all, but whose rule was ruined and so needed to be restored. What ruined God's rule was human sin and what restores it was the faithful actions of one special human being, Jesus of Nazareth. The key to understanding the message of the Bible is to realise what our problem is and who Jesus is and, therefore, how He was able to solve it. God's rule is exercised through the authority of His word. The Bible calls us to acknowledge our sin and to have faith in God.

⇒ **Sin** is rebellion against God's rule expressed in disobedience to His word.

⇒ **Faith** is submission to God's rule leading to obedience to His word

The story of the Bible can be told in seven movements, which will become clear as we work through the studies in this series:

1. Creation – God's rule established

- God already exists before the Bible's story begins – He is eternal and is simply there in the beginning.
- God rules over the universe He created through the power of His word (Genesis 1:1-25; Psalm 93:1-2).
- God created human beings in His own image to rule over the earth under His authority (Genesis 1:26-31).
- God gave human beings great freedom within limits set by His command (Genesis 2:15-17)
- God, man and woman live in perfect harmony in a perfect world with no suffering or death.

2. Fall – God's rule ruined

- Satan, disguised as a serpent, tempts human beings by twisting God's word (Genesis 3:1-5).
- Human beings reject God's rule and choosing instead to live their own way (Genesis 3:6).
- Humankind's harmony with God, one another, and the earth was broken (Genesis 3:7-24)
- Suffering, conflict, pressure and death become the experience of human beings in the world.
- God responds in judgement and grace, establishing a covenant with creation after the Flood.

3. Israel – God's rule described

- God makes a covenant with Abraham, a man of faith, containing three promises.
- Later, God rescues Israel from Egypt and forms them into a nation under His Law given through Moses.
- David becomes king over Israel and God promises that his descendants would be kings forever.
- Israel is unfaithful to God's covenant, so God uses other nations to take them unto exile.
- A faithful remnant of Jews returns from exile to rebuild God's temple and the city of Jerusalem.

5. Jesus – God's rule present

- Jesus taught about God's rule and performed miracles to show it had come near (Mark 1:15).
- Jesus appointed twelve men to be His authorised representatives (apostles).
- Jesus fulfilled the covenant with Abraham, Moses and David, calling Himself God's Messiah (Christ).

- Jesus died for sins and rose from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:3-4)
- Jesus formed a community of disciples and declared a New Covenant sealed with His blood (Luke 22:20)

6. Church – God’s rule declared

- Jesus commissioned His apostles to make disciples from all nations (Matthew 28:6-20).
- The Holy Spirit baptised the apostles, empowering them to preach about Jesus (Acts 2).
- People who believed in the apostles’ message were baptised and added to the Church.
- The Church is a community united in the apostles’ teaching, breaking bread, sharing needs and prayers.
- The good news (gospel) about Jesus spread across the world, reaching all nations.

7. New Creation – God’s rule perfected

- The Old and New Testaments look forward to a new, perfect creation (Isaiah 65:17; 2 Peter 3:13).
- Christ will return to judge all people and bring this new creation about (2 Timothy 4:1).
- Only those who have responded to God in faith will be included in the new creation.
- Those who reject God will be condemned and lost eternally.
- In the New Creation, sin, the curse on the earth and death will be no more (Revelation 21-22)

This message is, according to the Bible, the true story of human history. It tells us where we came from and where we are going and it challenges us to respond by:

- **Turning** away from our sin – acknowledging it and asking for God’s forgiveness (repentance).
- **Trusting** in Jesus – confessing Him as our Saviour and Lord over our lives (faith).

Those who respond to God in this way come into a new relationship with God as Father and become part of the Church, God’s new community. They have a new purpose for life and hope for a future eternally with God.

How to Read the Bible

The Bible is a collection of 66 books, yet it forms one book with a story (the story of God's relationship with mankind) that develops over time. There are three key principles that apply to reading any part of the Bible:

- A Ask God** to help you to understand and live it. The Holy Spirit inspired the Bible, and He can help you to understand it and to live it out in your life. The Bible was not written to give us a lot of theoretical knowledge but to teach us how to know God and to live for Him.
- B Be thoughtful** as you read. Take time to think over the meaning and meditate on it.
- C Context is vital** to understanding Scripture. Think of the historical and cultural context, and also the context of each verse in the section, book, and whole Bible. When you find one part of the Bible difficult to understand let what you have learned from other parts help you to get the true meaning. Remember that the whole Bible is God's word and tells one story.

