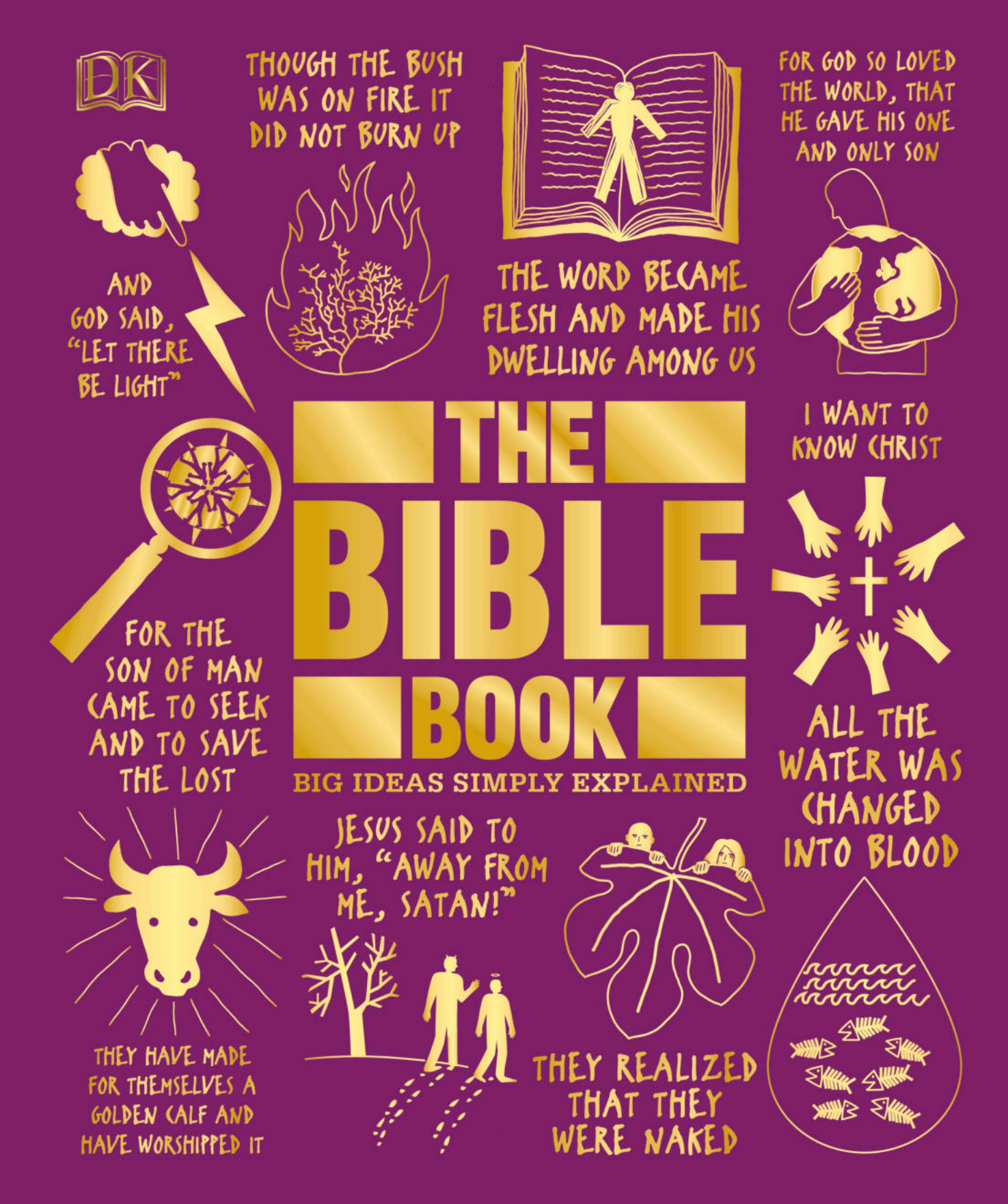
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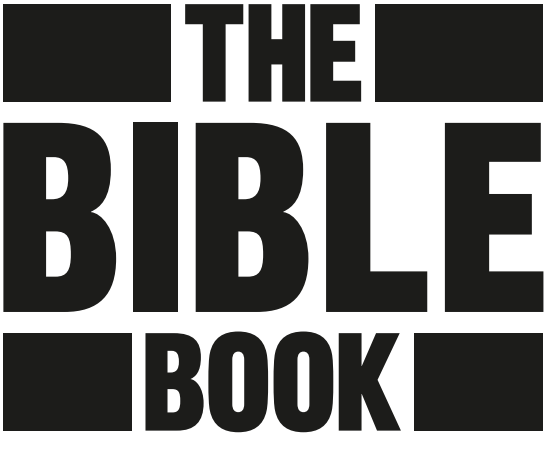
THOUGH THE BUSH WAS ON FIRE IT DID NOT BURN UP
FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD, THAT HE GAVE HIS ONE AND ONLY SON
AND GOD SAID, "LET THERE BE LIGHT"
THE WORD BECAME FLESH AND MADE HIS DWELLING AMONG US
I WANT TO KNOW CHRIST
THE BIBLE BOOK
BIG IDEAS SIMPLY EXPLAINED
FOR THE SON OF MAN CAME TO SEEK AND TO SAVE THE LOST
ALL THE WATER WAS CHANGED INTO BLOOD
JESUS SAID TO HIM, "AWAY FROM ME, SATAN!"
THEY HAVE MADE FOR THEMSELVES A GOLDEN CALF AND HAVE WORSHIPPED IT
THEY REALIZED THAT THEY WERE NAKED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INTRODU

CTION

The Bible is the world's most famous book and a keystone text of Western civilization. It has been translated into more languages than any other text in history, and it remains the most prolifically published book since the invention of the printing press. Christians worldwide look to it as sacred scripture—the written word of God, given by divine inspiration. It has influenced art, language, music, and literature for more than 2,000 years: in fact, the history of Western art cannot be fully understood without at least some knowledge of the Bible.

The Bible's teachings have also shaped social, economic, and political developments, contributing to Western civilization's emphasis on the value of the individual rather than the state. It is the subject of academic study by believers and skeptics, and its words are the source of comfort and challenge from pulpits on every continent.

Moved by God

The Bible is a collection of 66 books, written by some 40 authors, living on three continents (Africa, Asia, and Europe), over 1,400 years (c.1200 BCE–c.100 CE). These authors understood themselves to be "moved by God" to write "the word of the Lord." By the 1st century BCE, most Jews had come to recognize the 39 books of the Hebrew Bible, written in Hebrew and Aramaic, as God's written word—the scriptures (from *scriptura*, Latin for "writings"). Later, the Christian churches of the 1st and 2nd centuries CE similarly acknowledged the four Gospels and a range of apostolic letters, written in Greek, as the word of God, alongside the earlier Hebrew scriptures.

These texts communicate to the modern reader through a system of transmission and translation that began with the ancient Israelites. As early as the 3rd century CE, scholars were comparing copies and translations of the Hebrew Bible. This process continues among scholars today, who collect and compare newly discovered copies of biblical texts in order to establish a "critical text" from which translations are then made.

> We did not follow cleverly devised stories … but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty.
> **2 Peter 1:16**

The most famous English translation is the Authorized Version, also called the King James Version, published in 1611. *The Bible Book* refers to the New International Version, an English translation from 1978 that aims to make the text understandable to modern readers.

Book of books

The 66 books of the Bible are divided into two major sections. The first in the Christian Bible is the Old Testament (the Hebrew scriptures of Judaism, known as the Tanakh), comprising 39 books, which were written for the ancient nation of Israel. It begins with the five books of the Law (the Torah: Genesis to Deuteronomy), and proceeds through the Historical Books (Joshua to Esther). Although these books are arranged in roughly chronological order, the writing of the books occurred at various points along the timeline. For example, Psalms was probably written quite early, while Isaiah

and Amos were contemporaries. The third group of books are the Poetical Books (Job to Song of Solomon), followed by the Major Prophets (meaning "large books": Isaiah to Daniel) and the Minor Prophets (meaning "small books": Hosea to Malachi). These books are considered sacred texts by both Christians and Jews.

A small set of books, often referred to as the Apocrypha (from the Latin *apocryphus*, meaning "hidden") are considered by Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians to be part of the Old Testament. These seven books, plus additions to the Books of Daniel and Esther, were primarily written in Greek from 400–300 BCE. They are not regarded as scripture by either Protestant Christians or Jews, who argue that these books deny that there was any prophetic word from God (the characteristic of scripture) during the period in which they were written.

The New Testament comprises the Christian scriptures, 27 books that are accepted by all Christian denominations as the complete list of New Testament books. The title "New Testament" arises from the prophecy of a new covenant ("testament") that God would give to His people (Jeremiah 31:31–34). Most of the 27 books of the New Testament were written in the 1st century CE by Jesus's apostles, although some books, such as Hebrews, are anonymous. They were written for Christian churches and individuals scattered across the eastern half of the Roman Empire. The first group of books are the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), which present the life and ministry of Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies heralding a savior for Israel and the nations.

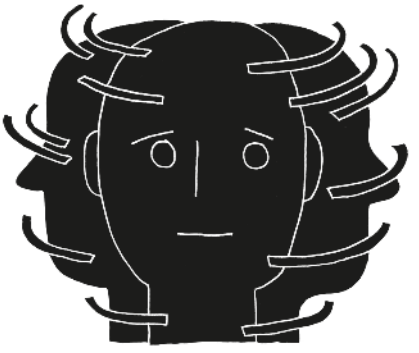
The Book of Acts describes the spread of the message about Jesus in the 30 years after His death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven, while the New Testament letters, known as "epistles," are divided into the Pauline Epistles (Romans to Philemon) and the General Epistles (Hebrews to Jude). The final New Testament text is the Book of Revelation.

Literary genres

There are many different types of literature in the 66 books of the Bible. Historical accounts, genealogies, and legal texts comprise most of the Law and Historical books of the Old Testament. The Poetical books contain proverbs, laments, praises, and even prayers for judgment on the wicked. The longest chapter in the Bible is a poem (Psalm 119), in which each of the 22 stanzas comprises 16 lines beginning with one of the 22 letters of the ancient Hebrew alphabet. The prophetic books contain parables, historical accounts, songs, and visions.

The Gospels are a unique literary genre, containing speeches, sermons, arguments, visions, and miracles, often interpreting events in Jesus's life as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies. The letters of the New Testament contain teaching, encouragement, and even rebuke. Many use literary devices common in Greco-Roman literature of the 1st century CE »

> Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.
> **Matthew 4:4**



such as lists of vices and virtues, household codes (instructions about family relationships), and topical treatments of moral questions. Finally, the most difficult form of literature in the Bible is the apocalyptic texts. Found in the Old Testament books of Daniel and Ezekiel, and in the New Testament Book of Revelation, these highly symbolic texts describe God's triumph over the wicked and vindication of the righteous.

Key themes

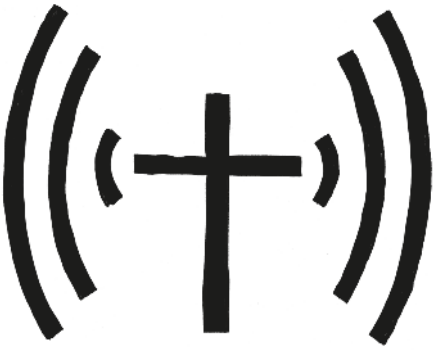
The Bible begins with the creation of the world and humanity. This original paradise indicates God's intent for humanity—to live in a rich and joyful relationship with God and others, exercising stewardship over God's world. This goal is challenged, however, when Adam and Eve disobey God, bringing ruin and decay upon themselves and creation. This "Fall" introduces the central tension in the biblical narrative; the holiness of God demands the judgment of sinful humanity, yet the love of God calls for the restoration of humanity and the fulfillment of God's purpose for creation. The rest of the Bible is taken up with resolving this tension, culminating, in the New Testament, with the fulfillment of the prophecy in Genesis (3:17) of one who will "crush the head of the serpent" and lift the curse of God's judgment on humanity and the Earth. Often, God pursues His purpose by making covenants with humankind, such as those made with Abraham, Moses, and David. God promised Abraham that his descendants would become a great nation (Israel) and that one particular descendant would bless the whole world. The Mosaic Covenant, also called the Law of Moses, was given through Moses to the nation of Israel, setting the terms of their relationship with God. The covenant with David promised that one of David's descendants would sit on the throne of Israel forever. Christians believe these covenants converge in the life of Jesus, who claimed that "[the Scriptures] speak of Me" (John 5:39) and explained how Moses and all the prophets pointed to Him (Luke 24:27).

> Within the covers of the Bible are all the answers for all the problems men face.
> **Ronald Reagan**

Human weakness is a recurring theme in the Bible. Even the greatest leaders are shown to be flawed. Jacob was a manipulative liar, Samson fornicated with Delilah, David committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdered her husband to cover it up, and even the prophets Elijah and Jeremiah wanted to give up their calling. God uses the weak to confound the strong. He makes a slave nation into His Chosen People (Israel), a murderer into a liberator (Moses), barren women into mothers (Sarah and Hannah), and a shepherd into a king (David). In the New Testament, God uses murderers (Paul) and flawed leaders (Peter) to spread the teaching of Jesus.

Early analysis

Traditionally, Jewish scholars, or rabbi, focused on memorization of the Hebrew scriptures as well as debates over their interpretation and application to Jewish life. By contrast, early Christian scholars, mostly pastors, analyzed the way in which the scriptures



spoke of Christ. Many tools used by these scholars are still popular today. They included examinations of grammar and analysis of word choice, such as the links between the words "Passover" and "passion." Some, such as Clement (c.150–215 CE) and Augustine (354–430 CE), adapted pagan philosophy to aid their reading of scripture.

Christian scholars tended to see difficulties and differences within scripture as fruitful sources of knowledge for those with enough faith to ponder them deeply. In the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE, such scholars struggled to understand how there could be only one God, while the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each fully God, yet also distinct. The 200-year debate, which took account of the full range of biblical statements on these points, without undercutting any, eventually led to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

> "The Bible has been the Magna Carta of the poor and oppressed. The human race is not in a position to dispense with it."
> **Thomas Huxley**

Modern perspectives

Modern-day biblical scholars utilize many of the same tools as their ancient counterparts, analyzing, for example, the range of meaning in *agape* (love) across the Bible and contemporary Greek literature. Some scholars affirm the ancient Christian conclusions about scripture, while others operate with a skeptical mindset and rely on external confirmation—physical evidence or historical records—before accepting biblical accounts of events. For example, some scholars rejected the biblical account of David as the founder of a royal dynasty until the discovery of the Tel Dan stele in northern Israel in 1993–1994. This battle monument, raised about 200 years after David would have lived, tells of an Aramean king celebrating a victory over "the house of David." In cases such as this, some Christian scholars, through their employment of skepticism and the scientific method, use historical evidence to inform their theology, and in order to develop conclusions as to the legitimacy of biblical scripture. Those who possess a naturalistic worldview (insisting that things are the result of natural causes) generally reject claims of divine intervention in history. As a result, skeptical modern scholarship often employs an archaeological approach to the Bible, in which perceived errors must first be sorted through in order to expose underlying truths.

Lay study

Study of the Bible is not the sole domain of scholars and clerics, but their work can enlighten the understanding of the average reader. Today, a number of readable Bible translations place the sacred books of Judaism and Christianity into the hands of any interested reader. While certain books are more difficult to read than others, and history and the Gospels are more engaging than the lineages and law codes, those who read carefully can find wisdom, inspiration, and hope in its pages. *The Bible Book* is intended to help readers to understand more of this most significant of books. ■

GENESIS

Over the course of six days, God **creates the world**, and then rests on the seventh.

1:1–2:1

Adam and Eve eat the **forbidden fruit** and God expels them from Eden.

3:6–24

God **floods** the earth, leaving only the patriarch **Noah** and those with him on his **Ark** to survive.

7:11–9:17

God makes a **covenant** with Abraham to worship only Him and no other God.

15:18–21

2:7–22

God **creates** Adam and Eve, the first man and woman, who live in the **Garden of Eden**.

4:8

Cain **kills** his **brother** Abel in the first example of **murder** in the Bible.

11:1–9

God destroys the **Tower of Babel** and scatters its people around the world.

19:28–29

Sodom and **Gomorrah** are destroyed by God because the people are **sinners**.

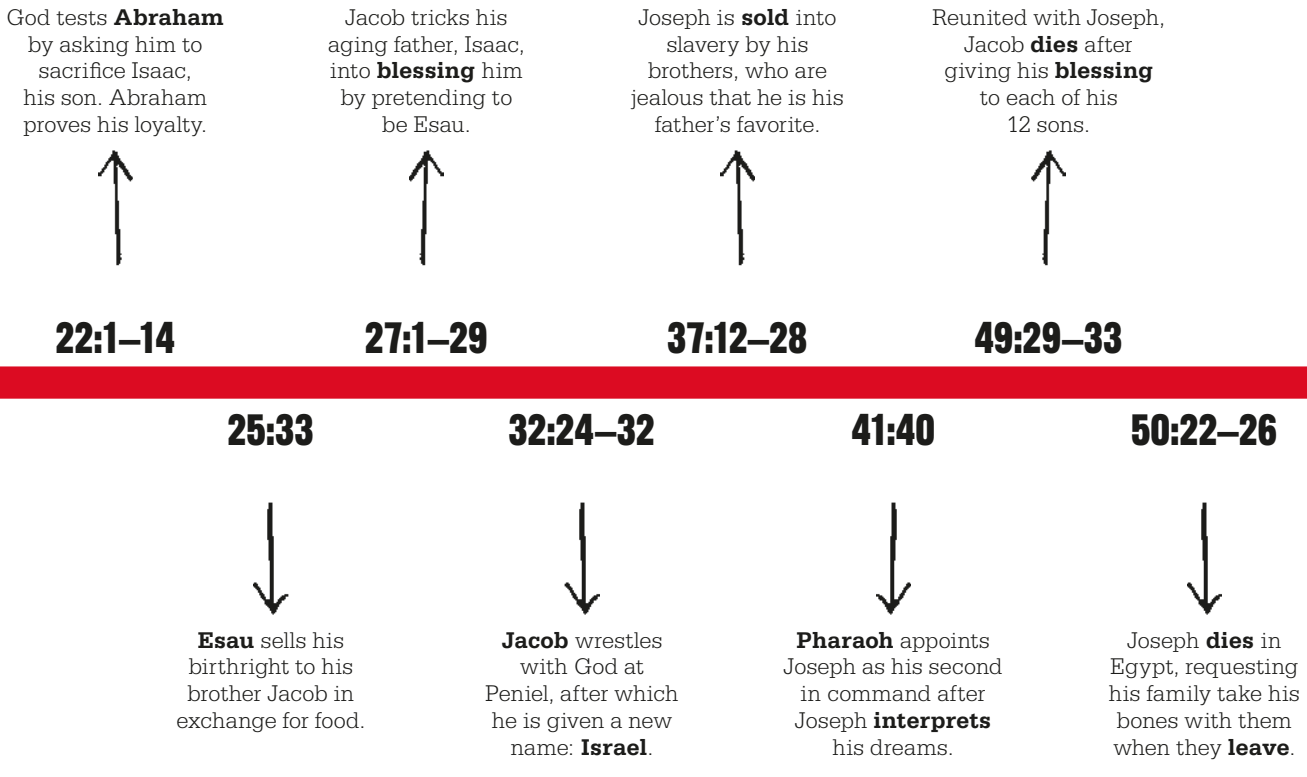
Genesis (*Beresht* in Hebrew) means the origin of everything. For Jews, Genesis is the first of the five books of the Torah (the Pentateuch in Greek) that open the Hebrew Bible. It not only relates the origin of humankind but also how the Jews' ancestors, the Israelites, were chosen by God to be monotheists. For Christians, the origin story of Genesis is the first in a pair of bookends, the second of these being Revelation, the last book of the Bible, which describes the apocalypse.

Themes and authors

Genesis divides into two sections, the first concerning the primeval period, and the second the historical, or patriarchal, period, although some scholars view the story of Joseph as a third section. The primeval period is concerned with creation, disobedience (the Fall, Cain and Abel), uncreation and punishment (the Flood, Tower of Babel), and recreation. In the patriarchal period, God chooses two descendants of Noah—Abraham and Sarah—to travel to the Promised Land and "be fruitful and multiply." The narratives then follow the exploits of their offspring, especially of Abraham's grandson Jacob, whose sons found the 12 tribes of Israel. In the final story, Jacob's son Joseph brings the family to Egypt, preparing the ground for the transition to the Book of Exodus.

According to Jewish and Christian traditions, Moses, inspired by God, penned the entire Torah, including his death in Deuteronomy, a belief still held by traditionalists. However, in the 17th century, Protestant reformers began to doubt the Mosaic authorship. In 1878, the German biblical scholar Julius Wellhausen published his theory that the Torah was written by four authors, whom he labeled J, E, P, and D—J for the Jahwist who used the name YHWH for God; E for the author who used Elohim; P for the Priestly class who wrote about genealogies and rituals and created the structure for the narratives of J and E; and D for the author of Deuteronomy.

Many scholars see repetitions and contradictions in Genesis as a sign of this composite authorship. Genesis 1 and 2, for example, tell different creation stories, with God creating humans at separate points in the narrative. Abraham tells two



different kings that Sarah is his sister, not his wife (Genesis 12 and 20), and Jacob is renamed Israel twice (Genesis 32 and 35). The acceptance of these multiple truths is a fundamental aspect of rabbinic Judaism. For Christian traditionalists, however, there can be no contradictions: Genesis 2 is a further explanation of 1; Genesis 12 and 20 are two separate stories; and Jacob's name is only officially changed in Genesis 35 after his covenant with God.

Political purpose

Wellhausen and other scholars also believed the identity of the Genesis authors could be contextualized from theological and political implications present in the text. One theory dates the authors to the reigns of David and Solomon (c.900 BCE), with the "J" author compiling stories from Judah and the "E" author compiling stories from the northern tribes, creating political narratives to unite the divided Israelites.

Schools of interpretation

In the 1960s, scholars led by Robert Alter turned to literary criticism to unlock Genesis, examining its "final form" in Hebrew. They looked at literary devices, such as wordplay (often lost in translation), and repetition, and the different genres (which might indicate the merging of multiple texts).

In the latter half of the 20th century, scholars shifted criticism from the text itself to the personal agendas of its interpreters and claimed there was no "right" way to read the Bible. Most interesting to nonscholarly readers of the Bible, perhaps, is the tension between Genesis and science. Translation of *Gilgamesh*, the Babylonian creation story, in 1872 revealed a flood story similar to the biblical one. For some, this confirmed that Genesis was accurate, but for others, it indicated the influence of Babylonian mythology. This translation came only 13 years after Darwin published his theory of evolution in *The Origin of Species* (1859). In 1925, the Scopes trial to determine whether Darwin or Genesis should be taught in Tennessee schools pushed the issue to the top of US politics. Debate continues in the US today, as a new wave of creationist museums seek to demonstrate that science and Genesis are not necessarily incompatible. ■

AND GOD SAID, "LET THERE BE LIGHT"

GENESIS 1:3, CREATION

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Genesis 1:1–2:2

THEME
The creation of the universe

SETTING
Primeval period Inside the Garden of Eden, during the time covered by the first 11 chapters of Genesis.

KEY FIGURE
God Creator of the universe.

The first few words of the Bible—"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth"—introduce us to its central character, God. They also reveal the universal scope of the Bible's narrative, from the heavens to the Earth, and present its overarching theme—the relationship between God and everything else. With so much covered in so few words, it is not surprising that the start of Genesis is considered to be one of the Bible's most eloquent yet difficult passages.

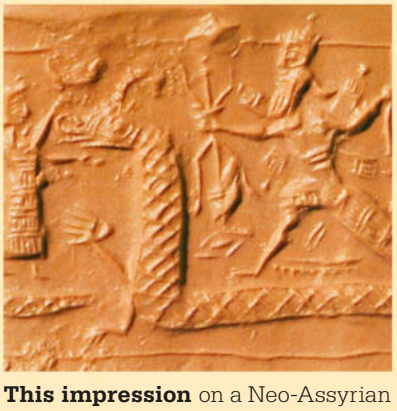
These opening verses were most likely written down sometime in the 6th century BCE, while the Israelites were being held in exile by Babylon, the most powerful state in the region. The story provided a hopeful message about God's purposes for his people and for the entire world. In contrast to the Babylonians' own origin story, Genesis attributes the existence of the universe to the goodwill of one God. It served to reassure the Israelites that even on foreign soil, they were not out of the reach of God's care, since God had created all land. God did not stand at a distance, but was intimately involved in the story of the world.

A world in seven days

Genesis 1:1–2:2 tells a single story about the beginning of everything. The origin of the universe starts with darkness and emptiness (1:2). As God's actions over the course of seven days unfold, life springs into existence. First, God calls out, "Let there be light," and light appears. Then God makes the sky. On the third day, God calls the water to gather into seas, creating dry land, on which plants and trees flourish. On day four, the sun and the moon are put in place, along with a host of stars. Next, God fills the sky with birds, and the seas with all their creatures. On the sixth day, God populates the land with all kinds of animals, and finally creates humanity "in his own image" (1:27). At this point in the story, the pinnacle of God's creative work, God entrusts creation into humanity's stewardship. On the seventh day, God rests.

Rhythms of life

The story of creation has its own structural beauty. Each account of God's activity is punctuated with "and God said," "and there was evening and there was morning," "and God saw that it was good." This rhythm helps to emphasize three key messages of the creation story. The first of these is that God creates simply by speaking. Throughout the rest of the Bible,



This impression on a Neo-Assyrian cylinder seal used to create imprints on wet clay shows the battle between Marduk and Tiamat.

The Babylonians' creation story

Believed to have been written down during the Israelites' captivity in Babylon, Genesis provides a significant contrast to the Babylonians' own creation story known as the Enuma Elish ("When on High"). While the God of Genesis has a loving relationship with humans and regards them as stewards of His creation, the Babylonian god Marduk enslaves humanity.

Enuma Elish is essentially an explanation for the supremacy of Marduk in the Babylonian pantheon. After a power struggle between the gods, Marduk defeats his rival Tiamat, ripping open her body and fashioning the two halves into the earth and the skies. Marduk then destroys another rival and uses his blood to create humankind to perform the work that the lesser gods have done until then. Marduk also imposes order on the universe by regulating the moon and the stars and takes control of the weather and calendar.

See also: The Garden of Eden 26–29 ▪ The Fall 30–35 ▪ The Flood 40–41 ▪ Entering the Promised Land 96–97 ▪ The New Jerusalem 322–29

> The heavens declare the Glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
> **Psalm 19:1**

the word of God is understood to be powerful and dynamic, able to pronounce blessing, judgment, and forgiveness. If God's word can speak the whole universe into existence, then God's word can bring hope to exiles in Babylon or provide wise advice for ordinary life. The creation of the world by God's word stands behind the repeated invitation throughout the Bible to "hear the word of the Lord."

The second message is that, while Genesis speaks about the creation of the physical world and all living things, it is also about creating a rhythm to life. Along with the daily rhythm of night and day, there is a weekly pattern of six days of work followed by one day of rest and a seasonal cycle marked by the creation of sun, moon, and stars. Throughout the Old Testament, these daily, weekly, and yearly rhythms are enshrined in Jewish religious practice, with daily prayer, the weekly rest on the Sabbath, and an annual cycle of religious festivals. While it would later become theological orthodoxy to speak about creation *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), here in Genesis God's act of creation is understood as the giving of order and purpose to the chaos of "the deep."

The third message of the story is that God's creation is "good," even "very good" (Genesis 1:31). »

The Creation is one of 117 woodcut illustrations by Lucas Cranach the Elder in Martin Luther's Bible of 1534. It shows a benevolent God looking down on his creation, with Adam and Eve at the center of the Garden of Eden.

Contrary to many ancient philosophies, which saw the physical world as a cumbersome drag on the human spirit, Jewish and Christian thinking begins with an affirmation of the goodness of the created world. Despite humanity's later departure from God's intentions, a belief in creation's innate goodness means that Judaism and Christianity have an earthly character. They expect the spiritual life to have an impact on the physical world, whether through the rhythms of worship and prayer, or through acts of service and love that promote the original goodness of God's world.

The opening of Genesis is a vision of the entire creation. This stands behind many of the Psalms—songs or hymns—later in the Bible, which delight in the beauty and variety of the created world, and find that creation is a signpost to the existence and character of God. It is a concept developed in "natural theology," which uses the beauty and complexity of the world as proof of God's existence.

Natural theology is sometimes explained using the "watchmaker analogy," in which the skill that brought a watch into existence is "proof" that a watchmaker exists. Those who have faith see the complexity, order, and purpose of the natural world as an indication that the Earth is no accident, but rather designed and made by God.

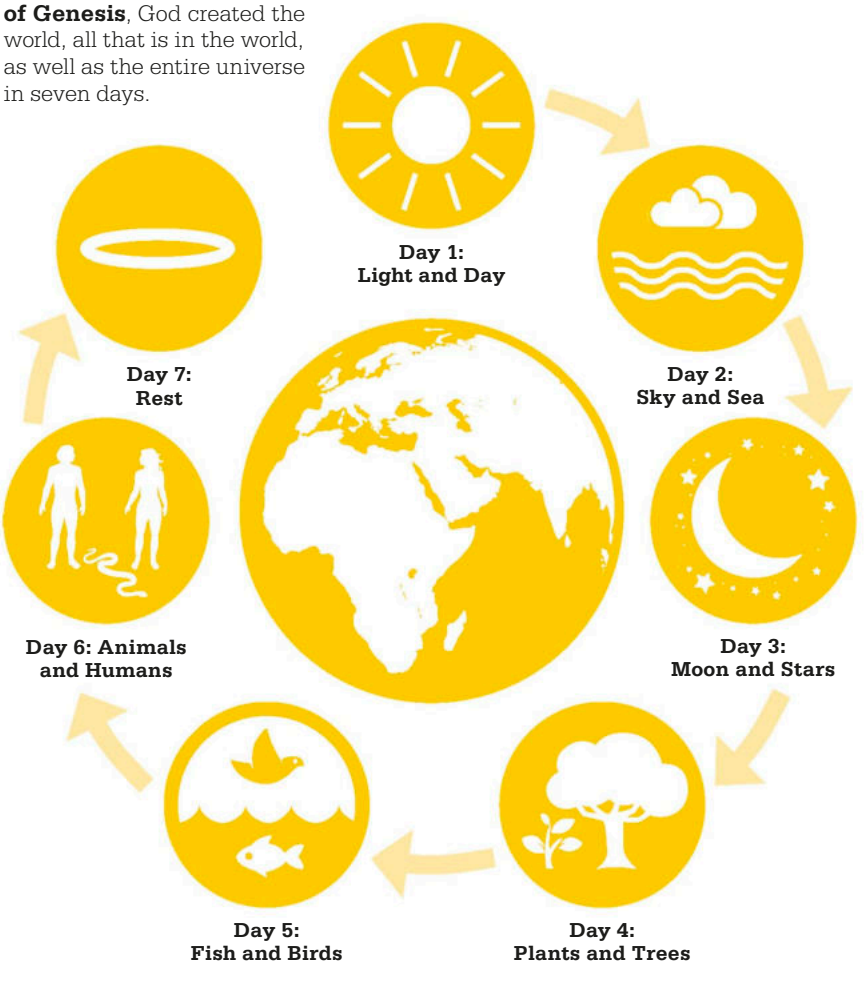
Modern response

This creationist view was challenged in the 19th century, when scientific discoveries led to new theories of the universe's origins. Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) put forth the theory of evolution, which stood in stark contradiction to the Genesis account of a seven-day creation.