In addition to these principles we must learn how to read the different kinds of literature in the Bible. The 66 books that form the Bible vary greatly in style because they were written using different types of literature. We are familiar with this in our own experience – just think about the difference between how you read a love letter, a novel, a textbook or a poem. Although the content of all four might be true they will be written in very different styles, and if you are going to get the message you will have to learn how to read that particular type of literature. If you read a poem literally you will be confused, as it is likely to use figurative language, and if you read a love letter like a textbook it will not have the intended effect on you of making you respond in love to the writer. The Bible contains several main types of literature, and you will find some helpful advice below about how to read each of these effectively:

Narrative (History)

These parts of the Bible record stories about people and events. They include over 40% of the Old Testament (Genesis, much of Exodus and Numbers, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and parts of the prophets including large parts of Daniel) as well as the book of Acts in the New Testament. Key principles for reading these parts of the Bible include:

- Remember that it is historical. These books are not written as impartial history textbooks, but they do claim to be historically accurate, they are not myths or made up stories.
- The stories are primarily intended to show us God's plan in working with His people and to teach us what God is like, rather than to provide examples for us to follow (although we can learn a lot either positively or negatively from the examples of the people in the stories).
- The stories record what actually happened, not necessarily what should have happened, so we should not always look for a moral (a teaching point for what we should do) in the story. To decide if God approves of any actions we must look at what God says elsewhere (especially in the Law and Prophets).
- The stories do not aim to tell us everything that happened. They tell us the things we need to know in order to see how God worked through that situation and to follow the big story of God's salvation.
- We should be careful not to read the stories as allegories (stories full of imagery that reflect a deeper figurative meaning behind the text), but to try to understand the clear meaning of the text. Some details in Old Testament narratives do, however, have typological significance – they point forward to Christ through similarity.

Law

Records of the Law God gave to Israel are found in large parts of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Key principles for reading the Law are:

- The Law can teach us a great deal about God – His holiness, justice, love and mercy (protecting innocent people) – and about ourselves – our sinfulness and need of a perfect sacrifice to receive forgiveness. It points us to our need of a Saviour.
- We should not read the laws in the Old Testament as God’s direct commands to us, since they were given to the people of Israel and many parts no longer apply to Christians. The systems of priesthood and sacrifice in the Temple have expired, being fulfilled in Jesus’ death, and the instructions for the punishment of crimes were only applicable to Israel as a nation. There are, however, many moral principles of right and wrong in the Law that are repeated in the New Testament and that reflect God’s character and His unchanging principles for human beings.
- Jesus explained that the Old Testament Law centred on the inseparable principles of loving God with our entire being (serving Him above all) and loving others in the way we love ourselves (seeking their good). At its core, sin is wrong worship of false gods, but it results in wrong actions towards others.

Poetry

Some parts of the Bible are poems or songs written to describe the experience of God’s people or to give praise Him. The main poetry book is Psalms (a psalm is a song intended for use in prayer and praise), but there is also some poetry in some of the prophetic and narrative books, and Song of Songs is a poetry book. Key principles for reading poetry are:

- Psalms arise out of a range of emotional conditions and give insights into what a relationship with God looks like as well as what He is like. The psalms serve three main purposes for believers:
 - a) A guide to worship, teaching us how to pray and sing praise;
 - b) A guide to honesty with God, showing us to tell God what we think and feel, even if it is not right;
 - c) A reminder to reflect and meditate on what God has done and who He is.
- We should be careful not to base an understanding of God and His will on verses from the psalms unless it is clear from other parts of the Bible. These are the words of people about God. They are also part of God’s word, but like words in narratives spoken by human beings they may not reflect God’s opinion.
- Hebrew poetry does not rhyme but uses parallels and repeated ideas for emphasis.
- Some Psalms also contain prophecies about Christ. These are explained in the New Testament.