For some people, the theory of evolution is a reason to reject not only the Genesis account of creation, but the whole Bible. Among Christians, there is a spectrum of responses to the creation story. Some believe it is absolutely true and a reason for rejecting theories of evolution and geological evidence; others view the biblical account as allegorical rather

This illuminated illustration of the Creation is from the Bible of Souvigny, produced in Cluny Abbey, France, in the 12th century. In the Middle Ages, even non-religious books often opened with an image of the Creation.

According to the first book of Genesis, God created the world, all that is in the world, as well as the entire universe in seven days.



than literal; a third camp seeks to combine the two by promoting the idea of intelligent design that set the process of evolution in motion.

Current biblical scholarship also considers the Creation story in the context of the period in which it was written down—during the exile of the Israelites in Babylon in the 6th century BCE. Faced with a threat to their identity by King Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon, God's people are encouraged by the poetic affirmation in Genesis that the world is a result of God's good and creative purposes, which will ultimately triumph over chaos. ■

> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God … Through Him all things were made.
> **John 1:1–3**

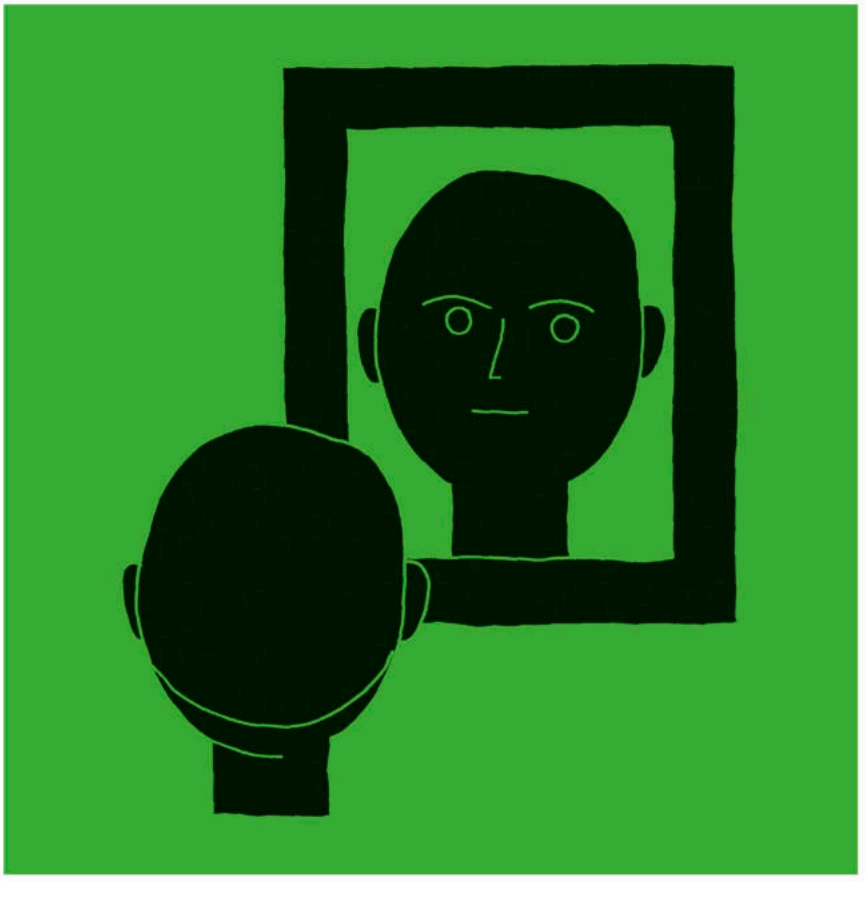
The symbolism of seven

In Genesis, the world is created in six days, followed by a seventh day of rest. This is the origin of the understanding of the number seven as a perfect, or complete, number throughout the rest of the Bible. Seven—or its multiples—are used to draw the reader's attention to something that is complete, in the sense that it is all that God wants it to be. For instance, in the Hebrew Bible, God has seven different names. In the New Testament (Matthew 18:22), Jesus tells his disciples to forgive 70 times seven, meaning completely and repeatedly. In the book of Revelation, there is a series of sevens—seven letters, seven lampstands, seven judgments, seven trumpets—that represents the completeness of God's plan. The seven churches that the apostle John addresses at the start of Revelation represent the universal church.

The menorah, the candlestick used in Jewish rituals, has seven branches. The design of the lamp was revealed to Moses on the top of Mount Sinai (Exodus 25:31).

LET US MAKE MAN IN OUR IMAGE, IN OUR LIKENESS

GENESIS 1:26, THE GARDEN OF EDEN



IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Genesis 1:1–2:25

THEME
Creation of humanity

SETTING
Primeval period Inside Eden, during the time covered by the first 11 chapters of Genesis.

KEY FIGURES
Adam The first man, made in God's image, who is the ruler of all animals and steward of the Earth.

Eve The first woman, and companion to Adam. Created by God, either at the same time as Adam or by using one of Adam's ribs.

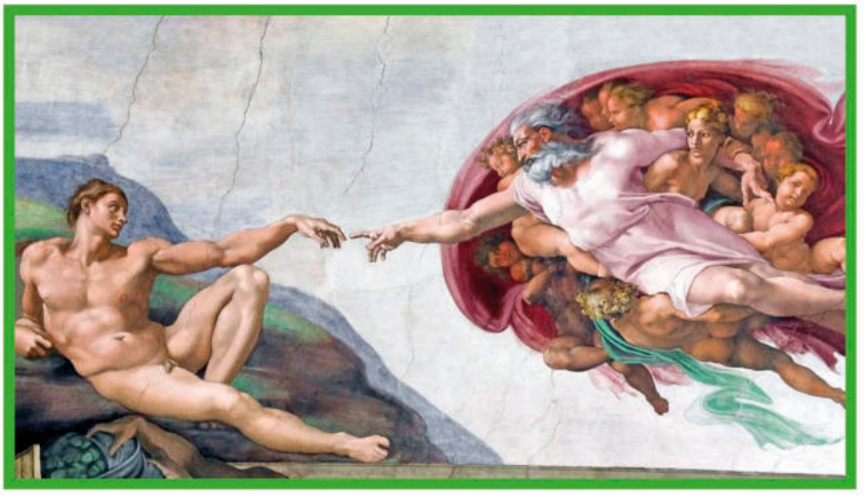
In chapter 2 of Genesis, God creates the Garden of Eden, an earthly paradise. We cannot know Eden's exact location, but scholars have proposed several possibilities, including Mesopotamia (now Iraq), Syria, Turkey, Iran, and Armenia. Genesis 2:8 mentions the Euphrates and the Tigris rivers, which both flow into the Persian Gulf via Turkey, Syria, and Iraq.

God creates the garden by bringing streams up from the earth and filling the ground with plants that are "pleasing to the eye and good for food." There are two trees in the middle of the garden—the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

The making of man

Genesis depicts the creation of humankind in two separate passages. The first of these (1:27),

See also: The Fall 30–35 ▪ Covenants 44–47 ▪ Entering the Promised Land 96–97 ▪ The New Jerusalem 322–29



Adam is made in God's image in Michelangelo's *God creates Adam* (c.1512), one of nine scenes from the book of Genesis painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican.

believed to have been written in the 6th century BCE by the Jewish priestly writer referred to as "P," is cursory. It implies that both sexes are formed at the same time, on the sixth day of creation: "So God created mankind in his own image," "male and female he created them."

The second passage, chapter 2:7, attributed to the oldest source of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible), known as Jahwist (or "J"), provides more detail and describes God in human terms. In this account, God forms the man out of dust and "breathes into his nostrils the breath of life." God goes on to create Eve when He sees that it is not good for *Adam* (Hebrew for man) to be alone. Putting Adam into a deep sleep, God removes a rib from his side and creates a woman from it (2:21). Seeing that this new being closely resembles him, Adam composes a poem: "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man" (2:23). She is not referred to as Eve until Genesis 3:20, after eating the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (see pp. 30–35).

Biblical references to God's image, in which humankind is made, are contradictory. Some passages ascribe human features, such as arms, eyes, hands, and a beard to God and refer to Him as "walking in the garden" (3:8). Others depict him as a type of angel, sheltering humans "under his wings." More significant are the spiritual attributes shared by God and humankind, which include intellect, the capacity for rational thought, morality, free will, creativity, and compassion.

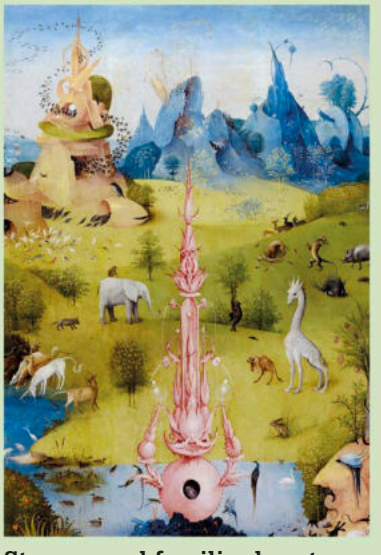
Divine spark

Inherent in God giving Adam life through His divine breath is the implication that humans themselves—unlike animals—»

Paradise

According to the Bible, the Garden of Eden is perfection itself—a place of beauty and abundance, free of disease, death, and evil, into which God sets Adam, the pinnacle of His creation. After around 500 BCE, this wondrous place becomes synonymous with the Hebrew term *pardes* (orchard), stemming from the Persian word *paridayda* (walled enclosure).

The concept of paradise is important within Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Even as He is dying on the cross, Jesus says to a thief hanging beside him, "Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). The Jewish Talmud (the written version of oral law) associates paradise with the Garden of Eden, and within Islam, the concept of *jannah* or "garden" describes the destination of the righteous after death.



Strange and familiar beasts populate the Garden of Eden portrayed in the left-hand panel of Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, c.1510.

> Adam was placed in Paradise in perfect estate … God walked and did talk with him.
> **John Jewel (1522–1571)**
> ***Bishop of Salisbury***

are blessed with the essence of divinity. Mankind's capacity for rationality and morality is the reason why no suitable companion could be found for Adam among the animals and why God gave Adam and Eve responsibility to look after the Earth and rule over the animals (1:26–28). In Judeo-Christian philosophy, these passages have been cited to justify humans using animals to serve their own needs.

Yet, despite having divine spark and being created in God's image, Adam and Eve are flawed (Matthew 19:26). God is everywhere (Proverbs 5:21) and is superior to everything else in the universe (Psalms 115:3), while Adam and Eve are limited. In the 13th century, the theologian Thomas Aquinas defined God as perfect (lacking nothing), immutable, and infinite, unlike humans, whom he described as spiritually, intellectually, and emotionally limited.

Original innocence

Although their flaws are revealed by subsequent events, Adam and Eve are created without sin and in complete innocence. Genesis 2:25 tells us that they are naked and unashamed. As they are alone with God, some readers assume that their days are centered around worshipping and communing with Him; their relationship with God is unlike any other creatures'.

In addition to managing the animals and tending the garden ("to work it and take care of it"), the pair are instructed to reproduce ("be fruitful and increase in number"). For now, at least, Adam and Eve are content with their bountiful lives and observe God's one prohibition: while they are free to eat the fruit from the Tree of Life, which grants them immortality, to eat the fruit from the mysterious Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil will be on pain of certain death (2:17).

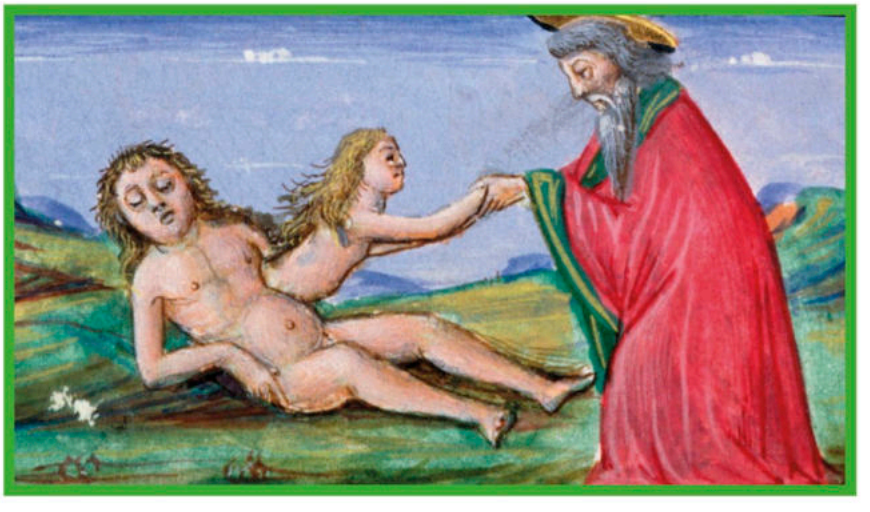
One man, one woman

Adam and Eve are the first couple (2:24–25 says the pair become "one flesh") and their union has traditionally been the yardstick for God's perfect intention for marriage—one man and one woman united in matrimony for life. Crucially, the affirmation in Genesis that both sexes are made in the image of God is often used to support the concept that God created all humans as equal, regardless of gender, race, or any other characteristics.

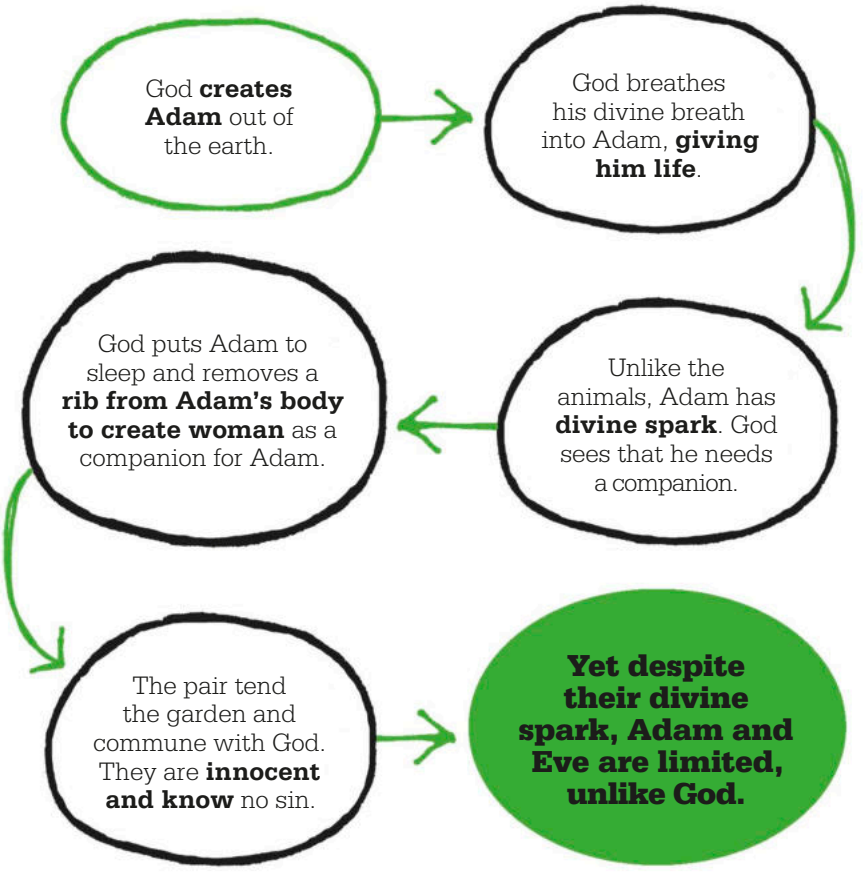
Yet the Bible is sometimes cited in support of claims that women are inferior to men. Genesis 2:18 refers to Eve's creation as Adam's "helper" (Hebrew *ezer*) and therefore potentially subordinate to him. However, some scholars suggest that *ezer* should have been translated as "companion," implying greater equality.

The divine "We"

In Genesis and throughout the Old Testament, God is often talked about in the plural—for example, "our" likeness (Genesis 1:26). This has triggered much debate and many theories. Possible explanations include polytheism (meaning that God himself is referring to more than one god), although this is soundly refuted in passages such as Isaiah 45:6 where God states, "I am the LORD, and there is no other."



God pulls Eve from the rib of the sleeping Adam in an image from a manuscript of 1480 based on St. Jerome's 4th-century Latin translation of the Hebrew Bible.



Other explanations are that God is including his attendant angels in the "us" of Genesis 1:26. Another explanation is that the plurals here and in Genesis 3:22 ("the man has now become like one of us") describe a conversation that God the Father is having with God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, the Trinity, a concept developed in the New Testament.

Human origins

The creation of Adam and Eve and the events unfolding in the Garden of Eden are also described in the Islamic Qur'an. While many Christians reject a literal interpretation of Genesis in favor of a more allegorical approach that also encompasses evolutionary theories of creation, recent surveys in the United States have revealed a widespread belief in the existence of Adam and Eve. (They are partly supported by a group of scientists who have traced human genetic history back many thousands of years, potentially to the first men and women.)

The Bible is clear—in Genesis and elsewhere—that Adam is the first man and not descended from other humans. Adam is referred to in Luke 3:38 as "the son of God," just as angels in the Old Testament are made by God (for example, Job 1:6, 38:7 and Daniel 3:25). The Bible depicts Adam as a living entity with many descendants who, according to Genesis 5:5, lives until he is 930 years old. ■

Adam and Eve

The first human couple, Adam and Eve were created—as adults—in the image of God. As they were not born in the same way as their descendants, they would not have needed umbilical cords. Despite this, navels are still present in many artistic representations of the pair.

Genesis 2:7 says that Adam is created out of dust. *Adamah* is Hebrew for "ground" or "earth," a reference to both Adam's origins and his fate after the Fall (see pp. 30–35). The word Eve means "life." She and the man are inseparable, made from one flesh, as they come from the same body (Adam's) and are brought together, both in marital union with each other and in full communion with God. Humankind's remarkable journey begins with Adam and Eve. Without them there is no fall from grace or sin, and thereby no need for suffering, mortality, redemption, atonement, or Jesus Christ.

THEY REALIZED THAT THEY WERE NAKED

GENESIS 3:7, THE FALL

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Genesis 3:1–24

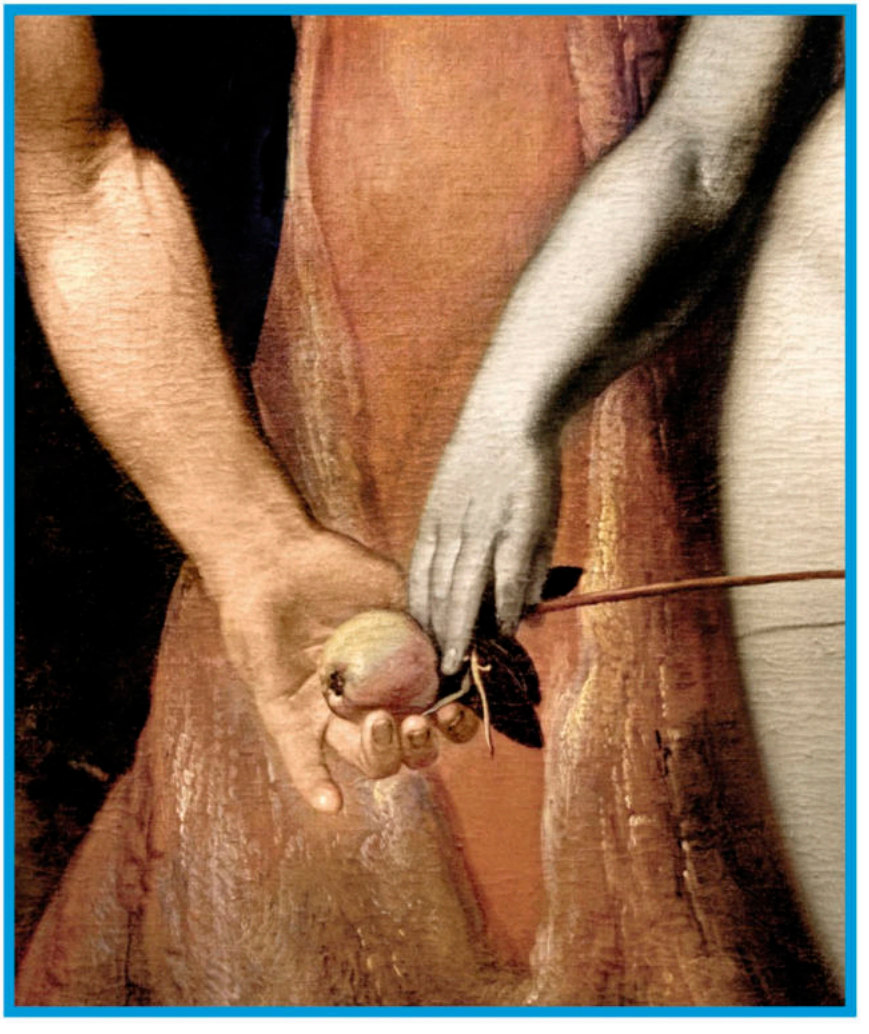
THEME
Original sin

SETTING
Primeval period The Garden of Eden during the time covered by the first 11 chapters of Genesis.

KEY FIGURES
Serpent In the Christian view, the embodiment of Satan, the archenemy of God.

Adam The first man, created by God in His own image on the sixth day of creation.

Eve The first woman, created as a companion for Adam, with whom he would populate the Earth.



The forbidden fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil passes from Eve to Adam in a detail from Cornelus van Haarlem's *The Fall of Man*, c.1592.

> For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.
> **Genesis 3:5**

In the third chapter of Genesis, Adam and Eve's disobedience, punishment, and alienation from God pave the way for the emergence of evil, bringing suffering, discord, and death into a sinless world. Until then, Adam and Eve live and work in paradise, enjoying a close relationship with each other and with God. They are forbidden only one thing—fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, which grows in the center of the garden. Eating this, warns God, will result in death. He gives no reasons or details for His command, but Adam obeys and avoids the Tree.

It is the serpent, identified in Genesis 3:1 as an extremely crafty animal, that questions God's motives in forbidding the fruit. It slyly implies that God is deliberately withholding something desirable—the means by which Adam and Eve can obtain wisdom and be like God. Eve needs little persuasion. The fruit looks good and she is tempted, so she eats

See also: Sodom and Gomorrah 48–49 ▪ David and Bathsheba 118–19 ▪ The Crucifixion 258–65 ▪ Salvation through Faith 301

> By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground.
> **Genesis 3:19**

it and gives some to Adam. Immediately, the couple see that they are naked. Ashamed, they sew fig leaves together to cover themselves and hide. Later, Adam admits to eating the fruit but blames Eve: "She gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it" (3:12). Eve passes on responsibility too: "The snake deceived me, and I ate" (3:13).

God's punishments are swift and severe. He condemns the serpent to crawl and eat dust for the rest of its life. Eve is told she will suffer excruciating pain in childbirth and be ruled by her husband. Cursing the ground from which Adam was made, God tells Adam he must forever toil before he can eat. Finally, God expels Adam from the garden—Eve leaves with him—and places cherubim (angelic hybrid creatures) and a flaming sword on the east side of Eden to keep them out.

The creation of death

It soon becomes clear that there is a price for gaining wisdom—pain, toil, scarcity, fear, and suffering. Denied access to fruit from the Tree of Life, humans are now mortal and will die. As God informs Adam, "For dust you are and to dust you will return" (3:19). Cast adrift, humankind is now in constant danger from the evil within themselves and from others.

Humankind and free will

In Christian thought, a sinful act is a deliberate action, attitude, or thought against God. This includes things that are done but should not be (sins of commission) and those that are not done but should be (sins of omission). The fact that all choices are open to sin takes humankind down a path of perpetual wrongdoing, frequently referred to in the Bible as "slavery."

For Christians, the exercise of free will is central to the story of the Fall. Adam and Eve's actions show that human beings have the freedom to make poor choices, but there is a price to pay. Up to this point, Adam and Eve have chosen to obey God. In the face of temptation, they make unwise choices that have catastrophic results. God insists that the couple face up to what they have done—with every exercise of free will comes a consequence (desirable or not) for which responsibility must be taken.

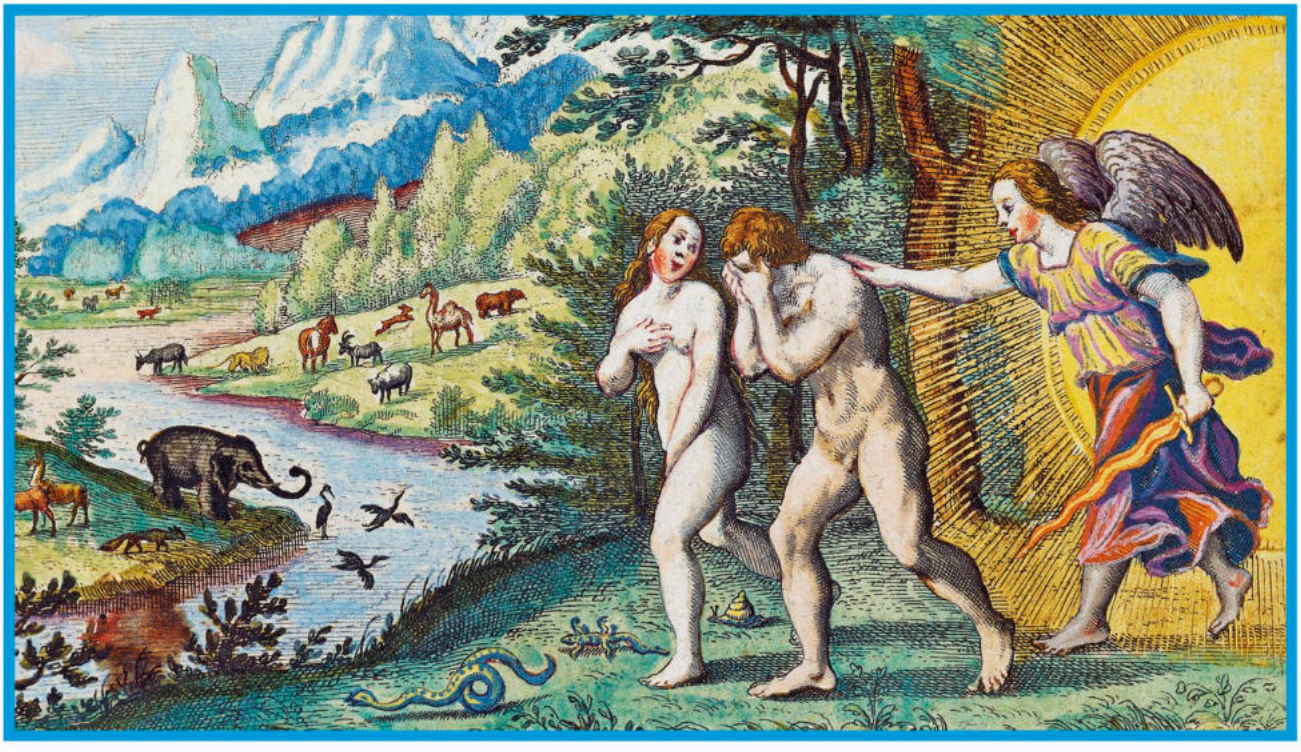
Theologians have long been occupied by the matter of theological fatalism, or the incompatibility between the concepts of free will and God's omniscience. If people can choose, how can God foresee their choices? Judaism accepts this as a paradox beyond human understanding, believing that God exists outside of time. His knowledge of the past, present, and future does »

The role of the serpent

No one knows why the crafty serpent is chosen to tempt Eve into disobedience. Unlike most animals in the Bible, it is able to talk, implying that it is more intelligent than other animals. Whispering into Eve's ear in Genesis 3:5, it causes her to doubt God. The Genesis account does not mention Satan, although the wily serpent is seen within Christianity (but not Judaism) as the devil or his mouthpiece. Satan is later specifically alluded to in Revelation 20:2 as "that ancient snake, who is the devil, or Satan …"

Snakes are not always represented as evil entities in the Bible. They are also seen as strong, courageous creatures. For example, Moses's staff turns into a snake on his command (Exodus 4:3) and God asks him to make a statue of a serpent with the power to heal snake bites (Numbers 21:8).

The serpent descends from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil to tempt Eve in the defining moment of the Fall. For its part in the catastrophe, the serpent is cursed above all livestock and all wild animals.



A cherub drives Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden with "a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the Tree of Life" (Genesis 3:24).

not interfere with free will. Some Christians reconcile this conundrum by believing that God limits his omniscience to preserve humankind's dignity and freedom.

Original sin

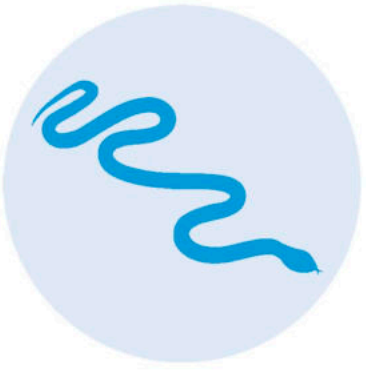
According to Christian doctrine, the consequence of Adam and Eve's disobedience is that all humans are born sinful, with an inborn tendency to succumb to temptation and disobey God. While God is blameless, people are damned, deserve to suffer, and require salvation. Known as Original Sin (or ancestral sin), this doctrine was set out by Paul the Apostle, in Romans 5:12: "Sin came into the world through one man [Adam], and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned." In the 5th century, St. Augustine (354–430 CE) developed Paul's doctrine further, saying that spiritual weakness was inherited via "concupiscence," or sexual intercourse, which deprives people of self-control.

The Augustinian view of Original Sin was formally adopted by the Roman Catholic Church during the 16th century. The doctrine was also popular among Protestant reformers, such as Martin Luther and John Calvin. They equated it with perpetual human longing for fleshly pursuits that persist even

Judaism and sin

The doctrine of Original Sin became a central tenet of Christianity but this concept is rejected by Judaism. Instead, Jews believe that we are born pure rather than tainted by the sins of our ancestors. They think Adam is not to blame for the wrongdoing of his descendants. We commit sin (*het* in Hebrew, meaning "something that goes astray") because we are not perfect beings. We must accept that we all transgress at some point in our lives. Because we have free will (*behirah*), we are naturally frail and likely to give way to our sinful inclinations (*yetzer*). Not all sins are committed deliberately, but those that are will be punished, either here on Earth or later, after death.

The many Old Testament stories concerning the nation of Israel and its sins look at the nature of human beings, the meaning of sin, and the potential for the forgiveness of those sins.



The serpent

The woman

Adam

God punishes the wrongdoers. The serpent is forced to crawl on its belly and eat dust; Eve and her daughters are destined to endure pain in childbirth; and Adam and his sons will always toil in order to eat.

after baptism (the rebirth and the washing away of hereditary sin). Calvin went further, rejecting the concept of free will in favor of predestination—the idea that all events are willed by God.

Both Judaism and Islam reject the idea of Original Sin. According to the Qur'an, Adam and Eve are *equally* responsible for the Fall. After their expulsion from the Garden of Eden, they are forgiven by God and become His representatives on Earth.

The wages of sin

Original Sin helps to explain why God allows innocent people to suffer. Personal innocence is no immunity against God's wrath; everyone is a sinner by nature and (eventually) by choice. "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God," says Romans 3:23.

Christian doctrine maintains that because of humankind's Original Sin, every person is born separated from God. When Paul states in Romans 6:23 that "the wages of sin are death," he is referring to Adam's original sin and death as a condemnation by and separation from God rather than a physical death. The inability to have a relationship with God is described in Ephesians 2:1 as a form of spiritual death: "You were dead in your transgressions and sins …"

For Christians, it is only through faith in Jesus Christ, who was sent by God to die for humankind's sins, that someone can be born again and reawaken spiritually. This is a central theme of redemption (the act of cleansing away Original Sin). Redemption is achieved by receiving God's grace, through baptism, and accepting that Jesus Christ died for the sins that enslave humankind.

In his letter to the Galatians (5:1), Paul proclaims, "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." Christians sometimes refer to Christ as the "Second Adam." The first Adam sins and causes the fall of humanity; the second (Christ) dies and redeems humanity.

> Nor can the Apostle mean that Eve only sinned … for if Adam sinned willfully and knowingly, he became the greater transgressor.
>
> **Mary Astell (1666–1731)**
>
> ***English feminist***

Blame falls on Eve

Christianity has traditionally blamed Eve—and all womankind—for the Fall from God's grace, and seen her as degenerate, morally weak, and subordinate to man. Paul contributed to this view. In 1 Timothy 2:14, he absolves Adam and blames Eve, saying, "Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor." Many medieval theologians echoed Paul's views, and Christian art reinforced this interpretation. Michelangelo's fresco of the Fall (c.1510) in the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican shows a serpent with the upper body and long blonde hair of a woman, an image that was prevalent during the Renaissance.

However, Genesis itself does not attribute blame for the Fall. On the contrary, it indicates that Adam is present when the serpent speaks to Eve and receives equal punishment, suggesting that they are both culpable. ■

AM I MY BROTHER'S KEEPER?

GENESIS 4:9, CAIN AND ABEL

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Genesis 4:1–16

THEME
The first murder

SETTING
Primeval period The unnamed land where Adam, Eve, and their children live after leaving the Garden of Eden.

KEY FIGURES
Cain Eldest son of Adam and Eve and the brother of Abel. Like his father, Cain is an agriculturalist.

Abel Second son of Adam and Eve and younger brother of Cain. Abel is a herdsman.

The story of Cain and Abel is the second installment of the Fall narrative, describing the first manifestation of evil in humankind. Genesis 4 tells how Adam and Eve's elder son, Cain, murders his brother, Abel. It follows a similar pattern to the previous chapter: ignoring divine warnings and committing a sin is punished, in this case with exile. While Adam and Eve disobey God's specific command, Cain's sin is violent: his anger at God and jealousy of Abel lead him to commit an act of fratricide.

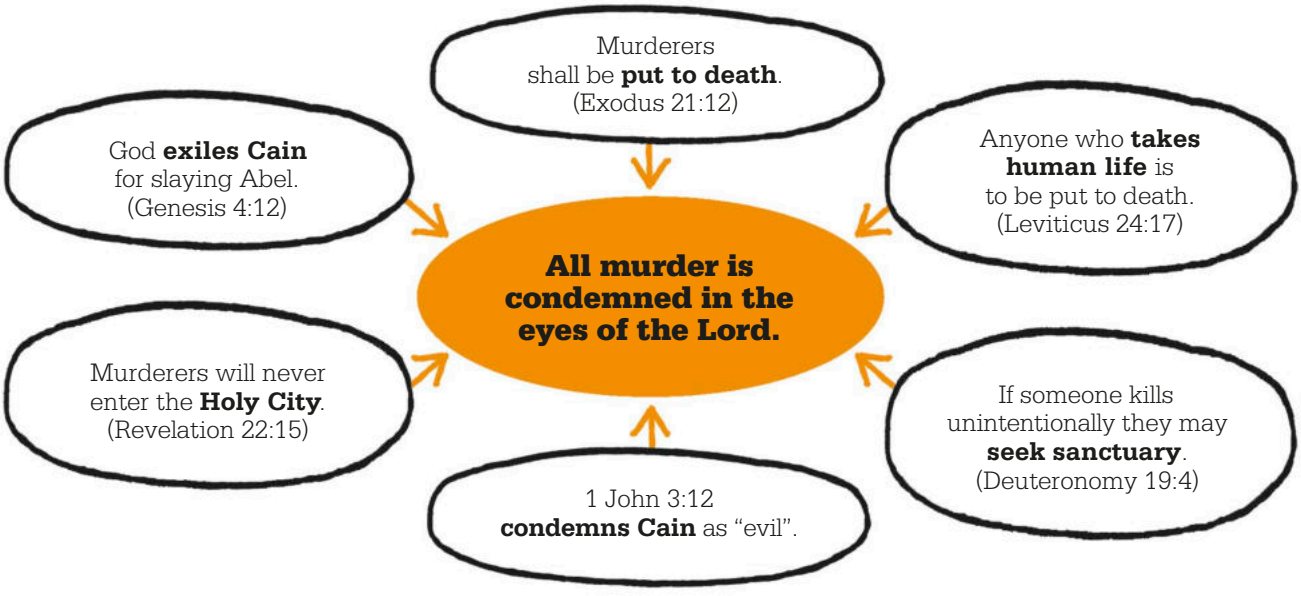
Sibling rivalry

Genesis 4 begins with the birth of the two brothers to Adam and Eve. When the boys reach adulthood, they pursue different occupations. The elder brother, Cain, becomes an agriculturalist, a tiller of the soil, like his father; Abel, the second son, becomes a pastoralist, a keeper of sheep and goats. These were the chief occupations during the time in which the authors of Genesis were writing, and tensions sometimes flared up between agriculturalists and pastoralists over the use of the land. However, there is no suggestion that disputes over land use—or any inherent conflict between the occupations—was the source of the animosity between Cain and Abel.

Death of Abel by Andrea Schiavone (c.1510–1563) shows Cain committing the first murder in the Bible. The dying sheep depicted in the background foreshadows the death of Abel.

In the passage, both brothers bring sacrificial offerings to God. Abel takes "fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock," while Cain brings "some of the fruits of the soil" (4:3). God responds favorably to Abel's offering, but

See also: Joseph the Dreamer 58–61 ▪ The Ten Commandments 78–83 ▪ The Prodigal Son 218–21 ▪ The Final Judgment 316–21



not to Cain's, which is less valuable. Cain is jealous of Abel. Noticing Cain's anger (4:7), God warns him that if he does not do what is right, sin will "crouch" at the door (the Hebrew word for "crouching" being the same as the Babylonian word for a demon that waits in doorways, a play on words by the authors of Genesis, who were writing during the Jews' captivity in Babylon in the sixth century BCE). God tells Cain to master the demonic temptation of sin. Cain, however, does not temper his impulses. Instead, he lures his brother out into the fields and murders him.

Cain's punishment

When God asks Cain where Abel is, Cain says that he does not know. "Am I my brother's keeper?" he asks (4:9). In another play on words, he is insolently asking, "Am I, the agriculturalist, the shepherd of my shepherd brother?" God knows what Cain has done and banishes Cain from the land onto which he spilled his brother's blood. "You will be a restless wanderer on the earth," God says (4:12).

Unrepentant, Cain says his punishment is more than he can bear. Before exiling him to the land of Nod ("east of Eden"), God puts a mark on Cain. Contrary to popular wisdom, this "mark of Cain" is a sign of God's continued protection, not a brand of shame. God says that anyone who kills Cain "will suffer vengeance seven times over." Cain then leaves for the land of Nod. ■

The sanctity of life

The Ten Commandments that God gives to Moses on Mount Sinai in Exodus are clear: "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13). Cain's punishment for murder was exile. God punished him, but also showed mercy by extending Cain his protection.

In this way, God sought to avert a potential cycle of violence and retaliation. By marking Cain (Genesis 4:15), He stopped others from taking the law into their own hands by killing Cain. God's plan seemed to work, for a time, as the next murder to be recorded by the Bible happens five generations later in Genesis 4:26. This time the murderer is Cain's descendant Lamech, who kills a man for wounding him. Lamech says: "If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times" (4:24).

In Israel during biblical times, "Anyone who takes the life of a human being is put to death" (Leviticus 24:17), but places of refuge were also created for anyone who killed someone "accidentally and unintentionally" (Joshua 20:3).

AT THAT TIME PEOPLE BEGAN TO CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD

GENESIS 4:26, THE ORIGIN OF PRAYER

IN BRIEF

PASSAGES
Genesis 15:1–6 Abraham prays for a child.

Genesis 21:8–21 Hagar, Ishmael, and the well.

THEME
The potential of prayer

SETTING
Primeval period During the time covered by the first 11 chapters of Genesis.

KEY FIGURES
Abraham Son of Terah, the ninth son of Noah.

Sarah Wife of Abraham, who is barren for many years.

Hagar Sarah's Egyptian handmaiden and concubine of Abraham.

Ishmael Hagar and Abraham's son.

The first extended prayer in the Bible arises from the anguish of a couple longing for children. It bursts forth during a conversation initiated by God with Abraham. After the King of Sodom tries to strike a deal that will obligate Abraham, God tells Abraham not to be afraid. God himself will be Abraham's shield and "very great reward." To this Abraham retorts: "What can you give me since I remain childless?" (Genesis 15:2). God's answer to this outburst, or prayer, is to take Abraham outside and point to the night sky: "Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." God pauses, then adds: "So shall your offspring be."

A God who cares

Abraham's encounter says much about prayer in the Bible. First, it takes place within the context of a dialogue between God and humankind, initiated by God. It assumes there is a God who cares and can be pleaded with. The person praying expresses themself with honesty and vigor, the prayer often taking the form of a lament about a painful situation. A common pattern involves a crisis, leading to prayer in which the person praying complains about, or laments, the situation and petitions God to intervene. This leads to resolution following divine intervention, which may take the form of a promise.

Petitioning God

According to Genesis, the cult of Israel's God, Yahweh, begins during the third generation of human life on Earth, when Adam

Prayer beads, used to count prayers, are clasped by members of the congregation at a Catholic church in Baghdad, following the death of Pope John Paul II in 2005.

See also: Esau and Jacob 54–55 ▪ The Exodus 74–77 ▪ The Prophet Samuel 110–15 ▪ The Crucifixion 258–65

The evolution of prayer

and Eve's third son Seth has a son called Enosh. At this time, Genesis tells us, people begin to invoke the name of Yahweh.

Many of the earliest prayers are petitions for the birth or protection of children. Isaac's prayer to Yahweh on behalf of his wife Rebekah leads to her becoming pregnant with the twins Esau and Jacob. The passion of such petitions is sometimes expressed in the names given to longed-for sons. For example, Leah, the first wife of Jacob, names her first son Reuben ("See, a son"), because, she explains, "the Lord has seen my misery" (Genesis 29:32).

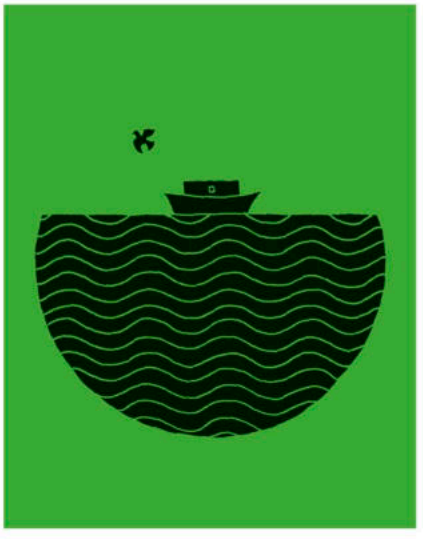
Another particularly poignant prayer involves Hagar, the Egyptian concubine of Abraham, Isaac's father. The jealousy of Abraham's wife, Sarah, leads to Hagar and her son Ishmael being banished to the wilderness, where they run out of water. Hagar places Ishmael in the shade of a bush, then sits a short distance away because she cannot bear to watch her child die. Her prayer brings a response from the angel of God, who calls out to reassure her of God's protection. She opens her eyes to see a well.

Prayers of thanksgiving

Another great strand of prayer, praise and thanksgiving, occurs when Abraham sends his servant to Mesopotamia to find a wife for Isaac. The servant petitions God for success in his mission. When his prayer is answered, he bows down and worships Yahweh, saying: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not abandoned his kindness and faithfulness to my master." The addition of such praise becomes more common later in the Bible. For believers, biblical examples of prayer show that humans can communicate with God and that God listens and responds. In the New Testament, prayer is usually communicated to God in the name of Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit. Prayer relies on promises of the Spirit's aid in prayer and God's favorable reception of prayers offered under Jesus's authority (Romans 8:26 and John 14:13–14). ■

The names of God

Names in biblical times were more than just a label: they stood for a person's being and status. Even more significant were the names of God. The three names for God most frequently used in the Hebrew Bible are El (more than 200 times), Elohim (2,570 times), and Yahweh (6,800 times). El was both a generic word for "god" and the name of the chief god of the Canaanites—a benevolent deity portrayed as an old man with a beard. El is often used in compounds: Everlasting God, God Almighty, Most High God. Elohim is another generic word for "god," emphasizing God's universality. It is used in the first verse of Genesis: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Yahweh (or YHWH, since ancient Hebrew script lacked vowels) is the personal name of the God of Israel. The name is explained in Exodus, during Moses's encounter at the burning bush, where God's words are translated: "I am who I am."



ONLY NOAH WAS LEFT, AND THOSE WHO WERE WITH HIM IN THE ARK

GENESIS 7:23, THE FLOOD

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Genesis 6:1–8:14

THEME
Obedience and trust in God

SETTING
Primeval period The floodwaters sent by God to cover the Earth; Mount Ararat, Mesopotamia.

KEY FIGURE
Noah Son of Lamech, who is a descendant of Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve. A righteous man, Noah becomes father to Shem at 500 years old, and then to Japheth and Ham.

Genesis establishes humans as **stewards of the Earth**.

→ But after several generations, humanity has **grown corrupt**.

→ God resolves to **remake the world**.

→ But he **preserves Noah and the animals** to begin a new life after the Flood.

→ God **makes a covenant** with Noah that he will not destroy the earth again.

→ **God tells Noah all creatures are given into his hands. Humanity must now care for the Earth and behave well.**

→ Human stewardship is **affirmed** in Psalm 8.

At the end of the first chapter of Genesis, God surveys His creation. "God saw what he had made," Genesis tells us, "and it was very good" (1:31). By the sixth chapter, the mood has darkened. "God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people of the earth had corrupted their ways" (6:12). His heart "filled with pain," He resolves to "wipe mankind … from the face of the earth—men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air—for I am grieved that I have made them."

See also: Creation 20–25 ▪ Covenants 44–47 ▪ Sodom and Gomorrah 48–49 ▪ The Psalms 138–43 ▪ The Suffering Servant 154–55 ▪ The New Jerusalem 322–29

Noah's family and the animals leave the Ark when it comes to rest in the Ararat region of Mesopotamia. Simon de Myle's painting (c.1570) shows aggression and chaos soon returning.

One thing makes Him modify His intention, however: the existence of one "righteous man," Noah.

Remaking the world

The writers of Genesis used the story of Noah to reflect upon what scholars have called creation, un-creation, and re-creation. God makes creation good; humanity spoils it. Patiently, God un-creates in order to re-create. Like other stories in Genesis, The Flood shows that God will judge and punish sin but also offer salvation to the faithful and penitent.

To deal with human depravity, God sends a flood to wipe out "all life under the heavens" apart from "righteous" Noah, his family, and a full sampling of animal life. God tells Noah to build an ark, or ship, to contain him, his family, and "two of all living creatures, male and female, to keep them alive" (6:19). Noah does as God bids. When they enter the ark, God shuts them in.

As the waters rise, God remembers Noah, and all the animals and livestock. In the Bible, remembering often involves the fulfillment of an obligation or promise. Here, God sends a wind, and the waters recede. In a famous passage, Noah sends out a raven to test how far the waters have withdrawn. It flies back and forth until the land is dry again. The second time, Noah sends out a dove—it returns with an olive leaf in its bill. The next time, the dove does not return. Noah now knows that it is safe to leave the ark.

The first covenant

Cleansed by water, the world emerges anew. Noah, effectively a second Adam, makes a sacrifice to God, who repeats to Noah and his family the blessing made in Genesis 1: "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth." God also enters into a covenant with Noah, the first of a series of covenants between God and humankind. "Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth." The sign of this pact is the rainbow. ■

Flood stories

Cultures worldwide have sagas of cataclysmic floods. In the case of ancient Mesopotamia and the surrounding region, there are at least three other versions of the Great Flood story, possibly inspired by a devastating flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers known to have taken place in 2900 BCE. In the Sumerian flood story, the equivalent of Noah is Ziusudra, a man known for his humility. In a version of the flood narrative found on one of the tablets recording the Babylonian epic of Gilgamesh, which may have been written down as early as the 22nd century BCE and was probably based on an older oral tradition, the sole human survivor of the flood is called Utnapishtim. The third account is the Akkadian epic of Atrahasis, written down in around 1700 BCE, whose eponymous hero is "exceedingly wise."

These stories later found their way into Greek and Roman mythology—the Roman poet Ovid tells a version of the flood story in his *Metamorphoses*.

COME, LET US BUILD OURSELVES A CITY, WITH A TOWER THAT REACHES TO THE HEAVENS

GENESIS 11:4, THE TOWER OF BABEL

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Genesis 11:1–9

THEME
The power of humanity

SETTING
After the Great Flood
Shinar, Mesopotamia.

KEY FIGURE
People of the world
Descendants of Noah, who speak one language.

Genesis 11 describes a large people journeying westward in a mass migration. They decide to settle in the land of Shinar, another name for Babylonia, after finding the Mesopotamian floodplain fertile. Although there is no stone with which to build a city, the people are technologically innovative and learn to create imposing structures using bricks, with bitumen for mortar. They establish a great city and begin to build a ziggurat, a temple tower in the shape of a pyramid that reaches toward the heavens. Not surprisingly, they are proud of this achievement.

High ambitions

The story of the Tower of Babel comes at the end of the first section of Genesis, before moving on from the creation of the universe to a more particular account of the ancestral origins of the nation of Israel. The Babel narrative draws on historical realities—people did migrate and Babel was an early name for Babylon—in order to tell a universal story about humankind's tendency to behave against God's wishes. It is not just the Babylonians who are depicted here, but the whole world, all speaking the same language.

After settling in Shinar, the people spur themselves on with two emphatic statements: "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly. … Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth" (Genesis 11:4).

Wary of what is happening among the people of Shinar, God visits the city and its tower. He sees that if the citizens of Babel continue to progress at this rate, nothing will be beyond them. Part of their power, He decides, lies in the fact that they all speak the same language.

The sin of arrogance

Genesis does not explicitly state the reasons for God's disapproval, but among the options suggested by scholars is that the tower is an outward expression of the sin of human arrogance. In a statement of His own, God says, "Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other" (11:7).

> "If … they have begun to do this, then nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them."
> **Genesis 11:6**

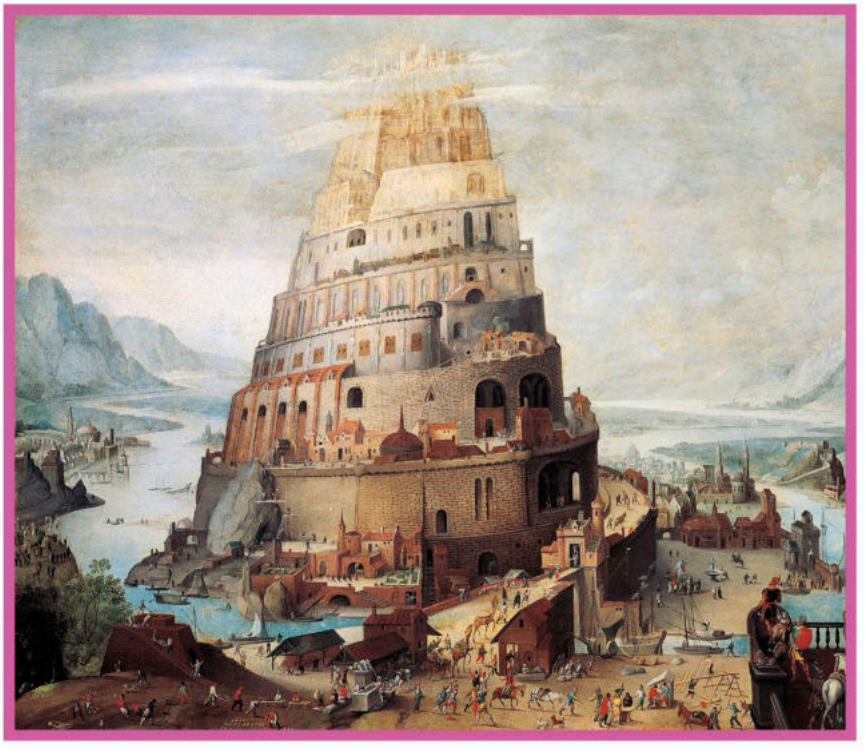
See also: The Fall 30–35 ▪ The Flood 40–41 ▪ Sodom and Gomorrah 48–49 ▪ The Fall of Jerusalem 128–31 ▪ The Day of Pentecost 282–83

He separates the people of Babel by language so that they are unable to complete the tower. God then scatters them across the world, in accordance with His previous command in Genesis 1:22 to be "fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth."

Political purpose

The story also has a satirical undercurrent. In the last verse, for example—"That is why it was called Babel—because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world" (11:9)—play is made of a similarity between the name Babel and the Hebrew *balal*, meaning "confuse." The intention may be to poke fun at Babylon, whose name meant "Gate of God." A more appropriate name, the Genesis writers may be suggesting, would be confusion.

Hostility toward Babylon is not surprising given that the book of Genesis probably took its final form in the 5th century BCE, not long after the Judeans had returned to Judah from their enforced exile in Babylon following the Babylonian capture of Judah. That experience, along with the Israelites' sufferings at the hands of other regional powers, may help explain the author's seeming preference for smaller scattered nations, each with its own language and territory, over the consolidation of power in a single imperial city. ■



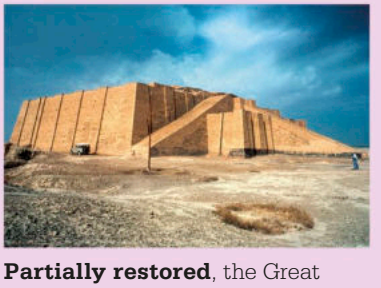
Cloud obscures the soaring tip of the Tower of Babel in a painting by an unknown 16th-century Flemish artist, who set the tower in a busy river port with basilicas and mosques.

Gateways to heaven

Most Mesopotamian cities, including Babylon, had ziggurats, which rose from the surrounding plain like artificial mountains reaching up to the heavens. These temples were seen as gateways between the world of humans and the gods—an act of pride disliked by the God of the Israelites. They were built with brick—there was little or no stone in the Mesopotamian floodplain—with solid mud-brick cores and exteriors of fired brick. Sometimes their sides were landscaped, as is commonly depicted in images of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

The inspiration for the story of the Tower of Babel is thought to be the Etemenanki ("House of the Foundation of Heaven and Earth"), a seven-story ziggurat topped by a sanctuary dedicated to the god Marduk. The chief temple of Babylon, the Etemenanki was destroyed by the Assyrian King Sennacherib in 689 BCE.

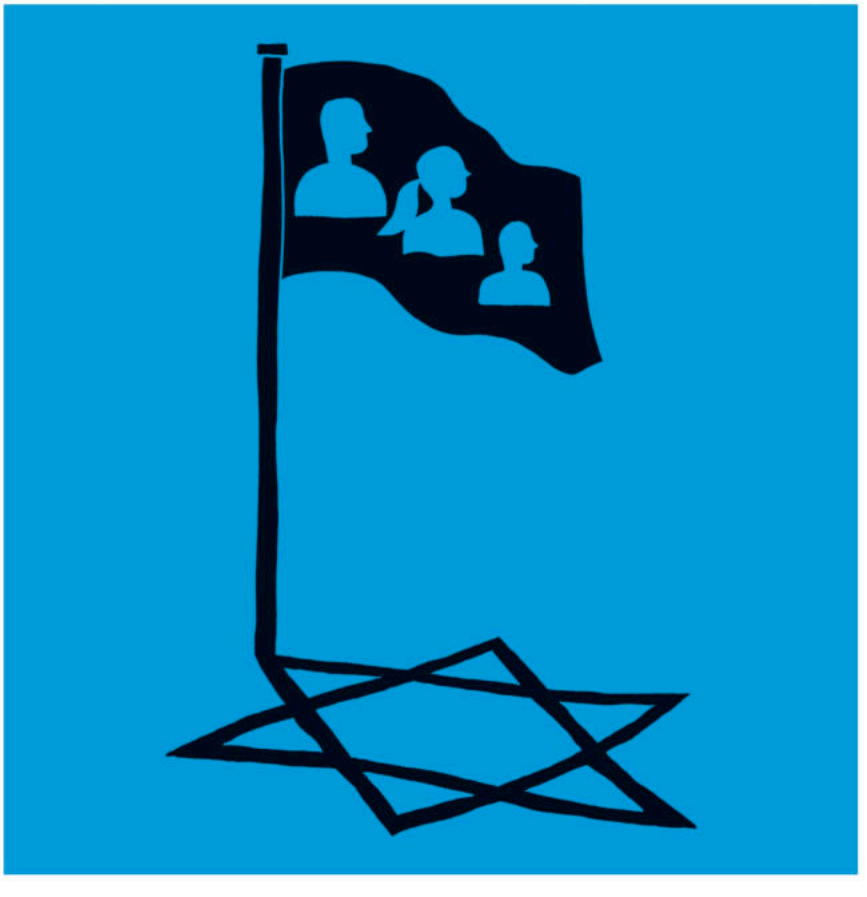
Ziggurats have not survived as well as the stone-built pyramids of Egypt but their remains still exist, including those of the Great Ziggurat of Ur in southern Iraq.



Partially restored, the Great Ziggurat of Ur, in modern-day Iraq, was built during the Third Sumerian Dynasty, c.2100 BCE. Like other ziggurats, it was climbed by sloping ramps.

I WILL MAKE OF YOU A GREAT NATION

GENESIS 12:2, COVENANTS



IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Genesis 12:1–20:17

THEME
Abraham's Covenant

SETTING
Early 2nd millennium BCE
The Fertile Crescent, Canaan, and Egypt.

KEY FIGURES
Abraham Son of Terah, who becomes the father of all nations.

Sarah Abraham's famously beautiful wife.

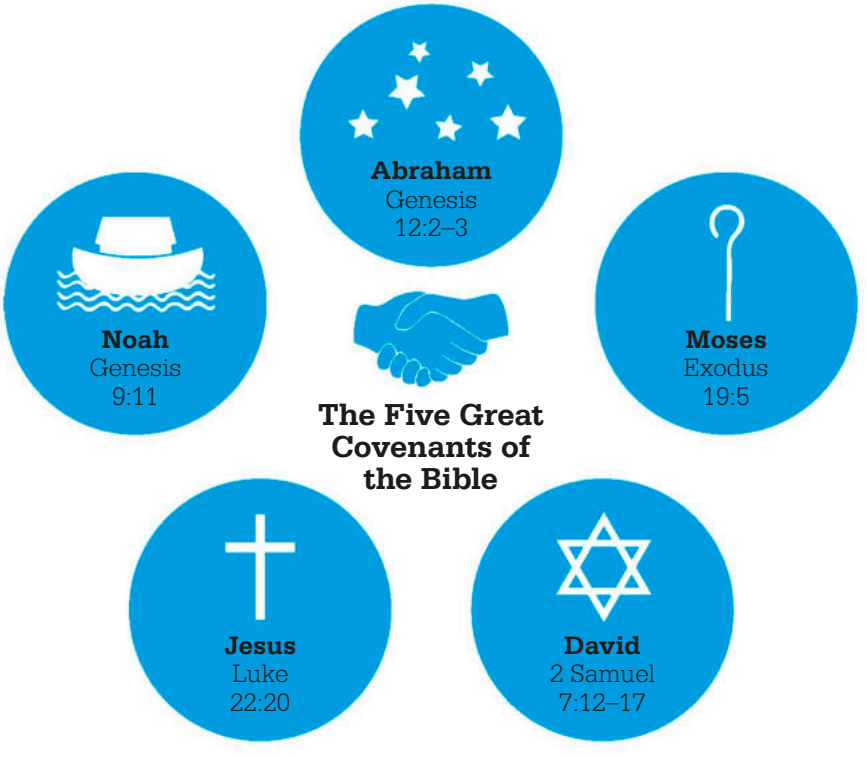
Lot Abraham's nephew, who travels toward Canaan with Abraham and Sarah.

Pharaoh Unnamed ruler of Egypt.

The conversion of Abraham by God is one of the most remarkable in the Bible. God's decision to reveal Himself to this ordinary man resulted in the emergence of three of the world's major religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

In Genesis 12:2, God appears to Abraham and urges him to leave his home and go to Canaan. In this critical narrative of posterity, introducing the concept of a people chosen to deliver God's message of salvation, God tells Abraham: "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

See also: The Fall 30–35 ▪ The Flood 40–41 ▪ The Testing of Abraham 50–53 ▪ The Ten Commandments 78–83



God reiterates his promise on several occasions. The basic components always remain the same: that Abraham's descendants will become a great nation, live in a fruitful land, be blessed, and be a blessing to all the peoples of the Earth. The nation God promises is one of generations of worshippers in their own land. This is the "covenant"—binding contract—that God and Abraham make. God offers divine promises in return for the continued faith of Abraham and his descendants. The covenant is part of God's plan of establishing a nation of people free from sin.

A momentous journey

In a clear demonstration of his faith, Abraham obeys God's call to leave his homeland. He is »

A 16th-century Brussels tapestry dramatizes the calling of Abraham and his journey. In fact, the biblical passage mentions neither the setting nor circumstances of the calling.

The Abrahamic Faiths

Abraham is one of the most important figures in the religions of the Middle East and the Western world. He is universally recognized as the father of the three great monotheistic faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. To the Jewish people, Abraham was the founder of Israel and their first patriarch. He taught them that there is only one God and inspired their faith with his unquestioning obedience and unwavering loyalty to God.

Christians view Abraham as possibly the greatest exponent of a human relationship with God. They believe that it is through Abraham's descendant, Jesus, that all God's promises are fulfilled. In Islam, where he is known as "Ibrahim," Abraham is regarded as a great prophet whose son Ishmael, by Hagar, became the father of the Arab peoples and the ancestor of the Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam. Muslims celebrate Abraham on the festival of Eid-al-Adha, held in memory of Abraham's willingness to obey God's command to sacrifice his son (see pp. 50–53).