Wisdom

The wisdom parts of the Old Testament include Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job as well as some psalms. These books are intended to teach us how to make godly choices in life. Some important principles for reading the Wisdom books are:

- To understand a wisdom saying we must understand the terms used in it correctly (e.g., “fool” in Proverbs means someone who ignores God, not someone with a low intelligence).
- Wisdom statements tell us what should be, not always what is, the case. Often two extremes are presented in a wisdom statement, giving us a principle that we must apply wisely in our decisions. These statements present ideals or general principles and force us to make a choice.
- The foundational principle underlying biblical wisdom is the realisation that God has created the universe with moral order and that everything we do has consequences because God remains ultimately in control. Within this understanding, wisdom gives us skills to live well.

Prophecy

16 Old Testament books (from Isaiah to Malachi) and the book of Revelation in the New Testament are prophetic, in that they declare words and describe visions given by God, often using highly figurative language and sometimes foretelling the future. The Old Testament prophets were God’s spokespeople to the nation of Israel. Their books record prophecies or visions given to the prophets by God for His people. Some also

include narrative portions telling about the prophet's ministry (in the case of Jonah, virtually the whole book is narrative!) Some important principles for reading prophecy are:

- The words of the prophets are the words of God. God gave specific words, rather than general ideas, for them to proclaim to the people. They make this clear by saying that these are words from God or 'oracles' revealed to them.
- The Old Testament prophets' role was primarily to call the people back to obedience to the Old Covenant.
- Many of the Old Testament prophets also saw forward to the New Covenant and the Messiah. Sometimes they were not even aware of this, and the prophecies about the future can seem to merge with the prophecies about the immediate situation.
- The prophets only had incomplete glimpses of God's overall plan. None claimed to record every detail of how God would work out His purposes. The future hope of the Messiah and the new creation was only revealed partially by them.
- Some parts of the prophets (e.g., Ezekiel, parts of Daniel and Revelation) are a distinct genre called apocalyptic. It contains highly figurative language, describing ultimate realities through powerful images that cannot be taken literally. They are glimpses into realities in heaven and in the end times of the world that are only partially revealed to us, but that describe God's ultimate victory.

Gospels

Four books in the New Testament are called Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. In fact, these books are "The gospel according to" each of the four authors. They tell one story, the good news about Jesus, from four different perspectives. The books are written to record the life and teaching with a sense of tension leading up to the climax in His death and resurrection.

The Gospels are comprised of a **narrative** backbone, which should be read like the other narrative portions of the Old Testament, but with four additional questions in mind:

- How do these events relate to Old Testament prophecies? Sometimes the Gospel writers point this out by telling us that something Jesus did was fulfilling what was written beforehand. In other cases, we need to notice the connections for ourselves.
- What do these events teach us about who Jesus is and His relationship with God? If the central question in all narrative passages is who God is, then in the Gospels the focus is on Jesus.
- How do these events relate to any teaching or comments of Jesus in the immediate context? The writers often juxtapose events (especially miracles) that illustrate some truth with teaching on that theme from Jesus.
- What do these events teach us about the nature of Christian discipleship? What does it mean to trust in and follow Jesus? This is often seen in the way people respond to Jesus.

Within this narrative backbone are portions of teaching by Jesus. These are of three types, that relate to other biblical genres:

- **Didactic** – some of Jesus' teaching, especially when He was alone with His disciples (John 14-16 is the longest portion of this kind) contains direct statements about God, promises to be trusted and commands to be obeyed. These portions are similar to the Old Testament law but can be applied more directly to Christians because they are spoken by Jesus to His followers. It is, however, important to ask whether a statement applies directly to us or only to the apostles as Jesus' authorised representatives.
- **Wisdom** – much of Jesus' teaching, especially when addressing a crowd of people who had not yet decided whether to commit to Him, is similar to the Old Testament wisdom literature. Jesus uses pithy, provocative sayings and, most famously, extended stories called parables that illustrate spiritual truths. The parables generally convey one dominant truth, although they can also contain some allegorical elements. They draw the interested hearer in, filtering out those who are not interested, and challenging those who focus to respond, often by relating to one of the characters in the story.