Punished by God, the repentant Pharaoh returns Sarah to Abraham and sends them out of Egypt. Pharaoh permits Abraham to retain the riches he has amassed during his stay.

Covenants in Judaism and Christianity

In religion, a "covenant" denotes a formal alliance or agreement between God and humankind, either a religious group such as the Israelites or humanity in general. The covenant God makes with Abraham is fundamental to Judaism, as it forms the basis for the Jews being the "chosen people." God promises to make Abraham the father of a great nation and commands that his descendants must obey Him. To this day, Jewish males are circumcised when they are eight days old as a symbol of this covenant.

In Christianity, a covenant has a different significance. Christians believe that the New Covenant was instituted by Christ at the Last Supper as part of the Eucharist. They believe it represents an ongoing relationship between God and his followers that will only come to full fruition with the Second Coming of Christ.

accompanied on his great journey through the Fertile Crescent by his wife Sarah, their nephew Lot, and servants. They travel along a well-trodden trade route from Harran in Mesopotamia to Egypt.

Following God's instructions, they eventually stop at the Great Tree of Moreh near a place named Shechem in the heart of Canaan. Here, God appears to Abraham once more and tells him that his descendants will inherit this new "Promised Land"—the chosen land for God's people. Seeing in advance the rewards God has promised him, Abraham builds the first of many altars to his Lord (12:7).

Father of many

At the time of their departure, Abraham and Sarah are 75 and 65 years old respectively. Although these might appear to be very advanced ages at which to establish a new nation, let alone have children, the patriarchs were long-lived. Abraham dies at the age of 175 and Sarah at 127.

At this stage, Abraham and Sarah are referred to as Abram and Sarai. God changes Abram's name (meaning "exalted father") to Abraham ("father of many") in Genesis 17. In this same chapter, God promises Abraham a son—Isaac—whose descendants will found a nation named Israel. The significance of Sarai's name change to Sarah is less clear. Both names mean "princess," but "Sarah" may also mean "queen."

Journey to Egypt

Abraham, Sarah, and Lot's initial stay in the Promised Land is brief due to a famine. Along with all the other people of Canaan, they are forced to flee to Egypt in search of food. Concerned that Sarah's great beauty may attract the Egyptians' attention, and that he may be murdered in order to clear the way for a marriage, Abraham instructs Sarah to tell the Egyptians that she is his sister.

The ruse backfires when Pharaoh takes Sarah into his harem. In turn, Pharaoh rewards Abraham for having a beautiful "sister" and showers him with

> "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people whom He has chosen for His own inheritance."
> **Psalm 33:12**

wealth, servants, and livestock. When God hears that Pharaoh has taken Abraham's wife as his own, he inflicts plague on Pharaoh and his household. Realizing he has been lied to, Pharaoh summons Abraham and asks him why he pretended Sarah was his sister. After an angry exchange, Pharaoh commands Abraham and Sarah to leave Egypt, yet he allows Abraham to retain the riches he has accumulated. Leaving Egypt, Abraham, Sarah, and Lot head toward the Negev.

Traditions and meanings

The biblical account of Abraham's life is rooted in oral traditions rather than historical records, so no true biography of Abraham can be written. However, the story of Abraham's life is so central to the fabric of the Bible that scholars have long debated when Abraham lived and what were the precise circumstances of his existence.

One commonly held view is that the story of Abraham's journey to Canaan was first related in the early Persian period (late 6th century BCE) by Jewish landowners defending their property in the face of Jews returning to Judah from their captivity in Babylon (see pp. 128–31). They were keen to trace the ownership of their lands back to their "father Abraham" to counter the land claims of the returning exiles.

Many readers of Abraham's narrative are struck by the moral ambiguity at its heart—Abraham's lie that Sarah is his sister instead of his wife, which he tells in order to preserve his own life. As if to soften the blow of this deception, the story later reveals that Sarah is Abraham's half-sister, as well as his wife: "Besides, she really is my sister, the daughter of my father" (20:12). This means that Abraham's statement to the Egyptians can be construed not only as a practical measure to ensure his survival, but also as a half-lie, or half-truth.

A merciful God

The ambiguities in the story also serve to show God as a benevolent, forgiving Lord. Later in the Bible, all kinds of noble acts are ascribed to Abraham (see pp. 50–53), but here he is an ordinary man, an example of how God's work can be carried out through anyone. God allows Abraham to lie to the Egyptians in order to save his life, but punishes Pharaoh for taking another man's wife as his own. Abraham is allowed to retain the riches he has accumulated because God is gracious and lenient. Although God does not approve of Abraham's actions, He will not rescind His promise or His blessing.

In order to understand the full impact of God's choice of Abraham as such an important representative on Earth, the reader must look beyond his deception in Egypt in the broader context of the subsequent events in his life. ■

> Nation will not lift up sword against nation, and never again will they learn war.
> **Isaiah 2:4**

FOR THE SAKE OF TEN MEN I WILL NOT DESTROY IT

GENESIS 18:32, SODOM AND GOMORRAH

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Genesis 18:1–19:29

THEME
Divine punishment

SETTING
Around 1900 BCE In Sodom and Gomorrah, two towns in the Valley of Siddim, possibly near the Dead Sea.

KEY FIGURES
Abraham Son of Terah and the future father of all nations.

The angels God's messengers on Earth.

Lot Abraham's nephew, who has settled with his family in Sodom.

Lot's wife A woman who may have enjoyed living in the sinful city of Sodom.

The men of Sodom Depicted as a sinful and unfaithful people.

Like the Great Flood, in which God destroyed and remade creation, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is one of the most dramatic examples of divine punishment in the Bible. It illustrates the need for human beings both to fear God's power and trust in His judgment.

In Genesis 18, Abraham is visited by three angels in human form. One of them, speaking as if he is God, tells Abraham that He has come to investigate reports of sinful behavior in the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah. The angel—or God himself—indicates that if the "outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous" as He has heard, He will destroy the cities.

The writers of Genesis then reveal the close relationship between Abraham and God. Abraham challenges God's plan and humbly asks, though he is "nothing but dust and ashes," whether it is right to take such drastic action. While he is not prepared to resist God's wishes, Abraham bargains with Him, confident that the "judge of all earth" (18:25) will do right. Eventually, God agrees that He

Other biblical references to Sodom and Gomorrah

In Deuteronomy 29:22–23, **Moses** refers to the **destruction** of Sodom and Gomorrah.

In Isaiah 13:19–22, **Isaiah warns Babylon** that it may end like Sodom and Gomorrah.

In Ezekiel 16:48–50, God compares **Jerusalem** to Sodom.

In Luke 10:12–13, **Jesus** cites places that are **more damnable**.

See also: The Fall 30–35 ▪ The Flood 40–41 ▪ The Ten Plagues 70–71 ▪ The Fall of Jericho 98–99

will not destroy the cities if He finds at least ten good people within them.

God's wrath

The story moves to the city of Sodom, where Lot, Abraham's nephew, invites two angel-strangers to stay at his home rather than in the town's square. Lot prepares a meal for the angels, "baking bread without yeast," foreshadowing the hasty meal the Israelites prepare when they flee Egypt (Exodus 12:8).

Later that night, the men of Sodom arrive at Lot's door and ask: "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them" (19:5). Refusing the men's request, Lot offers his two virgin daughters to the crowd instead, but the men refuse Lot's offer and try to break down the door. The angels strike the crowd with blindness. They warn Lot and his family that God is about to destroy the city.

Lot flees from Sodom with only his wife, two daughters, and the angels. God rains down fire and brimstone to destroy the two cities.

> The day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulfur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all.
> **Luke 17:29**

Fire engulfs the sinful while Lot, a "righteous" man, makes his escape with his wife and two daughters in *The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah*, by John Martin, 1852.

The angels warn Lot not to look back, but Lot's wife glances behind her and is turned to a pillar of salt.

Saving the penitent

The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah is traditionally considered to be homosexuality, giving rise to the word "sodomy." However, passages about the cities' sins focus on the abandonment of justice and neglect of the poor (Isaiah 3:8–15 and Ezekiel 16:48–50). More significant is what the story reveals about God's judgments and His relationship with Abraham. God considers the evidence before making judgment and allows Abraham to bargain with Him. God is prepared to reward the righteous and save the penitent. Nonetheless, His judgment is final: the cities of sin are not spared. ■

Cities of sin

Sodom and Gomorrah are not the only sinful cities in the Bible. Other debauched or lawless settlements include the other three cities of the "Valley of Siddim" (Admah, Zeboiim, and Zoar), Edom, and Jerusalem. States such as Egypt and Assyria are also censured for their lack of morality and disregard for God's laws.

These cities of sin were held up as dramatic warnings about the terrifying power of God's wrath. The book of Revelation describes the destruction of the city of Babylon at the end of time, noting that "the smoke from her goes up for ever and ever" (19:3). This is a direct reference to the smoke from fire and brimstone (sulfur) that rose up from the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah during their destruction.

NOW I KNOW THAT YOU FEAR GOD

GENESIS 22:12, THE TESTING OF ABRAHAM

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Genesis 16:1–22:19

THEME
Sacrifice

SETTING
Early 2nd millennium BCE
Beersheba and the region of Moriah, a three-day donkey ride from Beersheba.

KEY FIGURES
Abraham Son of Terah, "an ordinary man," who becomes father of Ishmael and Isaac.

Sarah Abraham's wife, mother of Isaac.

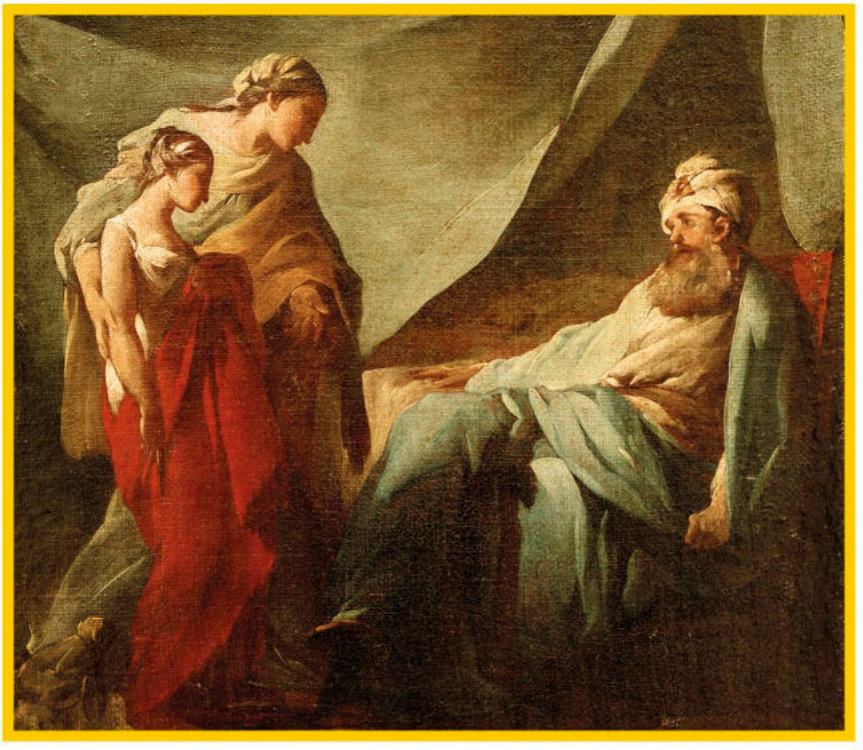
Hagar Sarah's maidservant and mother of Abraham's first-born son Ishmael.

Isaac Son of Abraham and Sarah.

The demand God makes of Abraham—to sacrifice his own son—is one of the most extreme tests of faith in the Bible. The fact that Abraham's son Isaac is the long-awaited child of promise makes the sacrifice even harder to fulfill.

At the start of Abraham's story, when God first tells him to set out into the unknown, he promises to make of him "a great nation," implying Abraham will have many descendants. He later promises Abraham offspring as numerous as the "dust of the earth." Despite God's promises, after many years of marriage Abraham and his wife Sarah remain childless. When Abraham complains to God about his plight, God's reply is to tell him

See also: Origin of Prayer 38–39 ▪ The Raising of Lazarus 226–27 ▪ The Nature of Faith 236–41 ▪ The Crucifixion 258–65 ▪ Salvation through Faith 301



Sarah presents Hagar, her Egyptian maidservant, to Abraham, in a 1743 painting of the event by Louis-Joseph Le Lorrain. Sarah hopes Hagar will conceive a child by Abraham.

to look up at the night sky: his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. Abraham's belief in God is firm, but when there is no child, in desperation, Sarah proposes her maidservant Hagar as a surrogate. Through this union, Abraham gains a son—Ishmael—but Sarah remains childless.

Then, at long last, with Sarah well past normal childbearing age, the miracle happens: Isaac is born. This is the child through whom the whole world would be blessed.

The child Isaac

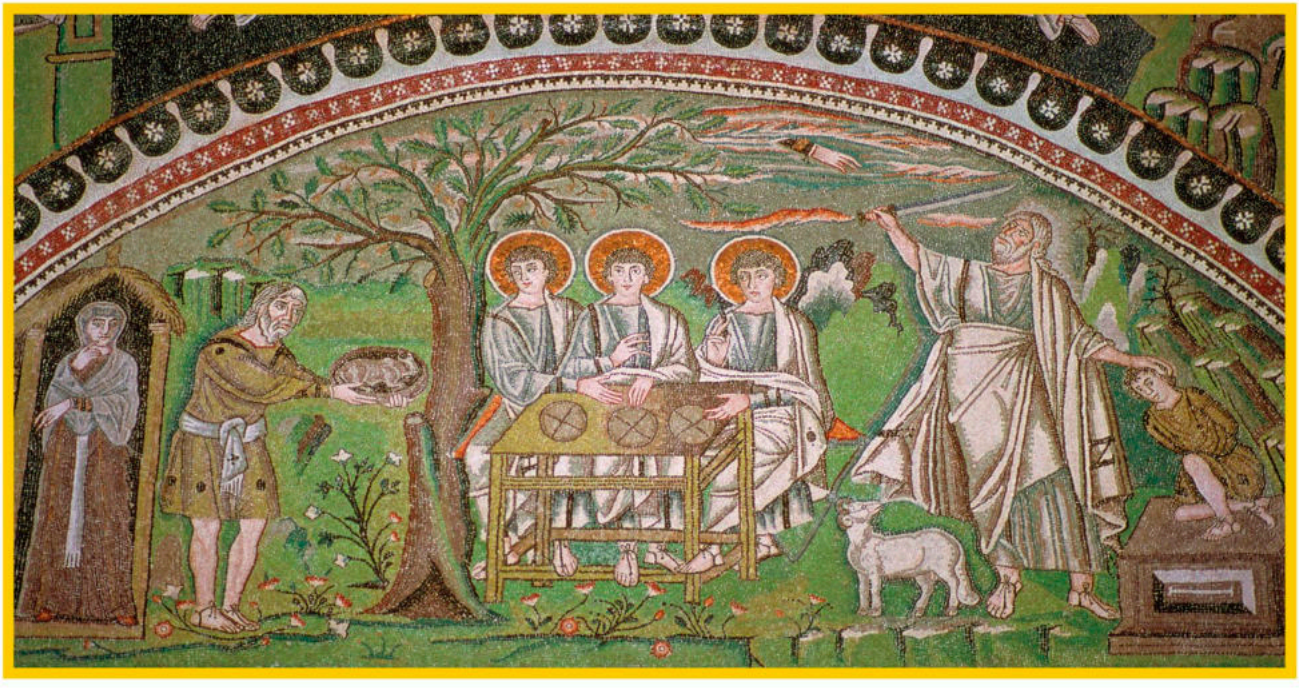
When Isaac is old enough to carry heavy loads and ask questions, God makes an astonishing demand of Abraham. God calls Abraham, who replies, "Here I am," the usual reply to a divine call in the Bible. God says, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you" (Genesis 22:2). The description of Isaac as Abraham's "only son," even though he has another son, Ishmael, underlines Isaac's role as the inheritor of Abraham's covenant with God. For Christians, God asking Abraham to kill his "only son" mirrors God's later sacrifice of His own son, Jesus.

God's use of the imperative "go" occurs in only one other place in the Bible: when God tells Abraham to "go" from his father's house and country to the land of Canaan (12:1)—a huge personal sacrifice. The now elderly Abraham (according to Genesis, he is 100 years old when Isaac is born) is being asked to perform another act of faith and set out on another journey into the unknown by making this second sacrifice.

As before, Abraham is prompt to obey God. Rising early the next morning, he saddles his donkey, cuts some wood to make a fire for the burnt offering, chooses two young followers to accompany him and Isaac, and sets off from Beersheba. After three days' traveling, they see in the distance the place chosen by God for the sacrifice. Father and son bid farewell to the two followers and set out on the last lap of their journey alone. The two of them "went on together" (22:6).

In a touching gesture of fatherly care, Abraham gives Isaac the wood to carry, while he himself takes the more dangerous flame torch (or perhaps firestone) and knife. The silence as they walk is »

> By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son.
> **Hebrews 11:17**



A 6th-century mosaic in the Basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy, depicts Abraham preparing to sacrifice Isaac. Three angels are in attendance and Sarah hovers in the background.

easy to imagine. After a while, however, Isaac speaks. "Father?" he asks. "Here I am," replies Abraham for the second time in the story. "The fire and wood are here," says Isaac, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham replies, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son" (22:8). Abraham's speech here shows that despite the enormity God asks, he still trusts God to provide for him.

When father and son reach the designated place, Abraham builds an altar from stones, takes the wood his son has been carrying, and places it on top of the altar. He binds Isaac—hence the Jewish name for the story, the *Akedah*, from the Hebrew *Akedat Yizhak*, "binding of Isaac"—and places him on top of the wood ready for the sacrifice.

Abraham reaches out his hand and takes the knife to start the process. At this moment, a voice cries urgently to him from heaven: "Abraham! Abraham!" For the third time in the story, Abraham replies, "Here I am," the repetition highlighting his unwavering faithfulness. "Do not lay a hand on the boy," says the voice. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son" (22:12). To fear God in the Bible is not so much an emotion of terror, but rather a profound respect for God, implying obedience and trust. Many Hebrew words for fear

Offerings to the Lord

Burnt offerings were common to most ancient religions in the Middle East. The meat was burned on an altar, its smoke rising as a pleasing odor to the deity or deities. Once religious rituals had become established among the Israelites, such offerings were made morning and evening in the Jerusalem Temple, along with offerings of grain and drink. The Israelites also believed that firstborn males should be offered to God: "The first offspring to open the womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether human or animal," the Lord tells Moses in Exodus 13:1. Scholars believe the ancient Israelites, in common with neighboring peoples, such as the Phoenicians and Egyptians, practiced child sacrifice, though it had ceased among the Israelites by the 7th or 6th century BCE. Instead, parents made burnt offerings of animals to "redeem" their firstborn sons. There is an echo of the abolition of child sacrifice among the Israelites in the story of Abraham and Isaac.

> Through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.
> **Genesis 22:18**

also mean reverence and respect. Abraham's trust and obedience shows he respects God's will.

Earlier, Abraham told Isaac that God would provide a lamb for their burnt offering. The Hebrew for "provide" is the same as the word for "see." When Abraham looks up, he sees a ram in a nearby thicket. Abraham takes the ram and offers it in place of his son. Genesis tells us that he named the place "The Lord will provide" (22:14)—suggesting a place where God revealed himself, or let himself be seen.

Multitude of blessings

So far, God has blessed Abraham six times in Genesis. The voice from heaven now pronounces God's seventh and final blessing upon him: "I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you." The covenant contained in the blessing is threefold. Yet again, God swears to make Abraham's offspring numerous, "as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore" (22:17). God promises to give Abraham's descendants victory in the face of their enemies. In addition, God promises to bless the entire world through them. After receiving the blessing, Abraham rejoins his followers and they make their way home.

A symbolic death

Some commentators view the ordeal of Isaac as an initiation rite involving a symbolic process of death and rebirth. In many cultures across the world, young men are put through an ordeal in which it seems, for a while, they will die. The purpose of the shock and terror of this experience is to prepare them for real death when it comes. It also creates a rupture with childhood. Through their symbolic death and rebirth, the young men leave their parents and infancy behind to take on the responsibilities of adulthood.

In many ways, the story of Isaac's near-sacrifice fits this pattern. Father and son both undergo an ordeal. For Abraham it is the last test in a life of faith and obedience to God, leading to a culminating blessing or covenant. After this, his life's journey is nearly done. The blessing passes to Isaac, the next link in the patriarchal and covenantal chain. ■

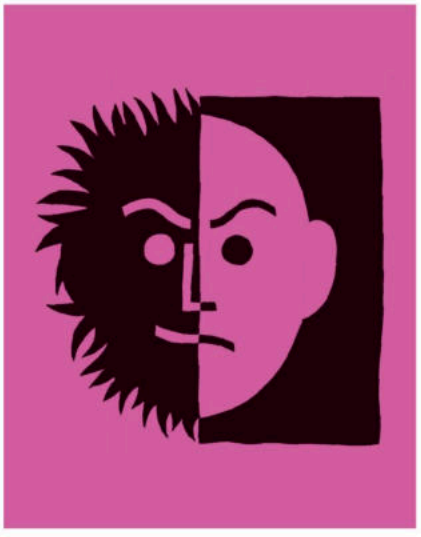
> And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend.
> **James 2:23**

Festivals of remembrance

Both Jews and Muslims celebrate annual festivals that remember Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son: for Jews, it is Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and for Muslims, the festival of Eid al-Adha. At Rosh Hashanah, the Akedah, or Binding of Isaac, in Genesis 22, is one of the key Torah readings for the feast. It is also invoked in one of the feast's special prayers. In this, God is asked to remember the "merciful promise" he made to Abraham on Mount Moriah where Abraham "suppressed his fatherly love in order to do Your will." The ritual blowing of the shofar, or ram's-horn trumpet, is linked to the ram.

For Muslims, Eid al-Adha ("Festival of the Sacrifice") commemorates Abraham's unconditional submission to God, but in Islam it is Ishmael, ancestor of the Arabs, rather than Isaac whom Abraham must sacrifice.

Hands decorated with henna bid people Eid Mubarak (blessed Eid) on Eid al-Adha in India. On this day, Muslims sacrifice a lamb to commemorate Abraham's willingness to obey God's command and sacrifice his son.



MAY NATIONS SERVE YOU AND PEOPLES BOW DOWN TO YOU

GENESIS 27:29, ESAU AND JACOB

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Genesis 25:25–29:28

THEME
The power of blessing

SETTING
Second millennium BCE
Beersheba and Haran.

KEY FIGURES
Isaac Son of Abraham and Sarah.

Rebekah The wife of Isaac.

Esau The older twin brother of Jacob.

Jacob The younger twin of Esau.

Laban Rebekah's brother.

The story of Esau and Jacob involves sibling rivalry, favoritism, and deceit. The twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah have been fighting since they were in the womb. "Two nations are in your womb," God tells the pregnant Rebekah, "and two peoples from within you will be separated, one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger."

According to Genesis 25:25, Esau was the firstborn ("the first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment"), but Jacob followed promptly, his hand clinging to his brother's heel. The boys grow up to be different characters: Esau is a hunter; Jacob is quieter. Once, when Esau returns from hunting, he finds his brother cooking a stew. When Esau asks for some, Jacob agrees on the condition that Esau surrenders his birthright—an elder son's entitlement to a double portion of any inheritance. Too hungry to care, Esau agrees.

The favorite son

Esau is Isaac's favorite son, Jacob his mother's. When Isaac is old, almost blind, and near death, he tells Esau to go out and hunt some game. Esau must then cook the meat and take the dish to Isaac so that he may bless his favorite son, a deathbed ritual believed to confer God's presence and protection on the recipient. Overhearing this exchange, Rebekah wants Jacob to receive the blessing. Her reasons are not stated, though some scholars suggest she is the instrument of God, whose plan for Jacob was revealed to her during her pregnancy. She tells Jacob to slaughter two kids from their flock, which she will cook. Jacob should then take the dish to his near-blind father, pretending to be Esau. Before he does this, she covers his hands and neck with goatskin to make him feel hairy like Esau. The deceit works: Jacob receives his father's blessing.

Shortly after this, Esau returns and discovers he has been cheated, but the blessing has already been

> "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go … I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised to you."
> **Genesis 28:15**

See also: The Testing of Abraham 50–53 ▪ Jacob Wrestles with God 56–57 ▪ The Psalms 138–43 ▪ Sermon on the Mount 204–09 ▪ The Trinity 298–99

given, so cannot be revoked. In his fury, Esau vows to murder Jacob once their father is dead.

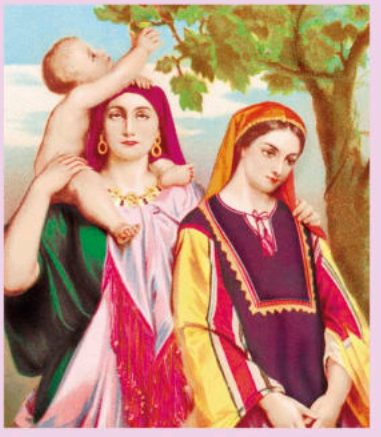
Jacob's ladder

Warned by his mother, Jacob flees under the guise of finding a wife among their own people. He heads for Haran, where Rebekah's brother Laban lives. One night on the journey, he has a dream in which he sees angels ascending and descending a stairway between Earth and heaven. God is present in this symbolic bond of the divine and the human. He assures Jacob of protection and promises that the covenant made with Jacob's grandfather, Abraham, and father, Isaac, will extend to him and his offspring. They will be as numerous as the "dust of the earth," a blessing to the whole world. Jacob, a younger son who has deceived his brother, receives God's favor.

Laban tricks Jacob

However, Jacob's behavior is punished, and also by a trick. When Jacob arrives at his uncle Laban's house, he falls in love with his cousin Rachel. Laban promises him her hand in marriage after seven years. However, at the end of this time, Laban substitutes his eldest daughter Leah at the ceremony. Jacob must work another seven years to marry Rachel. ■

Esau sells his birthright to Jacob, an impetuous act depicted in one of a series of biblical paintings, c.1860–80, by Lady Waterford for Waterford Hall, near Berwick-upon-Tweed, England.



Women in Genesis

The four Jewish matriarchs in Genesis—Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah—are noted for their faith and dedication to God. Even though they struggle to conceive children, they keep faith in God's plan and acknowledge His role in continuing Abraham's lineage by granting them miraculous pregnancies, even well past normal childbearing age.

Yet the women of Genesis are not passive. They are catalysts. Eve sets the history of humankind in motion when she defies God's command not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and women continually determine who will inherit God's promise to Abraham: Sarah secures the succession of her son Isaac when she persuades Abraham to expel Hagar and her son Ishmael, and Rebekah engineers for Jacob to receive his father's blessing instead of his older brother Esau.

YOUR NAME WILL NO LONGER BE JACOB

GENESIS 32:28, JACOB WRESTLES WITH GOD

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Genesis 31:1–33:7

THEME
The birth of Israel

SETTING
Second millennium BCE
Haran and Peniel.

KEY FIGURES
Jacob Son of Isaac and Rebekah and younger brother of Esau.

Laban Uncle of Jacob and Esau and father of Jacob's wives Leah and Rachel.

Leah The eldest daughter of Laban and Jacob's first wife.

Rachel The second daughter of Laban and Jacob's second and favorite wife.

The unknown stranger A mysterious figure believed to be an angel or God himself.

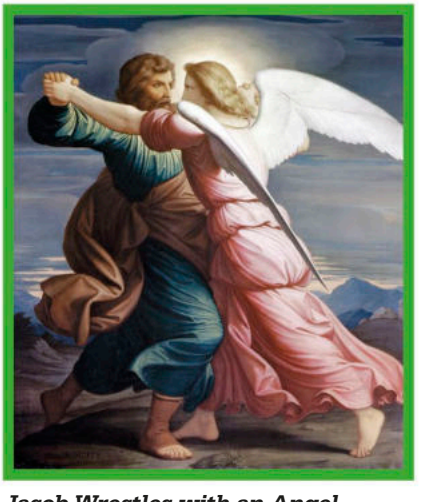
Esau The elder brother of Jacob.

When Jacob's growing wealth as a herdsman incurs the jealousy of Laban's sons, who think it is at their father's expense, God tells Jacob to go back to Canaan, "the land of your fathers" (Genesis 31:3). Jacob calls his wives Leah and Rachel (Laban's daughters) to tell them they must leave. He says how God has always been with him, enabled him to prosper, and never allowed Laban to do him harm. Leah and Rachel support Jacob and tell him that "all the wealth that God took away from our father belongs to us and our children" (31:16). They tell Jacob to do everything that God has told him.

Return to Canaan

Together with his wives and servants, Jacob prepares to escape and sends his livestock on ahead. Unbeknownst to Jacob, his second wife Rachel steals Laban's precious heirloom idols, known as teraphim, and packs them for their journey. Three days after Jacob's escape, Laban discovers that the teraphim are missing and that Jacob has fled. Furious, he pursues Jacob for seven days before catching up with them in the hill country of Gilead. However, a dream in which God warns Laban not to "say anything to Jacob" tempers his response. When Laban asks for the return of his teraphim, Jacob allows his uncle to search their tents.

Hearing this, Rachel hides the teraphim in her camel saddle and sits on it. When Laban searches her tent, she excuses herself for not standing, on the pretense that she is menstruating. Jacob chastises Laban for his lack of trust, and the



Jacob Wrestles with an Angel by Edward Jakob von Steinle, 1837, shows Jacob evenly matched with the mysterious stranger in the place Jacob called Peniel—"the face of God."

See also: Covenants 44–47 ▪ The Ten Commandments 78–83 ▪ Entering the Promised Land 96–97 ▪ The Fall of Jerusalem 128–31

two form a covenant before God, making a sacrifice. Jacob promises never to treat his wives poorly, or take another wife besides Laban's two daughters.

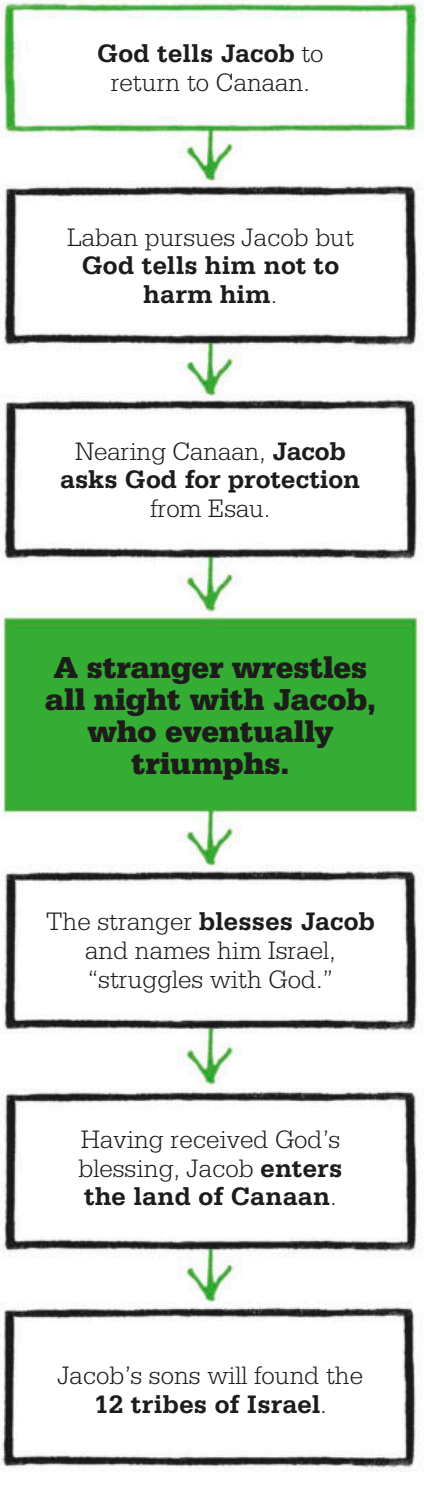
The wrestling match

As Jacob approaches Canaan, he receives word that his estranged brother Esau is advancing to meet him with 400 men. Shaken by the news, Jacob sends gifts of camels, sheep, goats, and cattle to pacify his brother. He then has his wives and sons escorted across the ford of the Jabbok, while he ruminates on the situation on the sands.