- **Apocalyptic** – a few portions of Jesus' teaching shortly before his crucifixion are apocalyptic, like sections of the Old Testament prophets and Revelation.


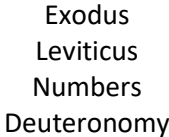
For more comment about the four Gospels see *The Life of Jesus Study Aids*.

Epistles (letters)

These New Testament books (from Romans to Jude) are letters written by apostles to individuals or churches to encourage and challenge them and to teach them true Christian beliefs and behaviour. Key principles for reading these letters are:

- As with any letter it is helpful to understand who is writing, who they are writing to and what caused them to write. We can usually see these three things by reading the letter carefully.
- To understand the letter correctly, it is often helpful to ask what questions might have been in the minds of the readers causing the writer to give these answers (this is especially true for a book like I Corinthians which was written in reply to questions this church had asked).
- The apostles who wrote these books had the same authority that Christ had. He trained them and appointed them with authority to lay down the foundational teaching of the Church.
- We should not take verses from the epistles out of context but must try to understand each phrase in the context of the book.
- The commands and warnings in the epistles are usually directly applicable to us today, since we are also Christians living in the same stage of salvation history. In those rare occasions when teachings are specific to the context and time they are written into, we must try to understand the underlying principles being applied to that culture and apply them to our own setting.

Bible Timeline

DATE	MAIN CHARACTER(S)	EVENTS	BIBLE BOOK(S) ABOUT PERIOD	BIBLE BOOKS WRITTEN IN PERIOD
???	Adam, Eve, Cain and Abel	God creates the universe Mankind is disobedient to God Sin leads to death	 Genesis	Job ?
???	Noah	God judges the earth by a flood – Noah and his family are saved because Noah has faith in God		
???		The city of Babel is built for man's honour – God scatters the nations and confuses their languages		
2090BC	Abraham	God chooses Abraham because he has faith. He promises to make a great nation that will bless all nations and to give them the land of Canaan.	 Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy	Genesis - Deuteronomy Some psalms
1700BC	Isaac Jacob Joseph			
1500BC	Moses	The people of Israel are in Egypt for 400 years. God uses Moses to lead them out. God gives the people the feast of Passover and His Law. The Law shows them what is right and wrong and that they have sinned and need God's forgiveness.		
1405BC	Joshua	Joshua leads the people into the Promised land.	Joshua	
1380 – 1050BC	The judges Samuel	The nation of Israel is led by a series of Judges. God is their King. They live in the land of Canaan but are often oppressed by their enemies because they often forget God and worship false gods.	Judges Ruth I Samuel 1-7	
1050BC	King Saul	The people demand a King – God grants their request, even though they are rejecting Him. The first three kings rule for 40 years each. God promises David that his descendants will be kings forever. David captures the city of Jerusalem, which becomes the capital of Israel. Solomon builds a Temple in Jerusalem where God will be worshipped.	1 Samuel 8ff. 2 Samuel 2 Kings 1-11 1 Chronicles 2 Chronicles 1-9	Psalms (of David) Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs (by Solomon)
1010BC	King David			
970BC	King Solomon			
930BC	Kings of Israel and Judah	After Solomon's death the kingdom splits in two – Israel in the north and Judah in the south. There are a series	1 Kings 12ff. 2 Kings 2 Chronicles	

		of kings (in Judah they are all descendants of David, but in Israel they come from several families) – some good and some bad. The people tend to follow their king either to worship God or to turn away from Him. Over time they grow further away from God.	10ff.	Isaiah, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, ? 1 and 2 Kings
722BC		Exile of Israel to Assyria (God judges them)		Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah
586BC		Exile of Judah to Babylon (God judges them)		Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel
538BC		Zerubbabel (the descendant of David) returns to Jerusalem – the Temple is rebuilt	Daniel	
458BC		Ezra returns to Jerusalem – the Law is restored	Esther	? 1 and 2 Chronicles Esther
432BC		Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem – the walls are rebuilt	Ezra	Ezra Haggai, Zechariah
4BC	Jesus, Mary	Jesus is born	Nehemiah	Nehemiah Malachi
29AD	John the Baptist 12 disciples	Jesus begins his three-year public ministry – He performs many miracles and teaches many things. He trains twelve men to be apostles.	Matthew, Mark, Luke, John	
33AD		Jesus dies and rises again from the dead. He returns to heaven.		
33 – c.90AD	Peter John Paul	The Church is founded in Jerusalem and begins to spread across the world. The foundational teachers of the Church are men appointed by Jesus to be His apostles.	Acts	Gospels, Acts, epistles, Revelation
FUTURE	Jesus	Jesus will return to rule and to judge – a new universe with no more sin or death is revealed	Revelation	

Old Testament (39 books) → **Jesus Christ** ← **New Testament (27 books)**

Beginnings – 1; Law – 4; History – 12;
Poetry / Wisdom – 5; Prophecy – 17

(God living as a man)

Gospels – 4; History – 1;
Letters – 21; Prophecy – 1

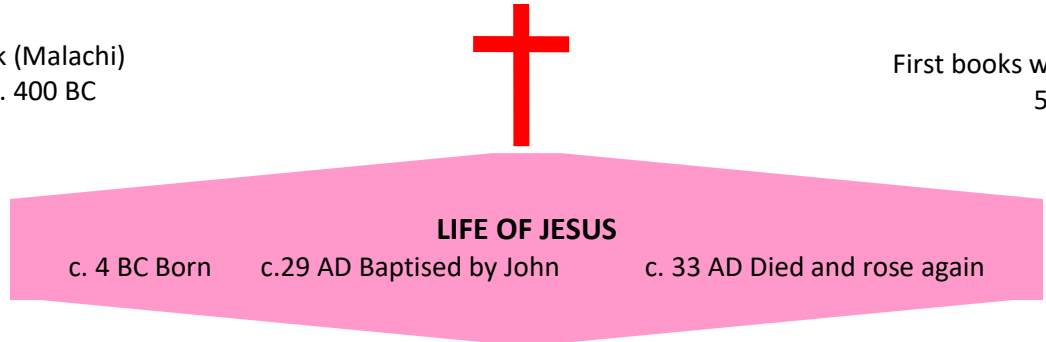
First book (Genesis)
written c. 1440 BC

Last book (Malachi)
written c. 400 BC

First books written
50s AD

Last book (Revelation)
written c. 90 AD

CREATION
human beings
disobey God (SIN)



NEW CREATION
Redeemed human
beings live with God

OLD COVENANT – sign = Circumcision
God’s special relationship with the nation of Israel in three stages:

- 1. Abraham** – c. 2000 BC
Three promises: a) The land of Canaan; b) Many descendants;
c) Through them all nations will be blessed.
- 2. Moses** – c. 1440 BC
The Law – a guide to right and wrong and provision of sacrifices for sin
- 3. King David** – c. 1000 BC
David’s family will be kings for ever
The people must respond to the Covenant in faith and obedience

THREE GROUPS IN ISRAEL ANOINTED TO SERVE GOD

- 1. Priests** – offered sacrifices to God on behalf of the people in the Temple;
- 2. Prophets** – spoke the words of God directly to the people and foretold the coming of a Messiah, an anointed king in David’s line;
- 3. Kings** – responsible to rule the nation under God, leading the people in faithfulness to the covenant.

NEW COVENANT – sign = Lord’s Supper
God’s special relationship with all Christians revealed through Jesus Christ fulfilling the Old Covenant:

- 1.** He is the descendant of Abraham who blesses all nations by bringing forgiveness for sins to all who trust in Him;
- 2.** He fulfilled the Law, never doing wrong and dying as the perfect sacrifice for sin;
- 3.** He was the descendant of David who rose from the dead and will be King over all forever.
The Holy Spirit changes believers in Jesus from within.

JESUS, MESSIAH, ANOINTED PRIEST, PROPHET AND KING

- 1. Priest** – offered Himself as the one sacrifice to finally pay for all sins forever, rose again to bring us to God;
- 2. Prophet** – God’s perfect word to us fulfilling all the Old Testament promises about the coming Messiah;
- 3. King** – the true King in David’s family line, saving all who acknowledge Him as Lord.