What follows is one of the most mysterious passages in the Old Testament. A stranger challenges Jacob to wrestle. The ensuing struggle lasts the night, with neither party prevailing. Eventually, at daybreak, Jacob's opponent realizes that he cannot defeat Jacob. To bring the wrestling match to a close, he touches the socket of Jacob's hip, dislocating the bone. Despite the pain, Jacob refuses to release his hold until the stranger blesses him. In reply, the stranger tells Jacob that his name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel ("He struggles with God") because he has struggled with both God and man and prevailed. The stranger blesses Jacob and vanishes.

The next day, Jacob meets his brother Esau and bows down before him to signal that he means no harm. The two men are reconciled.

Scholars dispute the identity of the stranger. Some say, following Hosea 12:3–4, that it was the Angel of the Lord; others that it was the spirit of Jesus Christ taking the form of a man. Still more say it was God Himself. ■



Twelve Tribes of Israel

During his years of self-imposed exile, Jacob prospers both in terms of wealth and in the number of children born to his wives and concubines. His first wife, Leah, bears six sons—Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun—while Rachel, his favorite wife, who struggles to conceive, gives birth to Joseph and Benjamin, the last child causing her to die in childbirth. In addition, Bilhah, Rachel's handmaiden, and Zilpah, Leah's servant, each give birth to two sons by Jacob—Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher.

Biblical tradition holds that these 12 sons, along with two of Jacob's grandsons through Joseph, would form the 12 tribes of Israel, or Israelites after the name given to Jacob by the stranger on the sands at Peniel.

A mosaic represents the 12 tribes of Israel descended from Jacob. The 12 tribes will eventually populate Canaan, the Promised Land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the Euphrates (Genesis 15:18).

WE WILL SEE WHAT WILL BECOME OF HIS DREAMS

GENESIS 37:20, JOSEPH THE DREAMER

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Genesis: 37:1–50:26

THEME
Dreams and their interpretation

SETTING
2000–1600 BCE Canaan and Egypt.

KEY FIGURES
Jacob A patriarch, who is also called Israel.

Joseph Jacob's favorite son, born to Rachel.

Reuben and Judah Joseph's half-brothers.

Pharaoh Ruler of Egypt.

Potiphar Captain of Pharaoh's guard.

The second youngest of Jacob's 12 sons, and the patriarch's favorite, Joseph is celebrated in Genesis as a dreamer. Through keeping faith with the messages of his divinely inspired dreams, Joseph rises to become chief adviser to the Egyptian Pharaoh and brings his family, destined to found the 12 tribes of Israel, into Egypt.

Joseph's story is a continuation of the history of the Israelites' ancestry, with divine calls and promises, but God is less obviously present than in earlier stories. Here, the emphasis is on the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation.

The meaning of dreams

From a young age, Joseph believes that his dreams contain messages about future events. However, his

See also: Covenants 44–47 ▪ Esau and Jacob 54–55 ▪ Jacob Wrestles with God 56–57 ▪ The Wisdom of Solomon 120–23 ▪ Daniel in Babylon 164–65

A composite illustration from a 13th-century illuminated manuscript shows Joseph being lowered into a cistern, being traded for 20 shekels of silver, and traveling to Egypt.

brothers see Joseph's narration of his dreams as boastful. In his first dream, Joseph sees himself and his brothers binding sheaves of wheat in the fields. While his sheaf stands upright, the sheaves of his brothers bow down before his sheaf. The unwelcome message of Joseph's dream—at least to his brothers—is that Joseph is destined to rule over them. Their unease is reinforced when Joseph dreams that the sun and moon, representing his father and mother, and 11 stars (his brothers) pay homage to him. Even Jacob is bemused by this and scolds Joseph: "What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?" (Genesis 37:10).

Plot against Joseph

In Genesis 37:13, when Joseph's older brothers are out grazing their flocks, Jacob sends Joseph to check on them. The brothers decide to take advantage of Joseph's visit to the remote location to murder him and thus prevent his dreams from coming true. However, Reuben, Jacob's firstborn, opposes this proposal and argues against killing Joseph outright. He recommends that they strip Joseph of his ornate coat, which is a gift from their father, and throw him into a cistern to die naturally. (Reuben secretly plans to rescue Joseph when his brothers' backs are turned.) However, another brother, Judah, also troubled by the idea of killing »

Prophetic dreams in the Bible

God employs dreams and visions throughout the Bible as a way of revealing and furthering his divine plan. These dreams act as a bridge between God and man. In Genesis 15:1, as Abraham falls into a deep sleep, God uses a vision to restate His covenant with Abraham. Later on in the Old Testament, Samuel, Solomon, and Daniel are all noted dreamers. Samuel has his first vision as a young boy in 1 Samuel: 3, when "the Word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions," and in 1 Kings: 3:5, Solomon dreams that God invites him to choose a gift (Solomon asks for a discerning heart to help him "distinguish between right and wrong.") In Daniel 7, Daniel is terrified by a vision of four great beasts that represent four future kingdoms, which will only give way to the Son of Man.

Joseph's dream An upright sheaf of wheat is surrounded by 11 others, which bow down before it. (Genesis 37:7)

The cupbearer's dream A hand squeezes one of three bunches of grapes into a goblet. (40:9–11)

Pharaoh's Egypt

Ancient Egypt was a sharply segregated society. At the top stood the pharaoh, not just as a king, but as an incarnation of divine power. Below the pharaoh came the nobles and then the priests; at the bottom were the farmers and slaves, the largest group.

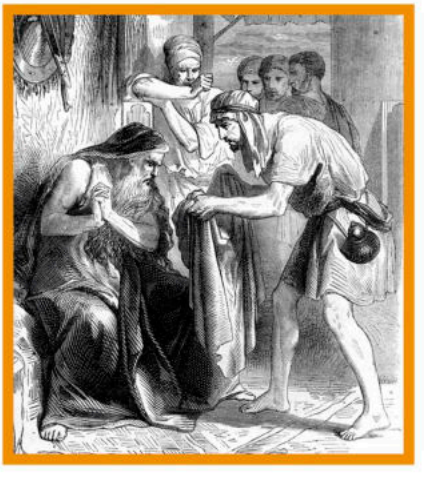
Although the country was mainly desert, agriculture along the Nile valley created enormous wealth for ancient Egypt. The unusual fertility of the Nile valley was due to the *akhet* (the annual inundation), when the Nile floods. The silt left behind enriched the soil, leading to abundant harvests. Tax on this bounty created immense wealth for Pharaoh and the nobles.

Hapi, the Nile god, and Osiris, god of life, received hymns and offerings to ensure the inundation. These gods were among more than 2,000 in ancient Egypt, including Anubis, god of the underworld, Isis, goddess of love, and the sun god Ra. It is not known to what extent the Israelites in Egypt embraced these gods or stayed true to their one God.

their own flesh and blood, suggests selling Joseph to a passing group of Midianite traders for 20 silver shekels. The brothers follow Judah's plan and also dip Joseph's robe in goat's blood to pretend to their father that their brother has been killed by a wild animal.

Fortunes in Egypt

The Midianites sell Joseph on to Ishmaelites traveling to Egypt, who, in turn, sell him into slavery in the house of Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard. Joseph serves his master well and is soon in charge of the entire household. However, when Potpihar's wife falsely accuses Joseph of seducing her, Potiphar throws him in prison.



As Joseph stays true to his faith by resisting sexual temptation, God does not desert him in his suffering. He is put in charge of the other prisoners, and interprets the dreams of two of them—Pharaoh's chief cupbearer and head baker. He tells them that in three days the baker will be put to death, while the cupbearer will be pardoned. When his predictions come true, Joseph asks the cupbearer to put in a good word for him with Pharaoh, which he promises to do.

However, the cupbearer, unlike God, is fallible and forgets his promise until two years later, when Pharaoh begins to have strange dreams. In the first dream, seven sickly cows devour seven healthy ones as they graze beside the Nile. In the second, seven sickly ears of grain swallow seven fat ones. At this point, the cupbearer remembers Joseph. Hearing the cupbearer's story, Pharaoh has Joseph brought before him.

Joseph is quick to explain the meaning of Pharaoh's dream, while also being careful to stress that he

Jacob is shown examining Joseph's blood-stained coat in a 19th-century engraving. Refusing to be comforted, Jacob says: "I will continue to mourn until I join my son in the grave" (37:35).

The baker's dream The baker has three baskets of bread on his head. Birds eat from the top one. (40:16–17)

Pharaoh's dream Seven skinny cows devour seven sleek, fat cows on the banks of the Nile. (41:4)

is simply an instrument of God and that the dreams are a sign of God's purpose. He tells Pharaoh that his dreams signify seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. He advises Pharaoh to store supplies of grain during the years of plenty in order to use them later. Pharaoh takes Joseph's advice and appoints him as his chief adviser.

The legacy of Joseph

Joseph's tale does not end here. Eventually, he is reconciled with his brothers, who, during the years of famine, are sent to Egypt by Jacob to buy grain. Joseph forgives his brothers, believing it is thanks to their earlier wrongdoings that he is able to feed them in their time of need. "God sent me before you to preserve life," he pronounces in Genesis 45:5. Pharaoh allows Joseph to bring Jacob and his people to Egypt, where they prosper. They remain there until, generations later, a new pharaoh, "to whom Joseph meant nothing" (Exodus 1:8), comes to the throne.

Joseph devotes his life to serving others. He always credits God for his achievements and remains faithful to Him. His story, which is also chronicled in the Qur'an, which regards him as a prophet, illustrates the power of forgiveness. Crucially for the next book in the Bible, the story also explains how the Israelites came to be in Egypt. ■

> The dreams of Pharaoh are one and the same. God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do.
> **Genesis 41:25**

Joseph's success at interpreting Pharaoh's dream, shown in this 1894 painting by British artist Reginald Arthur, leads to his appointment as Pharaoh's chief adviser.

EXODUS
DEUTER

TO
ONOMY

Moses is born and set adrift in a basket on the River Nile.

EXODUS 2:1–3

God sends **ten plagues** to Egypt in order to free the Israelites from slavery.

EXODUS 7:14–12:30

Moses parts the **Red Sea** and the Israelites escape Pharaoh's army.

EXODUS 14:1–31

God gives the Israelites instructions for building the **Ark** and the **Tabernacle**.

EXODUS 25:10–27:20

EXODUS 3:1–22

A vision of God appears to Moses in a **burning bush**.

EXODUS 12:31–42

Moses leads the **Exodus** of the Israelites through the desert.

EXODUS 19:17–20:26

God delivers the **Ten Commandments** to Moses, who inscribes them on stone tablets.

EXODUS 32:1–20

The Israelites fashion and worship a **golden calf**, causing Moses to destroy the stone tablets in anger.

Resuming the story of the Israelites from Genesis, the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy follow the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt under the guidance of Moses, their receipt of the Ten Commandments and other laws, and their journey to the Promised Land. The central message is one of deliverance through God's covenant with Moses, a continuation of the divine promise begun in Genesis and picked up through the Bible. In Christianity, Jesus is seen as a second Moses, who offers salvation from death.

The Bible as history

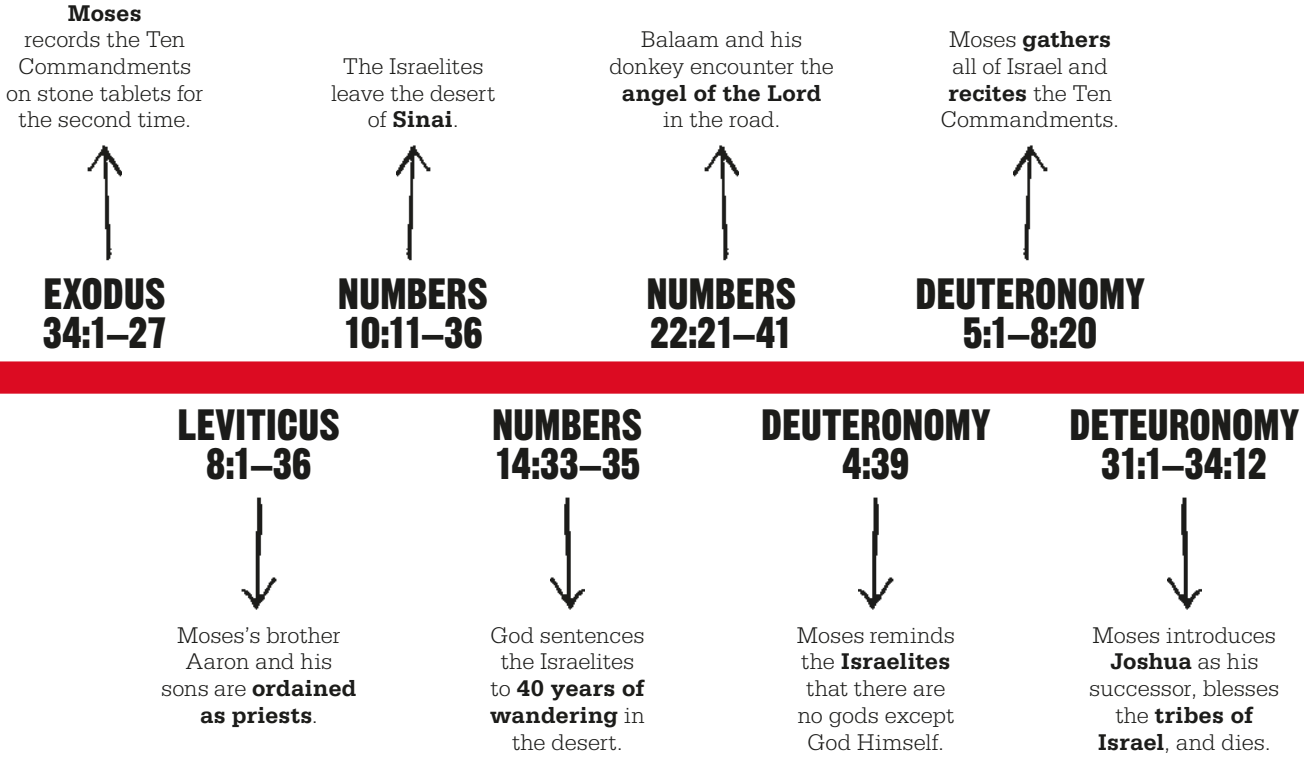
Scholars have long attempted to link events in Exodus to historical sources in order to verify and date the Israelites' flight from Egypt. No archaeological evidence has so far been found and there is no historical record. The Bible does not identify the pharaoh at the time of the Exodus. This lack of corroboration has led to a hunt for circumstantial evidence, such as the widespread migrations that are known to have occurred in the eastern Mediterranean during the transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age in around 1200 BCE, a period when trade routes changed and civilizations collapsed.

Some scholars link the Israelites with the Hyksos, Semitic peoples who ruled parts of Egypt in the 1600s BCE but were driven out by Thutmose III in the 1400s. The 1st-century historian Josephus Flavius, keen to stress the antiquity of the Jews, supported this idea. Other theories draw on the Amarna Letters, a correspondence on clay tablets sent by Pharaoh Akhenaten (1350s–1330s BCE) in Amarna, Upper Egypt, to the rest of the Ancient Near East. They point to mentions of a group of bandits called *haipiru/haibiru,* words similar to "Hebrew," that are to be driven from the land.

In 1939, Sigmund Freud, in his book *Moses and Monotheism*, proposed that Moses was a priest of Akhenaten's god, who introduced monotheism to Egypt. Despite this, attempts to link the Book of Exodus to historical events have proved futile.

Monotheism is all

Central to the Book of Exodus is the doctrine of monotheism, developed from the Book of Genesis. However, the first of the Ten Commandments



given to Moses on Mount Sinai, "You shall have no other gods before me," is ambiguous. Early biblical scholars, convinced that monotheism was not present from the start of the Bible but developed over time, believed that this suggested henotheism, effectively a middle stage between polytheism and monotheism in which one god is paramount among multiple gods.

However, the text of the Book of Deuteronomy (the "second law"), which follows Exodus, is clear. Not only does it proclaim that there is only one deity, but it establishes a creed, the *Shema* ("hear"), to reinforce the idea: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 6:4), a daily declaration of belief.

Deuteronomy is a retelling of the Law, which sets out to reestablish the Mosaic covenant. According to Jewish tradition, the Book of Deuteronomy was found in a dusty corner of the Temple in the 7th century BCE.

Building a religion

Whenever the Israelites ignore God's laws, disaster ensues. When they worship a false god in the form of the golden calf soon after receiving the Ten Commandments, they are condemned to wander aimlessly through the desert for 40 years. During this time, they formalize their religion, establishing its structure and liturgy. The Tabernacle, built according to God's instructions, is a moveable version of the Temple that will later be built by Solomon in Jerusalem, and Moses's brother Aaron founds a hereditary priesthood through his bloodline (the Levites). The text of the Pentateuch, or Torah, ends with Moses dying on the threshold of the Promised Land of Canaan. After his death, the Israelites, led by Joshua, Moses's appointed successor, are ready to retake the land promised to them by God from the polytheistic Canaanites.

As religious scripture, the Torah is significant to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and is highly influential on Western culture. For Jews, the Torah is the most important of the biblical texts because it establishes God's relationship with His Chosen People, while for Christians, Moses foreshadows the coming Messiah. In the Qur'an, the Torah is referred to as *al-kitab* ("the book") and Moses (Musa) is mentioned more times than any other prophet. ■

THOUGH THE BUSH WAS ON FIRE IT DID NOT BURN UP

EXODUS 3:3, MOSES AND THE BURNING BUSH

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Exodus 3:1–4:17

THEME
Human inadequacy in the face of God

SETTING
14th–13th century BCE
The foothills of Mount Horeb (also called Mount Sinai).

KEY FIGURES
Moses A descendant of Jacob through his son Levi, tasked by God with liberating the Israelites. He later becomes one of the greatest prophets.

Aaron Brother of Moses. Initially more articulate and confident than his brother, he assists Moses in carrying out God's plan.

The story of God appearing to Moses as a burning bush illustrates not only His compassion toward His initially reluctant prophet, but also His ability to enact His will through ordinary individuals. Although Moses would become one of the most famous figures in the Old Testament by freeing the Israelites from 400 years of slavery in Egypt, at this point in the Bible's narrative he is an outcast. An Israelite raised in Egypt's royal court after an Egyptian princess found him floating in a basket, he fled to Midian (possibly in Sinai) after killing an Egyptian he found beating a Hebrew slave.

See also: The Exodus 74–77 ▪ The Ten Commandments 78–83 ▪ The Twelve Spies 88 ▪ Entering the Promised Land 96–97

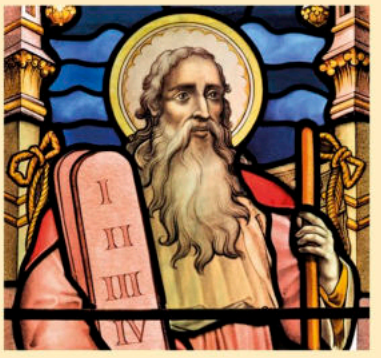
Moses removes his shoes before speaking with God in this 15th-century painting by Dieric Bouts the Elder. God commanded him to remove his sandals before entering holy ground.

In Midian, Moses marries a local woman and becomes a shepherd. It is while he is tending his flock beneath Horeb, the mountain of God (also known as Mount Sinai), that God first speaks to Moses. Spying a bush that is burning without being consumed by the fire, Moses approaches the bush to investigate the phenomenon. When God appears to Moses from within the flames, his first reaction is one of dread: he hides his face, afraid to witness God. God, however, has a mission for Moses: He tells him that He has heard the crying of the Israelites in bondage and that He has chosen Moses to lead His people out of Egypt.

Uncertain prophet

Moses demonstrates his human frailty by demurring in the face of God's request. He tells God that he is not the right person for the mission, fearing that neither the Israelites nor the Egyptians will listen to his entreaties. Moses further complains that the Israelites will not believe that God has shown Himself to him, because he does not know God's personal name.

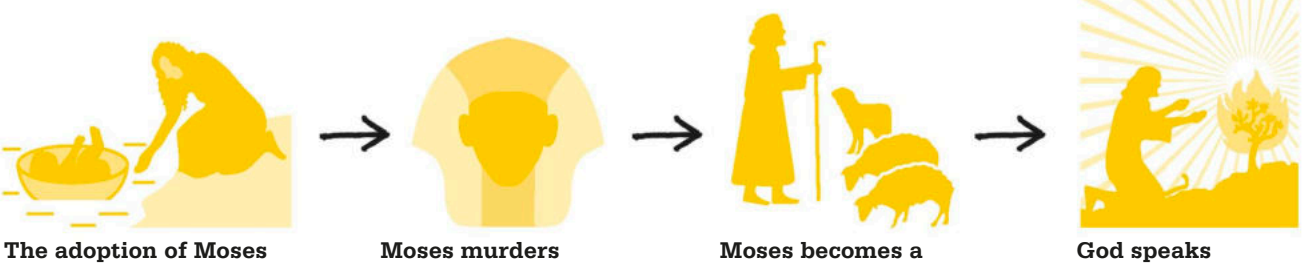
God is patient with Moses, mirroring the intimacy He has previously shown to the individuals He chooses to carry out His will, such as Abraham (see pp. 44–47). He tells Moses "I am who I am" (Exodus 3:14), indicating His perpetual omnipresence. To provide further evidence of His almighty nature to both the Israelites and to the Egyptians, He gives Moses the power to perform three »



The prophet Moses

Moses is one of the greatest figures of the Bible—a leader and lawgiver who is brought up as an Egyptian prince, becomes a social outcast, and ultimately goes on to become a leading prophet. After avoiding Pharaoh's slaughter of the Israelite firstborn sons when his mother hides him in a basket on the Nile, he returns to his people as an adult to lead them out of slavery. After his initial reluctance, Moses not only becomes the liberator of the Israelites, but shepherds them across the desert for 40 years as their spiritual and military leader. A figure of authority and justice, he adopts and enforces God's Ten Commandments.

The symbolism behind Moses's journey



The adoption of Moses by an Egyptian princess echoes Pharaoh's promotion of Joseph in Genesis (41:41).

Moses murders an Egyptian who is mistreating a Hebrew slave, foreshadowing the punishment of Egypt.

Moses becomes a shepherd, anticipating his role as a shepherd of the Israelites in their exodus from Egypt.

God speaks to Moses from a burning bush, a symbol of God's everlasting presence.

miraculous acts. First, when Moses throws his staff (probably a shepherd's crook) to the ground, it becomes a snake. Second, when Moses puts his hand into his cloak and then withdraws it, his hand appears leprous and white. When he repeats the action, the hand is restored to health. Third, God tells Moses that if he takes water from the Nile and pours it on the ground, it will turn to blood.

In spite of these miracles, Moses remains reluctant. He blames his lack of eloquence, saying "I am slow of speech and tongue" (4:10). God encourages Moses, telling him that He will be with him and will give him the right words to say. He entreats Moses to leave, but again, Moses refuses, and pleads: "Lord, please send somebody else to do it" (4:13). As in many Old Testament stories, the servant God chooses to enact His will is not at first particularly worthy or even willing. Moses's equivocation, indicative of human weakness, contrasts with the strength he later finds when he puts his trust in God.

God eventually loses patience with Moses. His anger "burns bright" against him, yet He also shows His compassion by allowing Moses's brother, Aaron, a confident speaker, to assist him on his mission and make up for Moses's shortcomings as an orator. God tells Moses: "I will help both of you speak and teach you what to do" (4:15). He then gives Moses another staff with which to perform miraculous signs.

Moses must eventually agree to God's election of him to lead the Israelites, because in verse 18, he is preparing to return to Egypt with his wife and sons, taking the "staff of God in his hand" (4:20).

St. Catherine's Monastery in Egypt claims to be the place where Moses saw the burning bush. Founded in the 6th century at the foot of Mount Sinai, it is a UNESCO world heritage site.

A holy site

The likely location of the episode of the burning bush has been greatly debated by biblical scholars. The Hebrew word for bush—and used in the narrative—is *seneh*, which is remarkably close to "Sinai" and may be a pun, a common feature in ancient Hebrew texts. *Seneh* is also widely believed to be another name for Horeb ("God's mountain"). The word "Horeb" is often interpreted as "heat," although others translate it to mean "desert" or "desolation," fitting the isolated locations in which God often communicates with His chosen instrument.

Although Mount Sinai is widely accepted as the location of the bush, some modern scholars insist that evidence points to other sites

The Kenites

Moses is linked through his father-in-law Jethro to a tribe known as the Kenites. This nomadic clan of coppersmiths and metalworkers played a key role in the establishment of ancient Israel. Believed to be descendants of Cain, many members of the tribe settled among the Israelite peoples and influenced their development.

Jethro, a shepherd and priest, lived in the land of Midian, where "Yahweh" was historically a deity. The "Kenite hypothesis," first proposed by the 19th-century German theologian Friedrich Wilhelm Ghillany, suggests that the Hebrews adopted the cult of Yahweh from the Midianites, who had previously learned it from the Kenites. In the story of the burning bush, when God tells Moses "I am what I am," this is translated from the Hebrew *hayah*, which in turn gives rise to the word *yahweh*. God's clarification to Moses is a statement of his identity as the God of the patriarchs and thus the God of the Israelites.

as far away as Hijaz (a region in the northwest of modern Saudi Arabia) or northern Arabah (west Jordan). The monks of the Sacred Monastery of the God-Trodden Mount Sinai (also known as St. Catherine's Monastery) are adamant that their complex, in a narrow valley at the foot of Mount Sinai, in Egypt, was built on the site of the burning bush. However, while this part of Egypt, which includes mountainous desert, is called the Sinai Peninsula due to this claim, there is little consensus about which mountain is the Mount Sinai of the Bible.

The burning bush

Some scholars believe that the inflammable plant *Dictamnus* might have inspired the biblical account of Moses's election by God. This flowering shrub, native to warm, open woodland habitats and found throughout the Middle East, is covered with isoprene-based, volatile oils that can catch fire easily in hot weather. It is these natural oils that burn—enveloping the exterior of the entire plant—and not the bush itself, which is generally unharmed once the flames extinguish themselves. It is possible that this natural phenomenon occurred regularly on the plains of the ancient Holy Land and would have been known to the oral storytellers and early scripture writers who shaped the Old Testament.

> Earth's crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God.
> **Elizabeth Barrett Browning**
> ***Poet (1806–1861)***

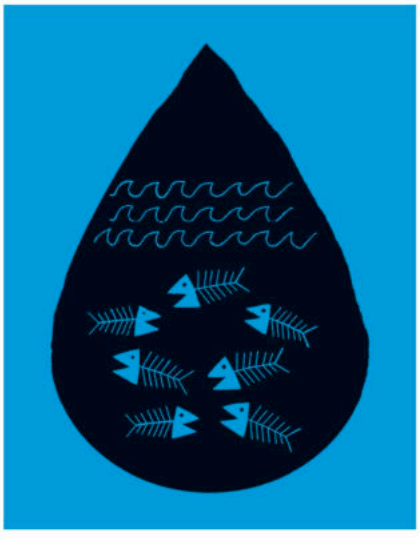
> There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush.
> **Exodus 3:2**

Whatever the explanations for the burning bush, it serves as a potent and highly visual symbol of God's omnipresence. In the early books of the Bible, God appears in a number of dramatic forms (known as theophany), underlining His unique ability to appear in different guises and circumstances. The declaratory marvel of the burning bush is juxtaposed with Moses's ambivalent attitude, reflecting the difference between the divine and the human. While God's reputation as the Almighty is emphasized through the spectacle, Moses's uncertainty demonstrates human weakness in the face of the divine.

The burning bush is one of the most dramatic symbols in the Bible and has come to represent many different things for religious institutions across the world. The motto adopted by the Reformed Church of France, "*Flagror non consumor*" (I am burned, I am not consumed), best exemplifies the significance that the burning bush has acquired in modern times. God is referred to elsewhere in the Bible as a "consuming fire" (Deuteronomy 4:24 and Hebrews 12:29), but the fact that the bush remains intact despite the fire can be interpreted as representing God's infinite capacity for mercy.

In Scotland, Ireland, Canada, Australia, the Netherlands, and a number of other countries, the bush has become the adopted symbol of Presbyterian churches. In the United States, the Jewish Theological Seminary has adopted the symbol with the accompanying phrase "and the bush was not consumed." In all cases, the symbolism associated with the image suggests that the Church suffers yet lives on. ■

Dictamnus albus, shown here in a 16th-century manuscript dedicated to St. Mark, may have been the burning bush of Exodus. The plant is covered in a flammable oil used to heal snake bites.



ALL THE WATER WAS CHANGED INTO BLOOD

EXODUS 7:20, THE TEN PLAGUES

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Exodus 7–10

THEME
Divine intervention

SETTING
14th–13th century BCE
Egypt.

KEY FIGURES
The Israelites Followers of the patriarch Jacob, who are enslaved in Egypt.

Moses A future prophet, chosen by God to lead the Israelites out of captivity into the Promised Land.

Aaron Moses's older brother, a Levite and skilled orator.

Pharaoh Egyptian leader and enslaver of the Israelites.

The ten plagues of Egypt occur at a time when the Israelites have been enslaved in Egypt for around 400 years. With their trust in God wavering, the plagues act as a sign from God that reaffirms the Israelites as His chosen people and shows His superior power over the many gods worshipped by the Egyptians.

On the instructions of God, Moses and Aaron confront Pharaoh and ask him to free the Israelites. Although Moses is respected by Pharaoh's advisers, God hardens Pharaoh's heart and he refuses Moses's request.

The identity of this Pharaoh is a matter of conjecture among scholars, since Exodus does not name him and there is no firm agreement about the date of the Israelites' eventual escape from

The Fifth Plague of Egypt by J.M.W. Turner actually depicts the hailstorm of the seventh plague. The mistitled painting was Turner's first major work to be shown at the Royal Academy.

See also: Moses and the Burning Bush 66–69 ▪ The Passover 72–73 ▪ The Exodus 74–77 ▪ The Twelve Spies 88 ▪ The Final Judgment 316–21

Evidence for the plagues

Over the years, scientists have made many attempts to discover evidence for the ten plagues and explain what caused them. Working in the 1950s, Danish academic Greta Hort was the first to argue that the plagues were the result of a chain of natural catastrophes in Egypt. Later, in the 1990s, Hort's theory was given further credibility by American epidemiologists John S. Marr and Curtis Malloy, who suggested that the tenth plague could be attributed to poisonous mycotoxins (fungal toxins) infecting the grain supply in Egypt.

In 2010, new theories of how the plagues could have resulted from natural causes emerged. These included ideas that a shift in the Egyptian climate from wet to dry was the trigger for the first plague, and that the penultimate three plagues were the result of a volcanic eruption on the island of Santorini in Greece, causing a large ash cloud to spread across Egypt.

Egypt. No record exists of this in Egyptian sources. Some scholars date the Exodus to around 1446 BCE, which would place it during the reign of Thutmose III, while others say it may have happened as late as 1275 BCE, during the reign of Ramesses II. Several other pharaohs have also been proposed.

Plague follows plague

God's response to Pharaoh's refusal to free the Israelites is to have Moses summon a series of plagues to afflict the Egyptian people, culminating in the tenth and most calamitous: the slaying in a single night of all the firstborn male children and animals of the Egyptians (see pp. 72–73). Excluding this final plague, the plagues come in sets of three, a number often associated with divinity and used by the writers of Exodus as a device to build narrative tension and expectation. The first two plagues in each set are preceded by a warning; the last is not. The gravity of the plagues increases with each set.

The plagues not only convince Pharaoh to free the Israelites, but they also rekindle the Israelites' faith in the Lord. These powerful acts demonstrate that the God of their fathers is worthy of worship and superior to the host of pagan gods in Egypt, the most powerful country in the region at that time. Plagues reappear as a symbol of God's wrath and judgment later in the Bible. They include the Seven Last Plagues that complete God's wrath at the Final Judgment, described in Revelation by the Apostle John.

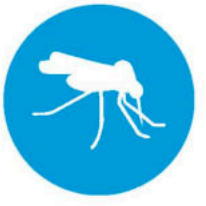
God's purpose

There is little historical evidence for the plagues. The one surviving document that may provide evidence, the Ipuwer Papyrus, describes scenes that could match the Exodus story—including a reference to a river of blood (the first plague)—but scholars believe that it was written between 1850 and 1600 BCE, preceding any of the proposed dates for the Exodus by several centuries. ■

The Ten Plagues

1. Blood The Nile River turns to blood, so it is undrinkable.

2. Frogs Land, houses, and people are covered in frogs.



3. Gnats The dust throughout Egypt turns into gnats.

4. Flies Swarms of flies cover Pharaoh's officials.

5. Livestock All the livestock of the Egyptians dies.

6. Boils People and animals break out in boils.

7. Hail A severe hailstorm falls on Egypt.

8. Locusts All the trees and plants are devoured by locusts.

9. Darkness The sky turns dark for three days.

10. Firstborn All the firstborn sons of the Egyptians die.

WHEN YOU ENTER THE LAND THAT THE LORD WILL GIVE YOU AS HE PROMISED, OBSERVE THIS CEREMONY

EXODUS 12:25, THE PASSOVER

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Exodus 12:25

THEME
Passover

SETTING
14th–13th century BCE
Nile Delta.

KEY FIGURES
Moses Leader of the Israelite people, who ensures that God's instructions are carried out to the letter.

Aaron Moses's older brother, who assists him in carrying out God's orders.

Pharaoh Leader of the Egyptians, who refuses to heed Moses's warnings of God's intentions.

The Jewish holiday of Passover commemorates the Israelites' deliverance from their Egyptian slavery. It also celebrates specifically how God makes a distinction between the Israelites and the Egyptians, sparing the Israelites from the last—and worst—of the plagues.

God's tenth plague against the Egyptian people kills all of the firstborn sons. In order not to harm the Israelites during this plague, God instructs His Angel of Death, a destructive figure, to *pass over* (hence the name of the holiday) the Israelites as it carries out His work. God tells Moses and Aaron to instruct the Israelites to sacrifice lambs and smear their blood over the door frames of their houses, in order to distinguish their homes from those of the Egyptians.

> When I see the blood, I will pass over you.
> **Exodus 12:13**

The angel kills the oldest son of every family in Egypt, including Pharaoh's own offspring, the crown prince. It is this event that forms the basis of the Passover holiday—Pesach—celebrated annually by Jewish families today, more than 3,000 years later.

Origins and significance

Scholars are generally in agreement that, in line with standard biblical chronology, the Passover would have occurred around 1300 BCE. Most also believe that the event derives from a protection rite employed by nomadic shepherds as they moved in search of pasture.

The blood of a lamb, sacrificed in a protective ritual, symbolized the life-giving power of God and protected the shepherds against any evil forces. The roasting and consumption of the lamb's meat—part of God's very detailed instructions to the Israelites at the time of the first Passover—would further seal the links between God and His people. The dramatic escape from Egypt gave this

See also: The Exodus 74–77 ▪ The Ten Commandments 78–83 ▪ Entering the Promised Land 96–97

ancient rite a whole new meaning, as it came to commemorate the victory of the Israelites' God over Egyptian gods and God's ongoing covenant with His chosen people.

God tells the Israelites to take part in the ritual of the Passover when they enter the land He has promised to them, and to carry this out for generations to come. As God has protected the firstborns of the Israelites, their lives now belong to God, and this ritual observance honors that. Passover can also be seen to represent the idea that Israel is God's firstborn, whom He will continually protect.

The bread of the Israelites

As well as eating the meat of the sacrificed lambs, according to God's instructions the Israelites ate unleavened bread. This meant that it contained no yeast and therefore had not "risen." Such was the rush accompanying the Israelites' departure from Egypt that there was no time to bake the bread with leavening yeast. Consequently, the Passover is also known as the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and during this time Jews discard all traces of yeast from their homes and eat entirely unleavened foods. God also prescribes the eating of bitter herbs during Passover as a symbol of the Israelites' bitter lives as slaves in Egypt.

Over the centuries, a number of other elements were added to the ritual of Passover, including special wines, foods, prayers, and blessings. Its significance in Jewish culture is inestimable: all subsequent acts of deliverance in the Israelites' history were seen as consequences of the Exodus (see pp. 74–77) and celebrated as extensions of the Passover. The holiday serves as a reminder of the drama and significance of the Exodus for God's chosen people. ■

The Israelites prepare for the tenth plague of Egypt in this 1639 engraving by Johann Sadler. By marking their homes with animal blood, they show God which houses to avoid.

Pesach and Judaism

The Hebrew name for Passover, "Pesach" is one of the most important Jewish holidays. As with two other major holidays, Shavuot and Sukkot, Pesach originally required Jews to make a pilgrimage to the Jerusalem Temple to sacrifice an animal. When the Romans destroyed the Temple in 70 CE—most scholars believe it stood on the site of the Dome of the Rock, the Muslim shrine in the heart of Jerusalem—the original stipulations of Pesach had to be altered. These days, most Jewish families celebrate the holiday at home, an arrangement similar to the original biblical tradition of holding the Passover in individual homes.

The term "pesach" may also refer to the lamb or goat that was designated for sacrifice during the holiday (in recognition of God's original orders). Known as the Korban Pesach, today this ritual sacrifice remains a central symbol of Passover. It is commemorated in a set of scriptural and Rabbinic passages and the presentation of *zeroa*, a symbolic meat-based food placed on the ceremonial Passover "seder plate" but not eaten. The seder plate also contains an egg to symbolize sacrifice.

STRETCH OUT YOUR HAND OVER THE SEA TO DIVIDE THE WATER

EXODUS 14:16, THE EXODUS

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Exodus 14–17

THEME
Divine deliverance

SETTING
14th–13th century BCE
Northeastern Egypt.

KEY FIGURES
Moses God's appointed leader of the Israelites, who follows God's instructions to lead them out of bondage.

Aaron Moses's brother, who assists him in guiding the Israelites out of Egypt.

Miriam Sister to Moses and Aaron, later a prophetess.

Pharaoh Ruler of the Egyptians, who chases after the Israelites, despite having released them from slavery after the plagues of Egypt.

Central to Judaism, the Exodus (from a Greek word meaning "exit") narrative is the account of the founding of the nation of Israel. The tale also features one of the most famous episodes in the Old Testament—Moses parting the Red Sea.

Following a barrage of plagues sent by God, Pharaoh summons Moses and Aaron and tells them that their people can leave. The Israelites—more than 600,000 of them—hastily gather their belongings and make their way out of Egypt and into the wilderness. They are at last free of bondage, but their troubles are not over.

See also: Moses and the Burning Bush 66–69 ▪ The Ten Commandments 78–83 ▪ The Golden Calf 84–85 ▪ The Twelve Spies 88 ▪ Entering the Promised Land 96–97

Moses leads the Israelites through the Red Sea in this 1849 painting by Vasilii (Wilhelm) Alexandrovich Kotarbinsky. With the waters parted, they are able to walk across the seabed.

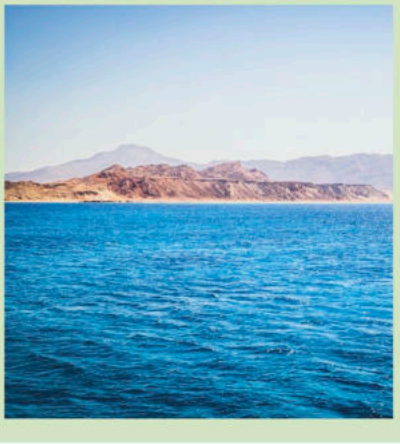
God leads the Israelites toward the Promised Land, manifesting Himself as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, in order to light their way and make the exit from Egypt as swift as possible. He leads the people southeast, in the direction of the land He has promised to them. The Israelites, however, are confused by the directions they are given and complain to Moses, who consults God at every sign of trouble.

Pharaoh's reaction

God then does something that is surprising. He "hardens" the heart of Pharaoh (Exodus 14:4), prompting the Egyptian ruler to decide to pursue the Israelites. This serves two purposes: it tests the faith of His chosen people by making the situation even more perilous while at the same time defending them by luring the Egyptians into a trap.

Pharaoh dispatches an army of chariot-borne soldiers, which catches up with the Israelites on the shores of a sea near a place called Pi Hahiroth (Exodus 14:9). (The Hebrew translation of Exodus calls the area *yam suf*—sea of reeds—whereas the Greek translation refers to it as *thalassa erythra*, red sea.) As the Israelites realize they are trapped between the water and Pharaoh's army, they panic and cry out to Moses. Transformed by God, Moses has lost his former reluctance to lead. He calms his followers by telling them simply to be still and that God will deliver them. God then instructs Moses to raise his staff »

The Red Sea



A 1,400-mile (2,250-km) long seawater inlet of the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea lies between Africa and Asia. At 16–18 miles (26–29km) wide at its narrowest point and about 165 feet (50m) deep at its shallowest, it would have been a significant hurdle for the Israelites to cross.

The name Red Sea has two possible derivations. First, the word "red" was used in some ancient Asiatic languages to denote the direction "south," just as "black" was used for north and other colors for east and west. Alternatively, the name may derive from the presence of large blooms of cyanobacteria, or "sea sawdust," called *Trichodesmium erythraeum*, which turns reddish-brown as it dies off.

The ubiquity of this weed on the surface of the Red Sea may also explain the Hebrew name *yam suf*, "sea of reeds." Although some scholars believe *yam suf* might refer to a reed-strewn freshwater lake that existed in ancient times on the site of the Suez Canal, it is also possible that *yam suf* refers to the same weed that turns the sea red.

> They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die?"
> **Exodus 14:11**

and stretch out his hand across the water. He assures him that the waters will part and the Israelites will be able to move on across dry land. He further explains to Moses that He will "harden the hearts" of the Egyptians so that they will follow the Israelites onto the seabed. The repetition of this phrase underlines the dual purpose that God had in mind from the start.

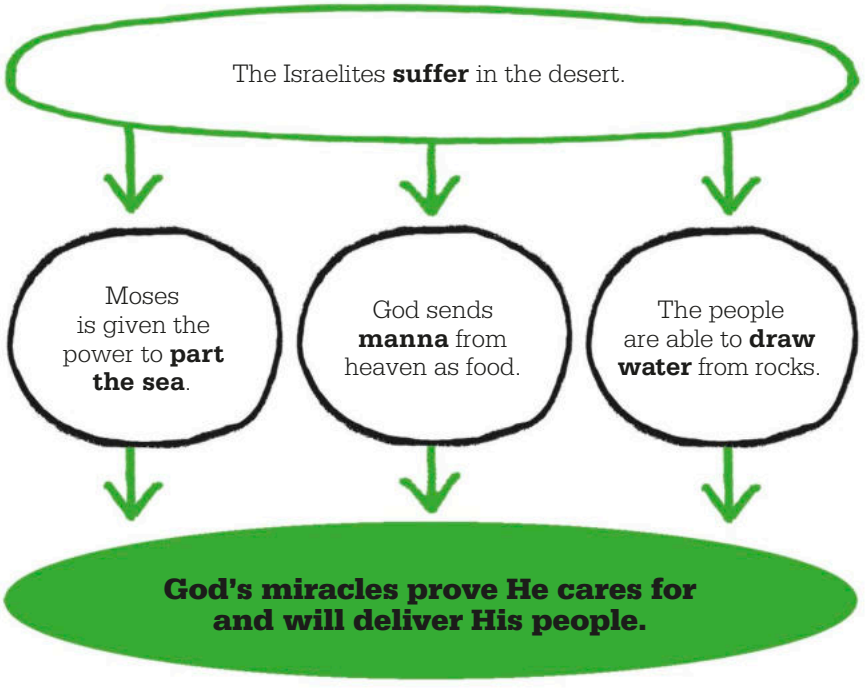
When Moses raises his staff, everything comes to pass just as God promised. The Israelites cross dry ground between two enormous walls of water, while God holds the Egyptians back with His pillar of fire. Once the Israelites are safely across the river, God allows the Egyptians to give chase. When the army reaches the seabed, Moses lowers his arms, and the waters sweep over the Egyptian soldiers and drown them. This divine act is one of several instances in Exodus in which God demonstrates His supreme power.

Song of the Sea

Once they have been safely delivered from Pharaoh's army, the Israelites celebrate by singing a song in worship of God. Known as the "Song of the Sea" (Exodus 15), the hymn is led by Moses and his sister Miriam (see box). Moses then leads the Israelites toward his old homeland of Midian in Sinai, where he is destined to receive God's commandments for their new nation.

The Israelites' high spirits do not last long, and Moses is soon tested by his people once more. They complain again that they might have been better off as slaves than risking starvation in the wilderness. However, every time the Israelites complain, God provides. When the people ask for more food, God rains a sticky, breadlike substance from the sky. This is *manna* and becomes part of the Israelites' diet during their 40 years of wandering. When they complain of not having enough meat, God makes a flock of quail land in their camp every day. For water, God instructs Moses to

A fresco on the wall of the Kalamíou monastery in the Peloponnese in Greece shows the Egyptians drowning as the waters of the Red Sea fall back in the wake of the Israelites' passage.



strike a rock with his staff, from which fresh water gushes. This continued divine intervention saves the Israelites, and shows the benevolence of God.

Significance of the Exodus

The Exodus is at the very heart of Judaism, but its message of freedom has also inspired many non-Jewish groups, from early Protestant settlers fleeing persecution in post-Reformation Europe to 20th-century African Americans striving for civil rights.

There is little archaeological evidence to support the Exodus as historical fact, but the largely accepted wisdom is that the event occurred sometime around the mid-1300s BCE and that Moses himself wrote the book that records it. In Exodus 34:27, God tells Moses "Write down these words …" and Jesus, in Mark 12:26, quotes from Exodus as the "Book of Moses."

God uses Moses as His instrument to rescue His chosen people not just from slavery but from a polytheistic society. The Exodus story shows God's power, His love for His people, and how He encourages and rewards trust and faith. Preceding events anticipate it and subsequent events refer back to it. Matthew 2:15 in the New Testament alludes to Jesus as the new Israel, come out of Egypt. ■

> The Lord looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion.
> **Exodus 14:24**

Miriam

After the crossing of the Red Sea, Miriam, an older sister of Aaron and Moses—by three and six years respectively—leads the Israelite women in celebrating, shaking timbrels (tambourines), singing, and dancing (15:20). Referred to as a prophetess in this episode in Exodus, she plays a crucial role in Moses's life and is also mentioned in Numbers 12, Numbers 20:1, Deuteronomy 24:9, and Micah 6:4.

When Pharaoh orders the murder of all firstborn male Israelite children, it is Miriam who watches over Moses in the basket hidden in the reed beds of the Nile River. When Pharaoh's daughter discovers the baby, Miriam offers to find a nurse for him and secretly enlists the help of his mother and her own mother. Later in the Bible, however, Aaron and Miriam rebel against Moses. God punishes Miriam with leprosy, but then heals her after seven days. True to her story, the name Miriam means either "beloved" or "bitter."

YOU SHALL NOT MURDER

EXODUS 20:13, THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Exodus 16:1–20:17

THEME
Protecting the Israelites

SETTING
14th–13th century BCE
Mount Sinai, also called Mount Horeb, on the Sinai Peninsula, three months after the Exodus.

KEY FIGURES
Moses The leader chosen by God to challenge the Egyptian Pharaoh and lead the Israelites out of slavery.

God Appears to Moses in physical form as a thick, thunderous cloud.

The Israelites The 12 tribes descended from Jacob, recently liberated from Egypt.

Moses is shown with horns in this 15th-century woodcut. These are the result of a mistranslation of the Hebrew for "rays of light" in Exodus 34:29. The error was repeated by many artists.

Three months after leaving Egypt, the Israelites arrive at the foot of Mount Sinai in the desert of Sinai, free from the rule of Pharaoh for the first time in living memory. However, after the initial euphoria of rescue, the Israelites struggle to know what to do with their newfound freedom. God summons Moses to the top of the mountain and tells him to make an offer to the people of Israel.

Having rescued them from the tyranny of Pharaoh and provided for their daily needs in the desert, God is prepared to enter into a covenant with them, just as He entered into a covenant with their forefather Abraham. Although all the earth belongs to God, if the Israelites commit to obeying Him, they will become God's "treasured possession" out of all nations and a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (19:5–6). When Moses relays God's message to the elders, they respond enthusiastically to the proposition: "We will do everything the Lord has said" (19:8). Moses takes their answer back to God.

Through Moses, God then instructs the Israelites to gather at a respectful distance from the bottom of the mountain, while Moses returns to the top to receive the terms of their covenant. A thick cloud then descends over Mount Sinai, and the people hear thunder and loud trumpet blasts and see flashes of lightning, fire, and smoke. The people tremble in fear. It is a clear indication of the gravity of the relationship that they are to share with God.

A new covenant

On the mountain, God gives Moses His terms, or laws—the ten foundational rules known as the Ten Commandments, or the Decalogue (from the Greek, "ten words"). The first three concern the Israelites' relationship with God. First, they are to worship Him alone, rather than merging their obedience to God with reverence for the deities of other people. Next, they are forbidden from making any image or idol of God, because God is not to be viewed in comparison to any earthly or heavenly creature. Thirdly, God's name is to be used with care and respect—never taken in vain. The Israelites must never forget that they owe their lives to God and not any other human or divine leader.

The fourth commandment instructs the people to keep a Sabbath day, which they could never have done as slaves working without a Sabbath rest. Just as God created the world in six days and then rested, so the Israelites should work for six days and then spend a day resting and relishing God's presence.

The last six commandments regulate the relationships between God's own people. They are to honor their parents, and refrain

See also: The Testing of Abraham 50–53 ▪ Jacob Wrestles with God 56–57 ▪ Entering the Promised Land 96–97 ▪ Call for Repentance 172

from murder, adultery, stealing, lying, and coveting things that do not belong to them.

After his encounter, Moses comes down the mountain and tells the Israelites the terms of the covenant. They respond enthusiastically: "Everything the Lord has said we will do." (24:3). Having agreed to the terms, the Israelites wait at the bottom of Mount Sinai while Moses goes back up into the thick cloud of God's presence.

Moses stays at the top of Mount Sinai for 40 days and 40 nights, during which time God provides him with tablets of stone, inscribed with the terms of the covenant. The tablets are to be a lasting reminder of the agreement between God and His newly rescued people.

Obedience slips

Subsequent events in the Bible prove that it does not take long for the Israelites to break more of the commandments – or to forget them entirely. Towards the end of his life, Moses must reiterate God's commandments for the generation born and raised during the 40 years in which the Israelites wander the desert (Deuteronomy 5). Centuries later, during the reign of King Josiah, the high priest "discovers" the Book of the Law languishing in a dusty corner of a storeroom at the Temple (2 Kings 22), and King Josiah tears his robe after the word of God is read to him, mortified that he has failed to uphold His laws. The Bible shows time and again that when the Israelites obey the law, they prosper, but when they forget it or actively disobey it, disaster ensues.

God's holy nation

The Ten Commandments are often misunderstood. Many people see them simply as a list of "dos and don'ts," but this misses their true significance. Although eight of God's commandments contain the admonition "do not," the purpose of the commandments is not primarily to prohibit, but rather to protect and promote God's "holy nation." The key to understanding the commandments is found in the opening words of the covenant: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." God has already given the Israelites a new sense of identity when He rescued them from the oppressive rule of Pharaoh in Egypt, turning them from slaves into "priests" (Exodus 19:6)—God's representatives on earth. The Israelites' life together had been made possible by God's dramatic »

> Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.
> **Exodus 19:5–6**

King Hammurabi, ruler of Babylon from 1792 to 1750 BCE, produced one of the earliest known codes of law, known as the Code of Hammurabi.

Ancient law codes

Other ancient Near Eastern societies also had laws to regulate relationships between people and rights relating to property. Some of these laws were recorded in cuneiform script, inscribed in stone, giving scholars an insight into the people who lived around the Israelites in their formative years as a nation, such as the Sumerians, Babylonians, and Assyrians. Typically, a king imposed a rule of law on communities living under his protection, including those that had been conquered. Many take the form of a treaty, in which the ruler offers protection in return for obedience. Such treaties could be described as case law, in which the law dictates what would be done in certain circumstances. Punishments were sometimes specified. In Babylon's Code of Hammurabi, for example, theft was punished by death, while herdsmen found guilty of fraud received a fine.

The Mosaic Law resonates with these codes, although it is based on the authority of God rather than a human leader.

The Torah

Hebrew for "instruction" or "teaching," *torah* refers to the Ten Commandments and the other instructions given to Moses on the top of Mount Sinai. The Israelites understand that God's torah has rescued them from the restrictive and vindictive rule of Pharaoh and see it as a gift and a blessing.

Throughout the Bible, torah is recognized as God's good commandments: following the torah will enable humankind to flourish within appropriate boundaries. Torah is also used as a collective term for the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These books, often called the books of Moses, are of foundational importance to Jews because they tell the story of how the Israelites came to exist as a nation and contain God's rule for life. In every synagogue, the Torah is handwritten on parchment scrolls that are kept in the Ark of the Law, symbolizing the Holy of Holies in the ancient Temple of Jerusalem.

regard for them, and now God gives them commandments to protect this new identity, recognizing that it would be too easy for them to fall back into godless ways.

More than ten

The Ten Commandments form the backbone of God's relationship with Israel. There are many other instructions that Moses receives from God to pass on to the Israelites, including instructions for constructing the Tabernacle, and these additional rules are necessary for the application of the Ten Commandments in everyday life. Over time, this larger body of commands and teaching become known as *torah*, which is still the fundamental set of laws governing Judaism today.

In this episode in the Bible, Moses is presented as God's great lawgiver, and the law is often called Mosaic Law. Today, however, the ten laws have a less prominent position within Judaism than they did in Moses's time. According to the Babylonian Talmud, a collection of interpretations of the torah and Jewish law compiled in the 4th century CE, priests ceased their recitation of these commandments, due to assertions by opponents, possibly early Christians, that they were the only laws imparted to Moses on Mount Sinai. This had led to the neglect of more than 600 other commands.

Open to interpretation

As with many verses in the Bible, the Ten Commandments are seen differently by various groups. Not only do interpretations of the laws themselves differ—does, for example, adultery refer to sexual acts outside of marriage, or only to the infidelity of married couples?—but different denominations place emphasis on different laws.

The Catholic Church, for example, following the medieval Roman tradition, does not include the commandment concerning the creation of images of God and also specifies as its own commandment that you must not covet your neighbor's wife. The prohibition

The rocky heights of Mount Sinai, where Moses is said to have received the Ten Commandments. Holy places are often also high places, where the human is nearer to the divine.

> Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, 'We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey.'
> **Exodus 24:7**

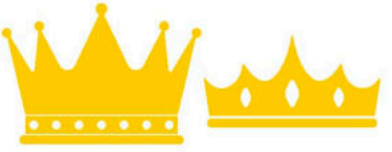
against creating images and idols is considered by Catholics to be part of the first commandment to worship no other gods. However, Greek Orthodox and Protestant denominations retain the Ten Commandments as recorded in the Book of Exodus.

Guide to life

One of the enduring legacies of the Ten Commandments is their combination of what we often see as religious and secular life. Throughout the Bible, there is no clear distinction made between the spiritual life of God's people and their practical life, or between public and private spheres. God's law covered all aspects of their lives, including politics and economics, friendships and family.

The Ten Commandments instructed the Israelites to live out their lives as God's people, showing to other people the justice and generosity that God had first given to them. Because of this positive role of law in the Israelites' lives, songs were even composed in praise of it. Psalm 17 says: "The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul." ■

The Ten Commandments (Exodus 20)



1. You shall have no other gods before me.

2. You shall not make for yourself an idol and worship it.

3. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.

4. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.

5. Honor your father and your mother.

6. You shall not murder.

7. You shall not commit adultery.

8. You shall not steal.

9. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

10. You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor.

THEY HAVE MADE FOR THEMSELVES A GOLDEN CALF AND HAVE WORSHIPPED IT

EXODUS 32:8, THE GOLDEN CALF

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Exodus 32

THEME
Idolatry

SETTING
14th–13th century BCE Six weeks after Moses received the Ten Commandments, near Mount Sinai.

KEY FIGURES
The Israelites Descendants of the patriarch Jacob.

Aaron Moses's brother and the first high priest of the Israelites. He is left in charge while Moses goes to talk to God atop Mount Sinai.

Moses Leader of the Israelites, and their communicator with God.

It is remarkable that the Israelites' fall into idolatry ever took place at all. Moses had only just received God's Ten Commandments, in which it was made clear that the Israelites were to worship only one God, and that idolatry was forbidden. Speaking through Moses, God had warned of dire consequences should the Israelites break these laws.

Yet, just 40 days after Moses had left his people to continue his meeting with God on Mount Sinai, the Israelites fall into sin by deciding to worship a golden calf, an idol that Aaron, the high priest and Moses's brother, had forged for them out of the jewelry and other gold trinkets they had brought with them from Egypt.

Israelite intentions

The reasons why the Israelites are quick to forget—or deliberately break—the commandments are not made clear. All that is said is that they believed Moses's failure to return to them meant that he had died. Three traditional explanations

The Israelites celebrate a bull-calf idol in this painting by Filippino Lippi, c.1500. The golden calf Aaron makes is thought to be an image of the Egyptian bull god Apis.

See also: The Ten Commandments 78–83 ▪ Balaam's Donkey 89 ▪ Elijah and the Prophets of Baal 125

Exodus	Deuteronomy
According to Exodus, the Israelites **create idols** in their panic because Moses is so long returning from the mountain.	Deuteronomy makes no mention of **Moses's** delay in **returning** from Mount Sinai.
Exodus places **blame on Aaron** for building the golden calf and letting the people run amok. His pardoning is not explained.	Deuteronomy says that **Moses intervenes** for Aaron with God, but not what Aaron has done to require this intervention.
Aaron orders the people to **melt down gold** earrings to make the calf.	The metal is **not mentioned**—instead, the idol is a "molten" calf.
The sons of Levi rally when Moses calls them. They **kill 3,000** people in the camp and are appointed for sacred duty due to their zeal.	Deuteronomy 10:8–9 notes only that the sons of Levi are appointed as **God's priests** "at that time."

The role of the Levites

Descended from Levi, the son of Jacob and Leah, the Levites include Moses, Aaron, and their sister Miriam. Following the incident with the golden calf, the entire tribe is set apart by God because their actions showed their loyalty to the Covenant. The Levites' special role is confirmed in Numbers 1, when God tells Moses not to number them among the other tribes.

All of the priests in the Old Testament are descendants of Aaron, and are sometimes called the Aaronide priests. Some of the most important include Ezra, Eli, and Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. Those Levites who are not priests are assigned specific duties to do with the Tabernacle. They also interpret the law.

Deuteronomy 9–10 also records the golden calf story. However, many of the details of Exodus 32–34 are absent and the account does not dwell on the role of Aaron.

for the Israelites' actions are offered in the works of medieval Jewish commentators Rashi, Nahmanides, and Abraham Ibn Ezra. Rashi argues that the golden calf was intended as an alternative god. Without Moses, the Israelites had lost their link with God and wanted a physical deity to worship.

Nahmanides, however, suggests the calf was supposed to replace Moses as the Israelites' conduit to God, whereas Ibn Ezra contends that the golden calf acted as nothing more than a pedestal, on which God was invisibly present. Whatever the reasoning behind them, the Israelites' idolatrous actions anger Moses. He persuades God not to punish them as severely as He had first intended, and climbs down Mount Sinai to confront them. To illustrate the betrayal their actions have constituted, Moses smashes the tablets bearing the commandments, then destroys the golden calf.

The prophet returns

Moses is determined to punish the Israelites himself for their transgression. The tribe of the Levites responds to his rallying call for those faithful to the Lord, and he orders them to "go back and forth through the camp," slaughtering the idolaters. Some 3,000 perish at their hands. This, however, is not their only punishment: God also strikes them with a plague "because of what they did with the calf Aaron had made" (Exodus 32:35). In a recurring theme in the Old Testament, disobedience brings disaster for the Israelites.

It might be thought that the Israelites would learn from their mistake, but this is not the case. Baal, Ashtoreth, and Molech are among three of the false gods they later choose to worship. ■

THE PLACE WILL BE CONSECRATED BY MY GLORY

EXODUS 29:43, THE ARK AND THE TABERNACLE

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Exodus 25–27

THEME
Creating a sacred dwelling place for God

SETTING
14th–13th century BCE
The wilderness in which the Israelites wander for 40 years.

KEY FIGURES
Moses Prophet and leader of the Israelites who was chosen by God to receive the Ten Commandments on top of Mount Sinai.

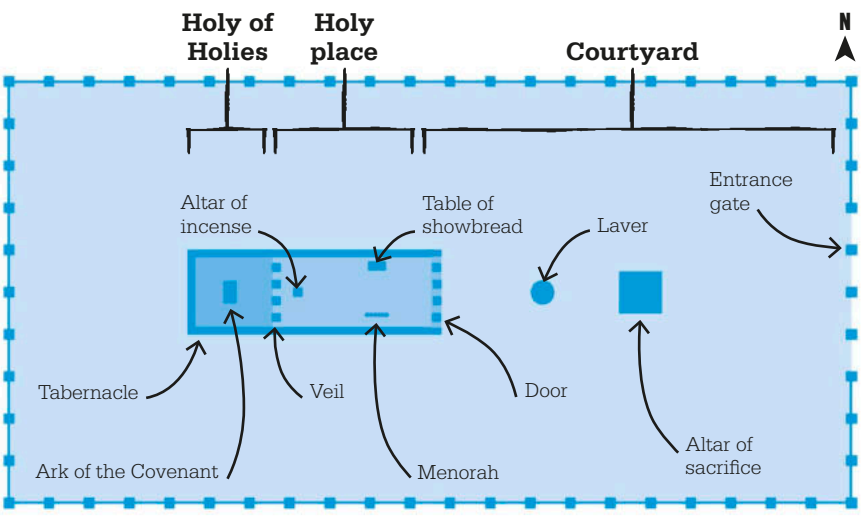
Aaron The older brother of Moses and the Israelites' first high priest.

God takes 40 verses of Exodus to explain to Moses the Tabernacle's purpose and how it must be built. A portable sanctuary, where the Israelites could commune with God, it accompanies them during their 40 years in the wilderness. It is the focus of their worship until Solomon's Temple is built in around 960 BCE.

Portable temple

At each place they camp, the Israelites erect a linen tent with acacia wood poles to create a courtyard around the Tabernacle. This courtyard contains the altar of sacrifice, on which offerings are made, and the laver, a bronze basin filled with water in which the priests purify themselves.

The Tabernacle itself is a tent with acacia wood poles set in silver bases and a roof with four layers. The outermost layer is made of porpoise skins, the next rams' skins dyed red, the third goats' hair, and the innermost layer is made of linen embroidered with depictions of cherubim—hybrid creatures with human faces.



The Tabernacle is a portable temple where God meets with His people. It is placed at the western end of an oblong courtyard with a single gateway on its eastern side.

See also: The Exodus 74–77 ▪ The Ten Commandments 78–83 ▪ The Wisdom of Solomon 120–23 ▪ The Fall of Jerusalem 128–31

God appears as a cloud over the Ark by day and as a fireball by night. Whenever the cloud lifts, it is a sign for the Israelites to move on.

Inside the Tabernacle are two inner rooms. The first is the Holy Place, containing the golden menorah (the seven-armed lampstand); the table of showbread, containing 12 loaves of unleavened bread, each representing a tribe of Israel and laid in two rows each week as specified in Exodus 25:23–30 and later confirmed by Leviticus 24:5–9; and the altar of incense, also plated in gold. Beyond this, separated by a veil, stands the Holy of Holies containing the Ark of the Covenant itself, a wooden chest overlaid inside and out with gold. Four gold rings are attached to the bottom of the chest, through which two poles can be passed to carry the Ark.

The Ark contains the two stone tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments and a pot of manna, the food God provides for the starving Israelites in the wilderness. According to some traditions, it also contains Aaron's rod, which had miraculously produced blossoms to indicate that Aaron was God's choice as high priest. The lid of the Ark, in Hebrew the *kapporet*, but in English known as the mercy seat, is solid gold.

> Have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them.
> **Exodus 25:8**

Day of Atonement

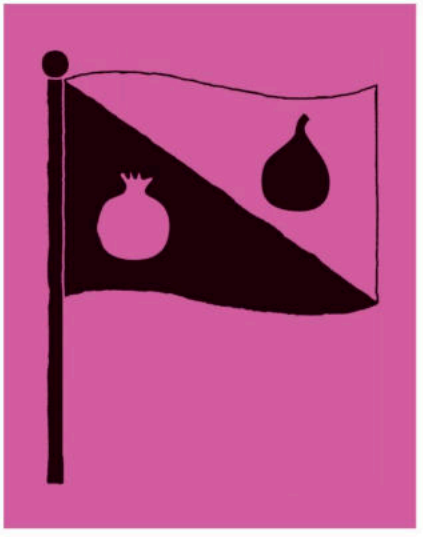
Only the high priest was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies and then only once a year on the day now known as Yom Kippur, when the Israelites atoned for their sins. Burning incense to shield his eyes from the divine presence, the high priest would sprinkle blood from a newly sacrificed bull onto the mercy seat to atone for his and his family's sins and then blood from a goat to atone for the sins of the Israelites in general.

A second goat was then brought into the Holy of Holies. Placing his hands on its head, the priest then confessed the Israelites' sins before releasing the goat into the wild. This ritual is the root of the word scapegoat, as the second goat now carries all the sins of the Israelites. ■

The fate of the Ark

The last time the whereabouts of the Ark of the Covenant is mentioned in the Bible is in 2 Chronicles 2:35. It details how King Josiah ordered the Levites to return it to the Temple of Jerusalem.

The Ark then vanishes from Bible history. One theory is that it was removed from the temple—probably by Jeremiah—before the fall of Jerusalem. It is said he hid the Ark in a cave on Mount Nebu. Other scholars suggest King Josiah buried it under a storehouse on the Temple Mount where the Dome of the Rock now stands. A more fanciful theory claims that Menelik I, the son of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, took the Ark to Axum in Ethiopia, where it is still housed in the Church of St. Mary of Zion.



IT DOES FLOW WITH MILK AND HONEY

NUMBERS 13:27, THE TWELVE SPIES

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Numbers 13–14

THEME
Lack of faith

SETTING
14th–13th century BCE
Kadesh-barnea, Sinai, south of the Promised Land.

KEY FIGURES
Caleb Son of Jephunneh, of the tribe of Judah. One of the scouts sent into Canaan, he urges the Israelites to take possession of the land.

Joshua Also known as Hoshea, Son of Nun, from the tribe of Ephraim. Another scout, he supports the view of Caleb, that the Israelites should take possession of the land. Later he will succeed Moses as leader of Israel.

Moses Israelite leader, who intercedes with God for the rebellious Israelites.

Following their departure from Egypt, the Israelites approach Canaan, the Promised Land. Before going further, Moses sends 12 spies, one from each of the 12 tribes, to scout out the land for 40 days.

A land of plenty

On their return, the scouts report a land that is good, flowing with the proverbial "milk and honey" God promised. As evidence, they bring a bunch of grapes so huge they have to carry it on a pole between two of them. However, they say, the people of Canaan are intimidating and live in large, well-fortified cities.

Undaunted, one of the scouts, Caleb, believes that God will be with them to give them this new home. Supported by another of the scouts, Joshua, he urges his fellow Israelites to go and occupy it. However, the remaining ten exclaim that they cannot attack such formidable foes. The bulk of the Israelites side with the ten and begin to lament that they ever left Egypt. Angry at their faithlessness, God threatens to destroy the people, but Moses intercedes on their behalf.

God's resolution marks a watershed in the book of Numbers. Israel will still enter Canaan but not for another 40 years, due to the people's lack of faith. In the meantime, they will return to the wilderness. Among the older generation, only Caleb and Joshua will possess the Promised Land. ■

> "Your children will be shepherds here for forty years, suffering for your unfaithfulness, until the last of your bodies lies in the desert."
> **Numbers 14:33**

See also: Covenants 44–47 ▪ The Exodus 74–77 ▪ Balaam's Donkey 89 ▪ The Fall of Jericho 98–99

THE LORD OPENED THE DONKEY'S MOUTH

NUMBERS 22:28, BALAAM'S DONKEY

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Numbers 22–23

THEME
Spiritual blindness

SETTING
14th–13th century BCE
Banks of the Jordan River.

KEY FIGURES
Balaam A prophet thought to come from Mesopotamia, who is hired by Balak, king of the Moabites, to curse the Israelites.

Balak The ruler of the Moabites who formed an alliance with the Midianites in a bid to stop the Israelites entering and settling the Promised Land.

Donkey Balaam's transport on his journey to visit Balak.

Balaam's faithful donkey falls down as an angel bars the way in this 1626 painting by Rembrandt van Rijn. The donkey's quick actions save Balaam from certain destruction.

The story of Balaam and his donkey demonstrates how God can use even a dumb beast to carry out His purpose. Balak, the ruler of Moab, a land east of the Jordan River, is concerned about the spread of the Israelites and summons the prophet Balaam to curse them. Mounted on his donkey, Balaam sets off to meet Balak. God sends an angel, armed with a sword, to intercept him. Neither Balaam nor other people can see the angel, but the donkey can. When the donkey veers off the road, Balaam beats her. On the third time this happens, God gives the donkey the power to ask Balaam why he is beating her. Then God opens Balaam's eyes so that he can also see the angel. Balaam falls facedown and apologizes, as he did not know it was God that had blocked his path.

The angel tells Balaam that he is free to go, providing he speaks only what God tells him. When Balaam meets Balak, the king orders him to curse the Israelites. Balaam tries seven times. Each time, instead of cursing them, he blesses them, underlining the message that God will protect the Israelites if they keep faith. ■

See also: The Fall 30–35 ▪ The Exodus 74–77 ▪ The Twelve Spies 88 ▪ Elijah and the Prophets of Baal 125 ▪ Daniel in Babylon 164–65

THERE IS NO OTHER

DEUTERONOMY 4:39, ONLY ONE GOD

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Deuteronomy 4:39; Isaiah 44:6

THEME
Monotheism

SETTING
14th–6th centuries BCE
Moab and Babylon.

KEY FIGURES
Moses Prophet who passed on God's laws to the Israelites, including that they should worship no other god.

Second Isaiah Prophet who gave the first indisputable edict of monotheism in the Bible. Sometimes known as "Deutero-Isaiah."

Nobody knows for certain how monotheism, the worship of one single god, emerged in ancient Israel at a time when polytheism, the worship of many gods or divine beings, was the norm not only in the Near East, but throughout the world. What is certain, however, is that the Israelites' idea of monotheism would have developed gradually. They may have started by recognizing their god Yahweh as superior to all other gods, before going on to deny the existence of any others.

One supreme god

Although the majority of religions in the region at this time were polytheistic, most of them recognized one specific god as superior to all the others in their pantheons. Examples included Marduk for the Babylonians and Ashur for Assyrians, who both believed their rulers were divinely ordained (although not divine themselves). Almost certainly, the first Israelites saw their God, Yahweh, in a similar light. Yahweh (God) was Israel's national deity, having delivered the Israelites from Egypt as His chosen people.

In Deuteronomy, Moses asks the Israelites: "Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation?" He reminds them of the "miraculous signs and wonders" and "great and awesome deeds" that they witnessed in Egypt. His question does not rule

Gideon and his men destroy the altar of Baal in his father's house, as described in Judges 6:27. Worshipping any other god was forbidden in the Ten Commandments.

See also: The Golden Calf 84–85 ▪ The Nature of God 144–47 ▪ The Divinity of Jesus 190–93 ▪ The Trinity 298–99

out the existence of other gods; it simply points to the uniqueness of Israel's God. The Bible is not yet proclaiming overt monotheism, although Moses's assertion may amount to much the same thing. The Israelites were only capable of thinking and expressing themselves in the terms available in their own time, and it is possible that this was the only way they could describe monotheism.

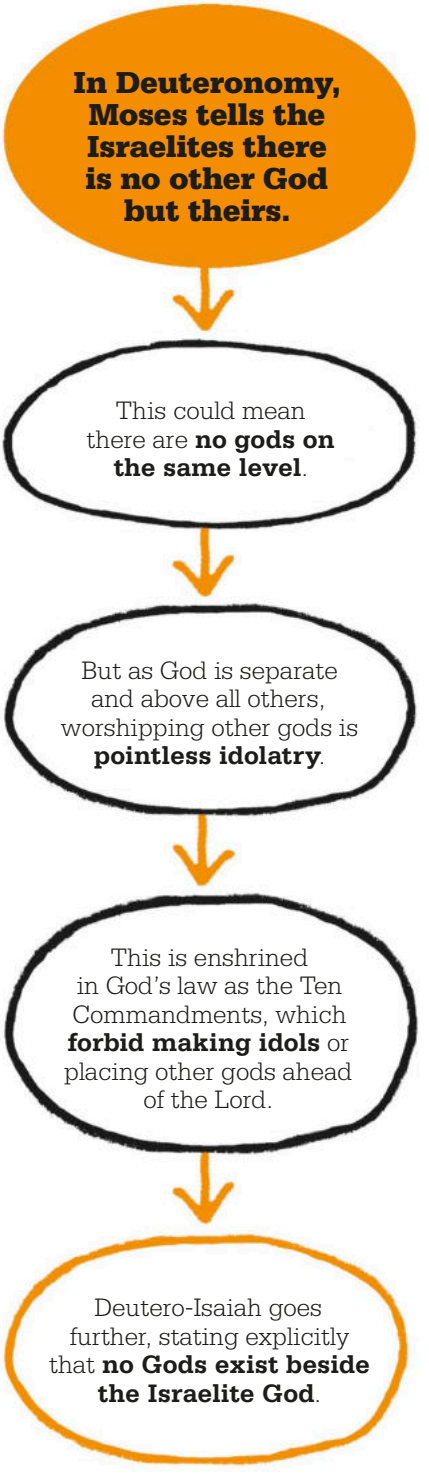
The journey to monotheism

Even though the Israelites were moving toward monotheism, the Bible tells us that they definitely did not think of God as existing completely alone in heaven. He had divine messengers, angels, to do His bidding, and the biblical writers show Him surrounded by the "host of heaven," a whole heavenly court. One of the prophet Micah's visions in Kings even reveals Him taking counsel from attendant spirits. This almost polytheistic idea of God as the supreme deity over a whole host of other divine beings could, over time, have developed into the entirely monotheistic belief that he was, in fact, the one and only god—the belief which exists today across the Abrahamic religions.

Monotheism in the Bible

Just as the Israelites' belief in monotheism developed over time, so did the Bible's stance on the matter. In Deuteronomy, Moses says that "the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other." At first glance, this seems like a definite statement of monotheism, but it could also be read to mean merely that there is no other god like Him.

It would take generations of reflection before a prophet—the so-called Second Isaiah, or Deutero-Isaiah, living during the Babylonian Exile in the 6th century BCE—was able to formulate the Bible's first explicitly monotheistic statements. This is recorded in Isaiah 44:6: "This is what the Lord says—Israel's King and Redeemer, the Lord Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God." ■



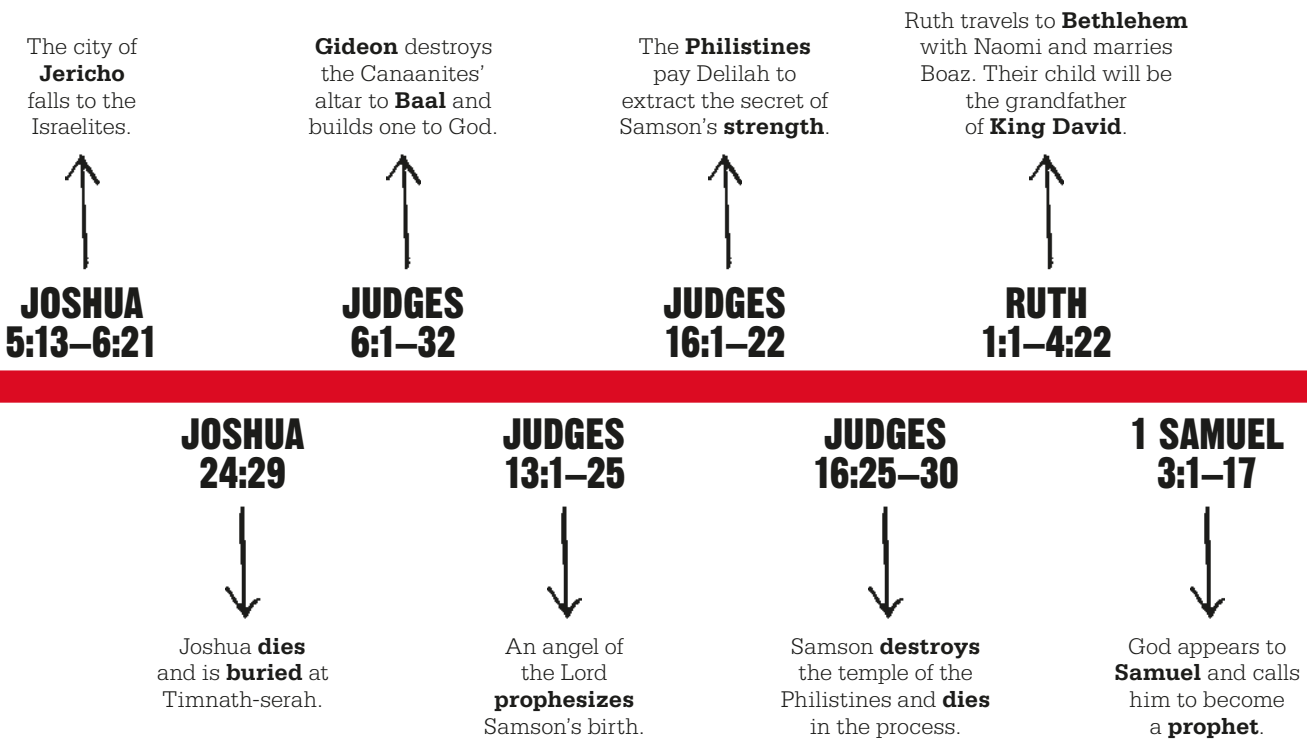
Deuteronomy: a new voice

Something new enters the Bible in Deuteronomy. The Israelites are on the brink of the Jordan, about to cross into Canaan, the Promised Land. Here, on the plains of Moab, Moses, now close to death, recalls God's tender care for the Israelites, urges them to live faithfully, and seeks to prepare them for their new life.

Leviticus and Numbers have an abundance of Mosaic law-giving, but the emphasis is on matters such as purity and liturgy. In Deuteronomy, more than in the earlier books, the law is put in the context of the passionate relationship between God and His people. Because He loves them, God teaches the people His laws and by keeping those laws, the people are able to gratefully respond to that love. Relationships between the people themselves are also important. Deuteronomy's law code features statutes that favor the disadvantaged and encourage generosity.

THE HIST BOOKS

ORICAL



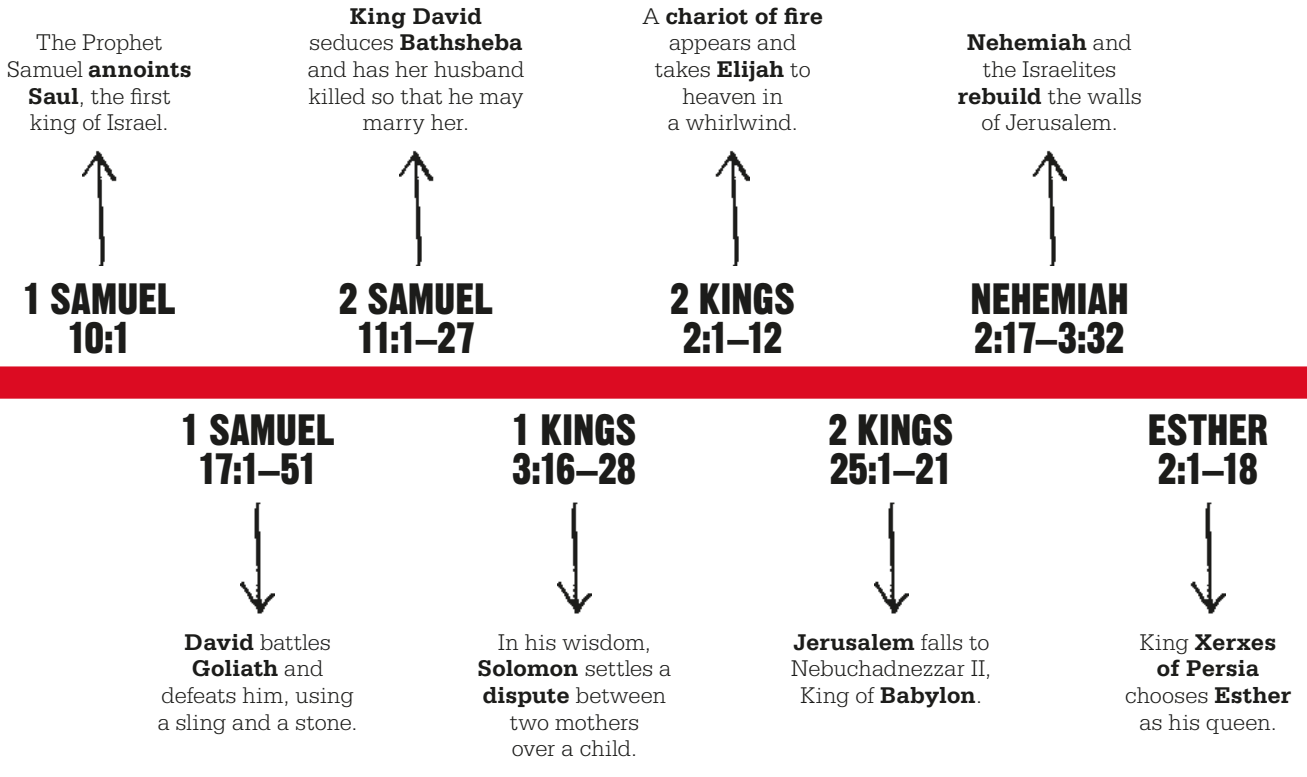
The Historical Books, which follow the books of the Torah, describe how the Israelites conquer the land of Canaan, their experiments with finding a leader, the rise of King David and the monarchy, their fall at the hands of the Babylonians, and the rebuilding of Jerusalem under Nehemiah.

The designation "historical" does not mean that the text is more historical than other parts of the Bible. It is more to do with the style of writing and the reporting of specific events, and the inclusion of dating systems. The texts that are included depend on the canon being used. For instance, the Samuel–Kings texts are found in the Prophets section (Nevi'im) of the Hebrew Bible because of the prominence of Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, and Elisha. However, Esther and Ruth, which most Christian canons include in the Historical Books (the equivalent of the Hebrew Bible's Prophets), are considered part of the "Writings" (Ketuvim) section of the Hebrew canon. For Christians, the inclusion of the Book of Ruth is important in establishing the line of David that eventually leads to Jesus.

Like the Exodus, the account of the conquest of Canaan is fraught with historical anomalies. Many of the sites mentioned in the conquest have not been located or their dating does not align with that given by the Bible. Most likely, the authors were drawing on stories of destruction that had been woven into the Israelites' oral history. Some scholars doubt that the conquest occurred at all and believe that the Israelites slowly settled the area, increasing in number over time. This theory is bolstered by the Book of Judges, which suggests the people of the land were never driven out. Efforts to find signs of the conquest continue today, with archaeologists looking for evidence of destruction embedded in the earth below broken pieces of Israelite pottery.

A monarchy emerges

German Bible scholar Martin Noth (1902–1968), who specialized in the early history of the Israelites, believed that the theologies of the Historical Books were similar to Deuteronomy, indicating a common date and source: the people are corrupt and need to return to the Mosaic covenant, and emphasis on the line of David underlines



the importance of the kingdom of Israel. The text follows a similar format to the Book of Genesis: people are blessed, then fail God, are punished, and then blessed again. Noth cited Judges as an example of this pattern. As the judges (leaders appointed by God to deliver the Israelites) arise, they then fail, and the Israelites' situation worsens. The story of the last judge, Samson (Judges 13–16), ends in civil war.

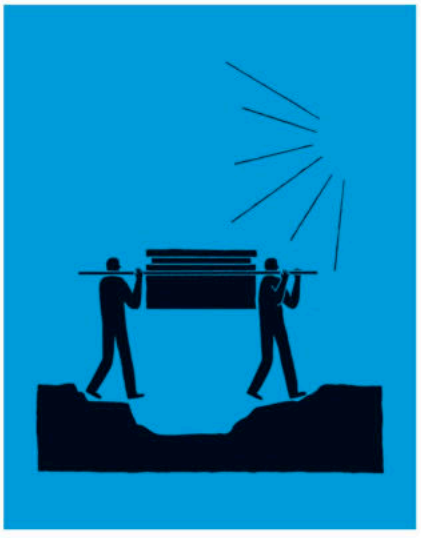
Throughout Judges, it is said that the people do what is right in their own eyes as there is no king in Israel to lead them. Noth believed the author was compiling both Deuteronomy and the Historical Books immediately after the Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, to offer an explanation for the fall of Jerusalem.

After the events in the Book of Judges, the Israelites cry out for a king to deliver strong government. In the Book of Samuel, God grants their request in the form of Saul, whose successor, King David, consolidates the 12 tribes of Israel as the United Monarchy of Judah and Israel. Given that the Bible is written mostly from the perspective of Judah, the central concern of the Historical Books is the rise of David in Judah, as the prophets later say that a Messiah will come from David's line.

Material evidence of King David's reign and his unification of the tribes is scant, although an elaborate stone structure that may have been David's palace has been discovered in Jerusalem. There is, however, conclusive evidence that his son, Solomon, built the Jerusalem Temple, thereby establishing the way ancient Jews would worship for almost 1,000 years. The destruction of the Temple by the Babylonians in 586 BCE would shape the theology of the Jews and have lasting effects on Judaism through the centuries.

Hopes for a Messiah

After the dissolution of the United Monarchy following the death of Solomon, the idea of a Messiah, which originally simply meant "anointed one," began to change from someone who would revive the monarchy to someone who would establish the everlasting Kingdom of God. For Christians, this would mean Jesus, whose Davidic ancestry is documented in the genealogy of Jesus given at the start of Matthew's Gospel. ■



TAKE UP THE ARK OF THE COVENANT

JOSHUA 3:6, ENTERING THE PROMISED LAND

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Joshua 3–4

THEME
Entering the Promised Land

SETTING
14th–13th century BCE
Banks of the Jordan River.

KEY FIGURES
Moses Leader of the Israelites, who has brought them to the edge of the Promised Land.

Joshua Moses's lieutenant, whom God appoints to lead the Israelites after the death of Moses. God gives Joshua the gift of invincibility in battle.

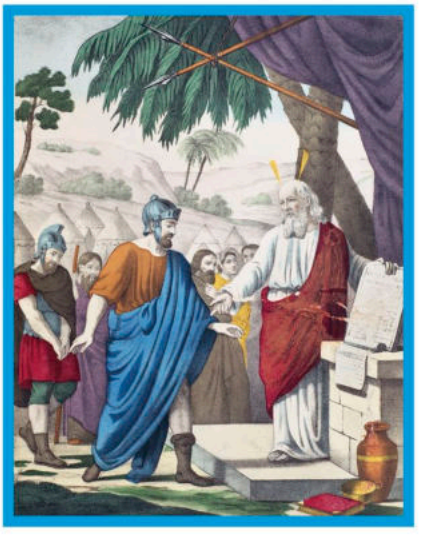
Caleb Assists Joshua in leading the Israelites into the Promised Land.

When Moses dies just one step away from Canaan, the land promised to Abraham and his descendants as an "everlasting possession" (Genesis 17:8), there is an obvious successor: Joshua, his faithful lieutenant. God tells Joshua to prepare to cross the Jordan River: "As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Joshua 1:5).

Relatively little is known about Joshua's background. He is an Ephraimite (descended from Jacob's son Joseph) who had been born in Egypt. Like the other Israelites, he had followed Moses out of the country when the Exodus began. Joshua was unquestionably Moses's most faithful disciple—as Exodus 33 puts it, he "did not leave the tent." He was chosen to go with Moses to Mount Sinai, where God issued the Ten Commandments, and, along with Caleb, was one of the 12 spies sent to scout out Canaan. The first mention of him in the Bible is in Exodus 17:9–16, which tells how Moses chooses Joshua to lead the Israelites into battle against the Amalekites at Rephidim, most likely a broad valley, now called Wadi Feiran, about 25 miles (40km) from Mount Sinai. Joshua was to win many more victories for the Israelites.

Crossing the Jordan

When the time comes for the Israelites to enter the Promised Land, Joshua and Caleb are ready. The Israelites, now camping by the banks of the Jordan River, are more



Moses appoints Joshua to lead the Israelites to the Promised Land. This 19th-century engraving highlights Joshua's role as a military leader by depicting him in a helmet and boots.

See also: Covenants 44–47 ▪ The Exodus 74–77 ▪ The Ark and the Tabernacle 86–87 ▪ The Twelve Spies 88

> For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land … a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees … where you will lack nothing.
> **Deuteronomy 8:7–9**

hesitant. It is spring and the Jordan River, swollen by the rains and the snowmelt from Mount Hermon, is in flood. It is easy for two spies to make their way across the river, as detailed in Joshua 2:23, but now an entire nation must ford it.

For three days, they wait, and then God gives Joshua orders for the Israelites to cross the river. The people follow God's commands, and as God promised, a miracle occurs. Just as the Red Sea had parted for Moses when he led the Israelites out of Egypt, the swollen river ceases to flow. At Adam, a place 19 miles (30km) upriver, the Jordan's waters "piled up in a heap" (3:16) and the riverbed is soon dry. While the priests stand with the Ark of the Covenant in the middle of the riverbed, the Israelites cross over on dry ground. When the crossing has been completed, Joshua orders one man from each tribe to pick up the large stones from the middle of the riverbed and carry them to the far bank. Once they have done this, the priests carry the Ark of the Covenant to the other side.

The parallels with Moses's parting of the Red Sea 40 years previously clearly shows that Joshua has taken up Moses's mantle as God's instrument. It also shows the Amorite and Canaanite kings the power of the Israelites' God.

Keeping the covenant

Even though the Israelites are in enemy territory, and therefore in peril, the first thing Joshua does once they have set up camp at Gilgal, 1 mile (1.5km) east of Jericho, is to use the stones collected from the Jordan River to commemorate their miraculous crossing and remind the Israelites that God keeps His promises when they keep His law. Joshua then follows God's command to "make flint knives" (5:2) and circumcises all the men who have not fulfilled this everlasting sign of God's covenant with Abraham during the 40 years in the wilderness. Joshua knows that a promise may be deferred by God, as it was after the Exodus (see pp. 84–85), if the Israelites disobey God's Law. ■

> That day, the Lord exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel, and they revered him all the days of his life just as they had revered Moses.
> **Joshua 4:14**

The significance of the camp at Gilgal

Located "on the eastern border of Jericho" (Joshua 4:19), Gilgal is the name the Israelites give to the camp they set up after crossing the Jordan River. It remains an important base for them during their conquest of Canaan: they set out from and return to Gilgal after a number of key victories, including the fall of Jericho, the destruction of the royal city of Ai, and the defeat of the Amorites at Gibeon.

In Gilgal, God orders the circumcision of all men born since the Exodus, after which He says to Joshua,"Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you" (5:9). After this, it is the site of the first Passover celebration in the Promised Land.

The Tabernacle stays in Gilgal until the conclusion of Joshua's conquest of Canaan, at which point the Israelites move west to Shiloh (18:1) and "the tent of meeting" is set up there. Later in the Bible, Saul is crowned king at a place called Gilgal (1 Samuel 11:15). This is widely believed to be the same location as the Israelites' camp, although agreement is not unanimous among biblical scholars.

NONE WENT OUT, AND NONE CAME IN

JOSHUA 6:1, THE FALL OF JERICHO

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Joshua 2, 6

THEME
God in war and conquest

SETTING
14th–13th century BCE
Jericho. The date is disputed by some archaeologists.

KEY FIGURES
Joshua Moses's successor as leader of the Israelites and commander of their army.

Rahab A prostitute or innkeeper living in Jericho, who shelters Joshua's spies and helps them to elude their pursuers.

Joshua's conquest of the city of Jericho is the start of God's fulfillment of His covenant with the Israelites—their settlement of Canaan, the Promised Land. Drawing on oral traditions and written sources, the authors of Joshua probably wrote the account during the Babylonian captivity of around 560 BCE in order to raise the spirits of the exiles. The story encourages the Israelites to believe that they can prevail, however poor their chances, if they put their trust in God.

Having crossed the Jordan River, Joshua plans to take Jericho, a seemingly impregnable structure. Archaeological evidence reveals that the city was built on a mound surrounded by a massive earthen embankment, with a 12–15 foot (3.6–4.6m) high retaining wall around its base. Two mudbrick walls augmented this: one on top of the base and the other at the crest of the embankment. In addition, the Bible tells us, Jericho is well provisioned for a siege. A spring inside the city walls

The Israelites have been transported to a Renaissance-style cityscape in this 17th-century engraving of a work by Maarten van Heemskerck.

See also: Sodom and Gomorrah 48–49 ▪ Covenants 44–47 ▪ Entering the Promised Land 96–97 ▪ The Nature of Faith 236–41

provides fresh water, while the city's granaries are full to bursting with freshly harvested grain.

The faith of Rahab

To find out as much as he can about the city's defenses, Joshua sends two followers—Caleb and the high priest Eleazar—to spy on the city. Once inside Jericho, the men rest for the night in the house of a woman named Rahab near the city gates. Rahab, either a prostitute or innkeeper according to different translations, is soon faced with a dilemma. The Israelites have been spotted and the king's guards are in pursuit. Rahab hides the spies under stalks of flax drying on her roof and tells the guards that the men left at dusk.

When the coast is clear, Rahab helps the Israelites escape. She says, "The Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below" (Joshua 2:11). They promise that she and her family will be spared when the Israelites attack. She is told to hang a scarlet thread, or cord, out of her window as a signal to keep her home safe. The spies report back to Joshua that, although Jericho's defenses are strong, its people are demoralized by the Israelite threat.

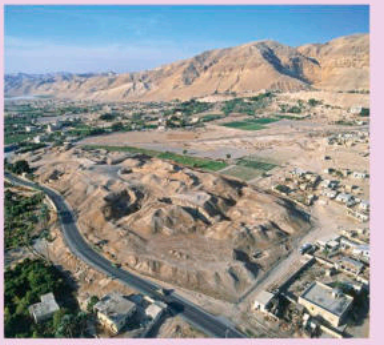
While Joshua considers his best strategy, a man carrying a drawn sword appears before him. Some biblical scholars say this is the angel of the Lord, but others argue that it is God himself. The figure tells Joshua exactly what he must do. He is to march his soldiers in silence around Jericho once a day for six days, bearing the Ark of the Covenant and preceded by the priests blowing rams' horns. On the seventh day, the Israelites are to march around the city seven times. The priests must then blow a last blast on the trumpets while the people raise a mighty shout.

> Cursed before the Lord is the one who undertakes, to rebuild this city, Jericho.
> **Joshua 6:26**

Joshua does what God has ordered. After the final trumpet blast and the shout, the walls of the city crumble and fall down flat. Joshua's soldiers storm into Jericho, slaughtering its inhabitants and then burning it to the ground. Rahab and her family are spared.

God's triumph

The Israelite victory is complete. God has shown the Israelites He is on their side and Joshua's unwavering obedience to God has allowed them to prosper under his leadership. However, the story of a city razed to the ground, its women and children slaughtered, unsettles many modern readers, to whom indiscriminate destruction is incompatible with the concept of an ethical God. The explanation, perhaps, lies in the conquest being a metaphor for the power of faith and obedience. The character of Rahab is key. Although she is a foreigner, and possibly a prostitute, she is redeemed through her faith and good works. ■



Archaeological finds at Jericho

One of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world, ancient Jericho is a site of considerable archaeological importance. Excavations show that the first settlements appeared about 8000 BCE and were repeatedly destroyed and rebuilt over the following millennia. However, while it is clear that the city was invaded at some point in its history, most archaeologists dispute the biblical account.

British archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon, who worked at Jericho in the 1950s, concluded that Jericho did not exist at the time Joshua is said to have conquered it. Jericho, Kenyon postulated, was destroyed, but it was by the Hyksos of northern Egypt in around 1550 BCE, about 150 years earlier than the biblical account. Kenyon's findings also suggest that the city wall, which previously had been dated to the time of the Israelites, actually dates from the early Bronze Age, 1,000 years before. However, the story of the Israelite conquest may have some credence. It is possible that the Israelites conquered a town that had sprung up on the ruins of an earlier settlement.

HAS NOT THE LORD GONE AHEAD OF YOU?

JUDGES 4:14, GIDEON AND THE JUDGES

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Judges 4–8

THEME
Deliverance by the judges

SETTING
13th century BCE During the settlement of Canaan, the Promised Land.

KEY FIGURES
Gideon One of the 12 judges. Chosen by God to help the Israelites seize victory over the Midianites.

Abimelech Gideon's son who proclaims himself king against God's will and sets in motion the next cycle of decline for the Israelites.

The Midianites A semi-nomadic people from east of the Jordan, who fight against Israel.

The story of Gideon is typical of the events of the Book of Judges. It follows a familiar cycle of disobedience, punishment, repentance, and deliverance, as the Israelites yet again struggle to remain faithful to their God. Gideon becomes the instrument of God's intervention, and his miraculous military victory serves to set the people back on the right path, if only temporarily.

Fractious tribes

The Book of Judges began as a cycle of sagas about tribal heroes. These were pulled together into a single book probably in the late 7th century BCE, with additions

See also: Moses and the Burning Bush 66–69 ▪ The Fall of Jericho 98–99 ▪ The Exodus 74–77 ▪ The Fall of Jerusalem 128–31

and revisions made after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. The book covers the troubled period in Israel's history between the arrival of the tribes in Canaan between the 14th to 13th century BCE and the establishment of the monarchy in 1050 BCE. Judges depicts the Israelites as living in fractious tribes; it is a messier but almost certainly more accurate picture than the preceding Book of Joshua.

The book proposes to follow the fortunes of 12 judge-deliverers, perhaps to match the 12 tribes. In fact, four of these receive only minimal mention. Along with Gideon, the major stories are those of Deborah and her general Barak, Jephthah, and Samson.

The people suffer

Gideon gets the fullest treatment, his story starting, in a familiar way, with Israel's disobedience: "Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and for seven years He gave them into the hands of the Midianites" (Judges 6:1). The effect of the Midianites and their allies the Amalekites is compared to a swarm of locusts in its devastation (Judges 6:5). The land is ravaged and the Israelites are forced to seek refuge in caves and valleys. From a historical perspective, this sounds like a description of the sufferings of settled farmers at the hands of herder overlords who exact brutal harvest-time tributes. The desperate Israelites finally remember God and cry out to Him, but His initial response is to send an anonymous prophet to remind them of His record of saving them and rebuke their ingratitude (6:7–8).

Following this, God (or His angel) appears to a young man, Gideon, who is secretly threshing wheat inside a winepress, hoping to escape the attention of marauding Midianites. The exchange that follows has parallels with the calling of Moses at the burning bush. The angel greets Gideon, perhaps ironically, as a "mighty warrior" (6:12) and tells him that God is with him. However, Gideon's response is bitter, and he says God appears to have abandoned the Israelites. The angel replies: "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?" (6:14). An alarmed Gideon, like Moses before him, protests his weakness and insignificance. The angel simply reasserts that Gideon is the one who is going to strike down the Midianites. »

Gideon's fleece is covered in dew by God's angel in this painting (*c.* 1490s) from the school of Avignon, France. This is one of several signs from God that convinces Gideon He is with him.

Deborah

As well as being the only female judge, Deborah is the only one shown exercising a judicial role. She lives in the hills of Ephraim by a landmark palm tree, where people come to have their disputes settled. The wife of a man called Lappidoth, she is described as a charismatic prophet.

In her time, Israel suffers under the Canaanite king of Hazor and his general Sisera. When God tells Deborah to call up the army of the general Barak, she rides with it into battle. A sudden rainstorm helps Barak's army defeat the Canaanites, but Deborah warns that honor of the victory will go to a woman. This becomes true, when Sisera is killed by a woman called Jael with just a tent peg. Judges tells the story of this victory twice, first in prose, then in poetry, in the Song of Deborah. This is believed to be one of the oldest Bible fragments, if not the oldest: a victory song composed possibly as early as the 12th century BCE.

The Israelites use loud trumpets to shock the men in the Midianite camps in this engraving. Alarmed by the noise, and the Israelites' faith in their God, the Midianites are forced to flee.

As in other Old Testament stories, the divine promise is followed by a sign: the angel touches with the tip of his staff some meat and bread that Gideon has prepared for Him and fire rises from the ground to consume the offerings. Terrified, Gideon realizes that he has been face to face with his true God.

Tackling idolatry

God's first command to Gideon is to tear down an altar to the Canaanite god Baal that stands on Gideon's father's land. He is to build a new altar to God in its place and then sacrifice one of his father's bulls as a burnt offering. Gideon fulfills this command by night, provoking a furious but ultimately futile backlash from his townspeople the following day.

A more serious challenge comes when a huge army of Midianites and their allies marches across the Jordan and into the Valley of Jezreel. The spirit of God comes upon Gideon, who blows a horn to summon an army from among the tribes of Israel. As the troops begin to rally, Gideon is nervous and seeks reassurance from God.

He takes a woollen fleece and places it on a threshing floor. The next morning, if there is dew only on the fleece and not on the ground around it, he will know that God does indeed intend to save Israel by his hand. As dawn rises the next morning, Gideon wrings a bowlful of water out of the fleece; the ground all around is dry. Still not content, Gideon reverses the test, and when, the following morning, dew is on the ground and not on the fleece, he knows that God is truly with him.

Preparing for battle

Gideon now heads an army of 32,000 men. But this is too many for God, who is determined that Israel should know that He, God, is the one who saves them, not their own military strength. God tells Gideon to ask anyone trembling with fear to quit now. Many men do—22,000 of them—but the fighting force is still too large in God's eyes. He tells Gideon to cut the forces further.

Gideon takes his army to the waterside. God has told him to note the men who go down on their knees to drink water, and those who stay standing and lap the water up to their mouths with their

Role of the judges

The 12 judges were sent by God to deliver his chosen people from oppression. Unlike leaders such as Moses, the judges were intended to provide only temporary leadership, and scholars believe that some of these judges ruled in different regions simultaneously.

Before Israel had kings, the judges were sent by God to act as both prophets and warriors—combining the spirits of both Moses and Joshua. The judges were skilled military leaders: Deborah and her general Barak, for example, led two Israelite tribes to a grand military victory in the late 13th century BCE.

The Book of Judges emphasizes a connection between military and spiritual matters. Without a judge, the Israelites often forgot God's commands and slipped into sin. He consequently made their enemies strong to punish them. When Israel was led by a judge, however, the people were brought back into God's service, and able to defeat their oppressors.

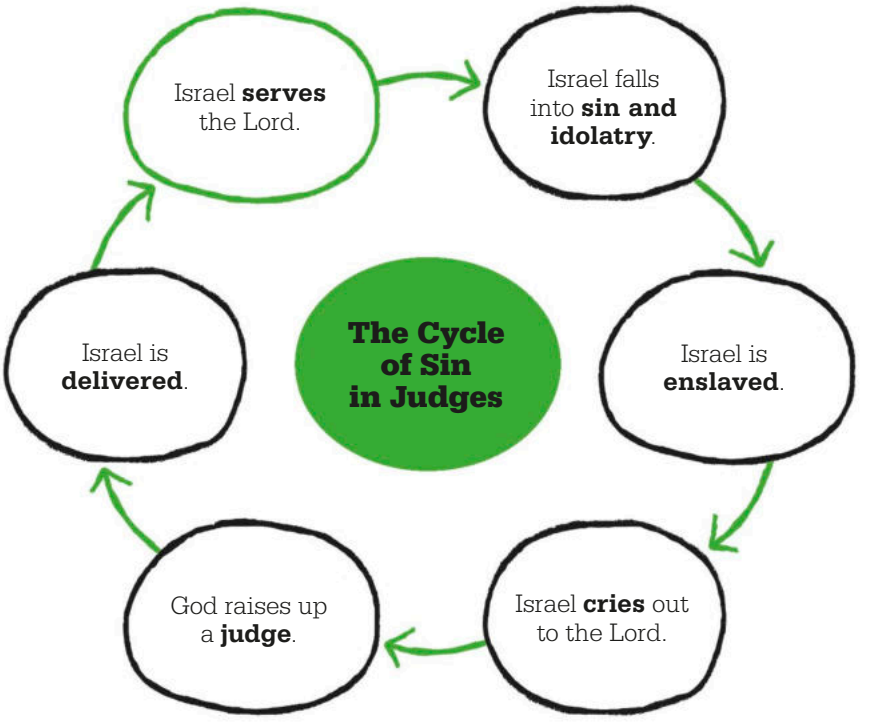
hands. In the event, most go down on their knees; only a small number use their hands. These few will constitute Gideon's army—a mere 300 men against a much larger Midianite force. The battle lines are now set. The Midianites are encamped in a valley near Moreh in central Israel. Gideon and his guerrillalike band are stationed on the hillside above.

On the eve of battle, God gives Gideon one last reassurance. During the night, he tells Gideon and his servant to creep down to the Midianite camp and listen to what they hear. Gideon obeys. He hears a Midianite recounting a dream in which a barley cake came rolling down the hill from the Israelite camp and upset a Midianite tent. Another Midianite replies that this must be a sign of the sword of the Israelite leader Gideon and that God has put their fate in Gideon's hands.

Seeing the low morale of the Midianites, Gideon returns to his men with renewed boldness. "The Lord has given the Midianite camp into your hands" (7:15) he cries, and the men prepare for battle. His tactics are psychological. He divides his men into three groups of a hundred, issuing each of them with a horn or trumpet, an empty jar, and a torch. They are to creep down on the Midianites from three sides, and when Gideon gives the word, they are to blow their trumpets and smash their jars to reveal the blazing torches. At the same time, they will shout: "A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!" (7:20)

The plan works to perfection. The Midianites are caught by surprise and stampede in their panic, turning their swords against each other. The mighty Midianite army flees in confusion and disarray.

> "The anger of the Lord burned against Israel … But when they cried out to [Him], He raised up for them a deliverer … who saved them."
> **Judges 3:8–9**



The cycle continues

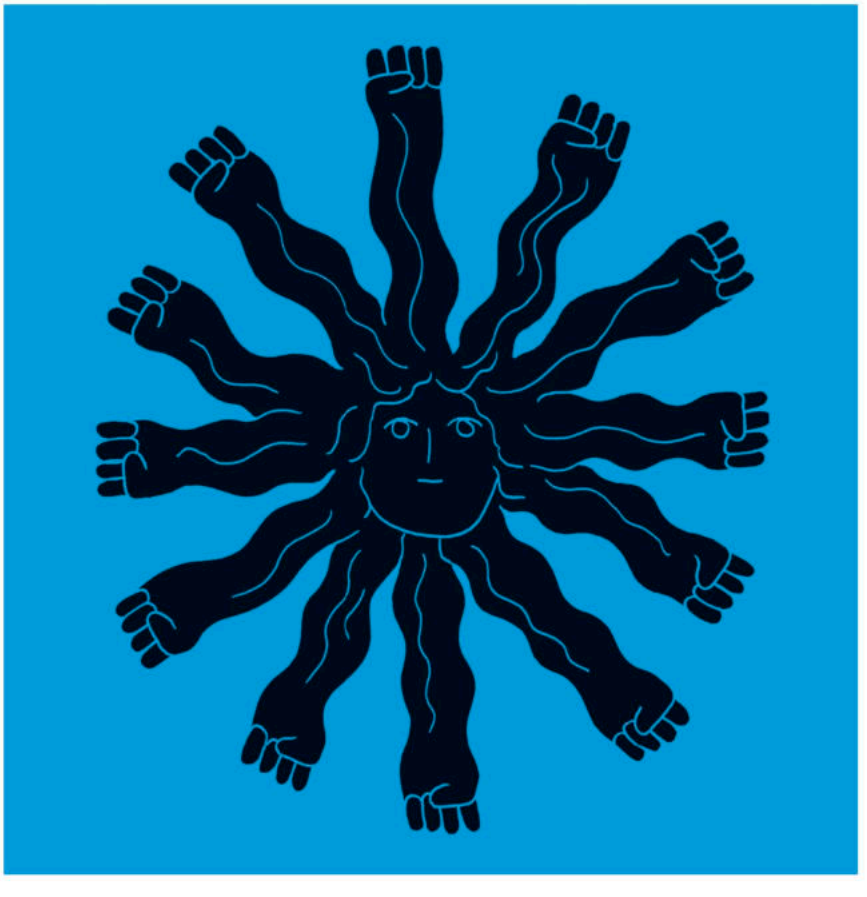
Behind this story lie two key biblical themes: God's justice and God's mercy. According to divine justice, disobedience brings punishment. However, divine mercy also ensures that the cry of human suffering reaches God, who intervenes on the part of the supplicant. The benevolent Lord continues to protect His chosen people despite their misdeeds.

God's deliverance temporarily restores peace and the grateful Israelites ask Gideon to become their king. Although he declines, he still accepts a lion's share of the gold taken from the Midianites, and uses some of this to make an ephod (thought to be a vestment for covering an idol). Judges records how "Israel prostituted themselves by worshipping it there" (8:27), and idolatrous actions begin yet again.

Despite this lapse, the peace lasts 40 years, until Gideon's death. It is broken when his son Abimelech does what his father refused to do, by proclaiming himself king. Other judge-deliverers are raised up, but when the people turn against the king, Israel spirals into violence, as Abimelech turns his army against them. ■

THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD CAME UPON HIM

JUDGES 14:6, SAMSON



IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Judges 13:1–16:31

THEME
Human weakness

SETTING
c.12th–11th century BCE The low country of Judah.

KEY FIGURES
Samson Selected by God to free the Israelite people from the oppression of the Philistines. He is immensely strong, yet deeply flawed.

Samson's wife Woman whose Philistine blood displeases both Samson's parents and God.

Delilah Temptress with whom Samson falls in love. Working for the Philistines, she learns the secrets of Samson's strength.

Philistines Oppressors of the Israelites, and Samson's greatest foe. They capture, blind, and enslave him.

Samson is the ultimate strong man of the Bible, but in some respects, he is also one of its weakest subjects. In classic allegorical style, the story of Samson's rise and fall exemplifies the magnitude of human weakness and the consequent need to heed the Lord's commands.

In Judges 13:3, an angel of the Lord visits Samson's mother-to-be and informs her that, although she is barren, she will have a son, who will deliver the Israelites from the

See also: The Prophet Samuel 110–15 ▪ David and Goliath 116–17 ▪ Daniel in Babylon 164–65

Philistine oppression. Samson's mother is warned not to drink any wine or other fermented substance, nor eat anything "unclean" during her pregnancy, as her son will be a "Nazirite" from the womb.

Nazirites, whose name derived from the Hebrew word *nazir*, meaning "dedicated to God," were Israelites who took a voluntary vow to follow Nazarite law for a designated period of time in service to the Lord. By contrast, Samson's oath, made on his behalf by his mother, lasts his whole life. Two key stipulations for Nazirites were that they must not cut their hair, nor come into contact with dead bodies. However, during the course of his life, Samson breaks all of these rules and more.

Samson's strength

In Judges 14:6, Samson encounters a young lion as he is on the way to visit the vineyards of Timnah—now called Tell Batesh—in the Sorek Valley. As the lion charges, Samson is endowed by the Holy Spirit and tears the lion apart with his bare hands.

Samson later returns to the scene of the carnage. As he passes the lion's carcass, he sees that bees have made a nest in it and gathers some of the fermented honey in his hands. Samson then eats some of the honey as he goes along his way. Here, Samson breaks two key Nazirite laws in swift succession: he touches a corpse and consumes a fermented substance.

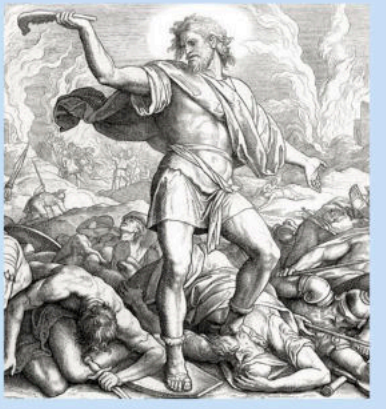
Endowed by God with superhuman strength, Samson becomes a leader and judge of the Israelites; he rules the people for 20 years. However, he continues to break his Nazirite vows and provoke the Philistines in a series of conflicts. This culminates in Samson burning their crops and murdering large numbers of them on behalf of the oppressed Israelites. Visiting the cities of Philistia, he also spends time in the house of a harlot, indicating his weakness for women.

Yet Samson receives God's support in spite of his misdeeds. God provides the strength Samson requires to fulfill his divinely ordained mission of breaking the Philistine yoke.

Imprisonment

Matters come to a head when the Philistines confront Samson about his rampages. When Samson replies that he is only doing to the Philistines what had been done to his own people, the Philistines take Samson prisoner. However, God once more comes to Samson's aid and he breaks free. Seizing the jawbone of a freshly killed donkey »

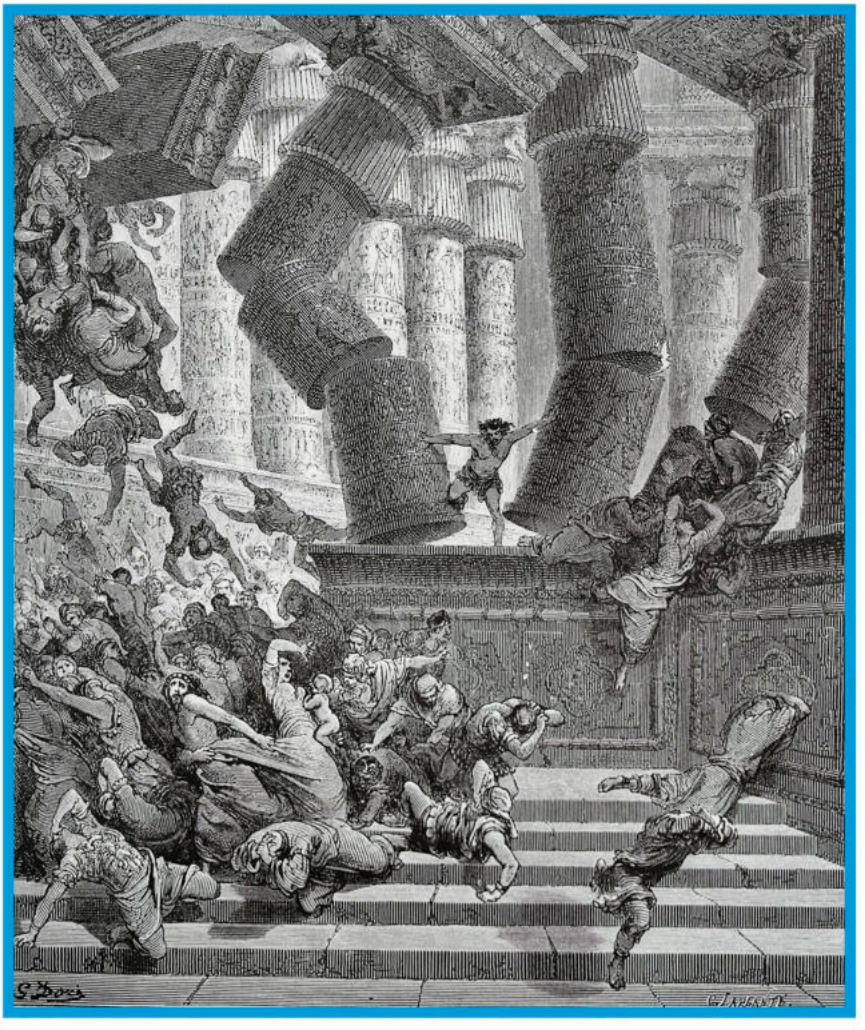
Samson battles the lion with his bare hands in this 18th-century icon painting from Kargopol, Russia. Many famous depictions of Samson show him bravely reaching into the lion's mouth to tear it apart by the jaws.



The Philistines

This ancient group fought constantly with the Israelites throughout the 12th and 11th centuries BCE. One of the Sea Peoples who raided the eastern Mediterranean in around 1170 BCE, they were based in the five city states of Ashkelon, Ashdod, and Gaza, situated on the coast of southwestern Canaan, and Ekron and Gath inland. Their origins are unconfirmed. It was once thought the Philistines originated from Asia Minor, but recent evidence supports a theory that they came from the Aegean island of Crete and settled in Canaan around the same time as the Israelites in the 12th century BCE. In the lead-up to the founding of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in around 930 BCE, the Philistines constituted one of the country's greatest threats.

There has been much debate about the meaning of the name "Philistine," which translates from the Hebrew *Pelesheth*, as "sojourners." The area they occupied was known as Philistia, believed to be the origin of Palestine, the name given to the area by the Greeks.



Samson's Revenge and Death is a wood engraving from *Die Bible in Bildern* (The Bible in Pictures) by the German artist Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld. Published in 30 parts between 1852 and 1860, the work contained 240 woodcut illustrations.

> The Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon him. The ropes on his arms became like charred flax and the bindings dropped.
> **Judges 15:14**

Samson lays waste to 1,000 Philistine men with it. He then mocks the Philistines as donkeys themselves. After this victory, God rewards Samson with a drink from the spring of Lehi—a place named for the great victory, as "Lehi" means "jawbone."

Delilah's treachery

Samson's fortunes change when he encounters a woman named Delilah in the Valley of Sorek. She is working for the Philistines, who are determined to find a way of capturing Samson. Delilah seduces Samson in order to persuade him to reveal the secret of his great strength, and how to take it from him. After several abortive attempts—and some creative lying from Samson—Delilah finally learns that if Samson's hair is shaved off, he will lose his strength. With the Philistines' help, Delilah cuts off Samson's hair while he is sleeping. The Philistines then rip out his eyes—a punishment to dissuade prisoners from rebelling—and tie him to a heavy grinding mill that he must heave in circles in order to make flour.

Meanwhile, Samson's hair steadily begins to grow back, and Samson realizes that his strength is returning. This fact is lost on his Philistine captors, who parade him in triumph at a temple festival in honor of their god Dagon. Three thousand Philistines are gathered in the temple when Samson positions himself between two great pillars supporting the roof. He prays to God for revenge on the Philistines for the loss of his two eyes, asking to die with his captors. God grants Samson the strength he requests. With a mighty heave, Samson pushes over the pillars, the roof collapses, and everyone inside the temple, including Samson, is consigned to a gory end.

Vessel of God

Biblical scholars have long debated the meaning of the tale of Samson. Some see him as a legendary hero, in the mold of Hercules or the Mesopotamian mythological figure Enkidu, or as an archetypal folk

Samson tells Delilah …	When Delilah believes him …
He will become weak if he is tied with **seven fresh bowstrings** that have not been dried.	He **snaps the bowstrings** as easily as strings held over a flame.
He will become weak if he is tied securely with **new ropes** that have never been used.	He snaps the ropes as if they are **threads**.
He will become weak if the braids of his hair are **woven** into fabric on the loom and **pinned down**.	He easily **pulls up** the pin and the loom.
The truth: Samson will become weak if his head is shaved.	Samson **loses** his strength and is **captured** by the Philistines.

hero. Others see him as a real historical figure. The biblical tale of Samson sheds light on how individuals can derive strength from God's spirit, and illustrates the fundamental nature of human weakness. The contrast between divine strength and mortal frailty is shown by Samson's story. Through God he is physically strong, but he yearns for and seeks out the company of women and breaks his Nazirite vows. This ultimately brings about his downfall; he fulfills the mission he has been given by God, but he is continually diverted by selfish impulses along the way.

Two important lessons can be taken from this story. First, it makes clear that God has the power to take a human being's selfish impulses, such as Samson's lust, and use them to accomplish His will. Although Samson's life ends in tragedy, he does achieve the goal he has been set. The story also illustrates the dangers of ceaseless retaliation. Samson and the Philistines attack each other back and forth, until all parties involved are destroyed by the endless cycle of vengeance. ■

Delilah, played by Hedy Lamarr, prepares to cut Samson's hair in the 1949 film, which cast Delilah as the vengeful sister of Samson's first wife.

Samson and Delilah in popular culture

The story of Samson—and particularly of his relationship with the woman from the Valley of Sorek, Delilah—is one of the most riveting tales in the Bible. The couple's love affair and her quest to uncover the secret of his strength have inspired artists, writers, and screenwriters. Delilah has been portrayed as a heartless seductress and a lover torn between loyalties.

Numerous artists, including Michelangelo and Rembrandt, have painted scenes from the lovers' lives. Popular literature, from *The Canterbury Tales* to Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, is replete with references to the pair. One of the most lavish representations of the lovers is Cecil B. DeMille's 1949 Hollywood classic *Samson and Delilah*, starring Victor Mature as Samson and Hedy Lamarr as Delilah. DeMille created an action-packed drama, casting Lamarr as a minx and Mature as a handsome but simple-minded hulk.

YOUR PEOPLE SHALL BE MY PEOPLE AND YOUR GOD MY GOD

RUTH 1:16, RUTH AND NAOMI

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Ruth 1–4

THEME
God's care for outsiders

SETTING
1250–1050 BCE In the Kingdoms of Moab and Judah.

KEY FIGURES
Naomi Jewish woman whose husband and sons have perished abroad.

Ruth The foreign daughter-in-law of Naomi who converts to Judaism.

Boaz Relation of Naomi's husband who becomes Ruth's second husband.

In the Old Testament, the story of Ruth and Naomi appears between the stories of the judges—military as well as judicial leaders—and the establishment of the monarchy through the prophet Samuel. Neatly divided into scenes that build to a climax, the book resembles a play, suggesting a single author intent on showing God's (and the Israelites') care for those on the fringes of society, even when one is a Moabite, a foreigner.

The first scene is set in Moab, a country on the east side of the Dead Sea, to which Naomi, her husband, and their two sons have fled to escape a famine in the kingdom of Judah. The sons marry Moabite women called Ruth and Orpah. However, within ten years of living in Moab, Naomi's husband and sons have all died, leaving her alone with her daughters-in-law. There are no grandchildren.

Ruth in Boaz's Field, 1828, by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld, depicts Ruth's first encounter with her redeemer, the landowner Boaz (left), a descendant of Abraham via Isaac.

Women alone

In the second scene, the famine in Judah has ended and Naomi decides to move home. She encourages her daughters-in-law to return to their homes and find new husbands. Naomi cannot offer her daughters-in-law levirate marriage, by which a widow marries the oldest surviving brother of her husband, as she has no sons. Naomi cares for Ruth and Orpah, who have both shown kindness to her: "May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband," she says (Ruth 1:8–9).

Orpah returns home, but Ruth stays with Naomi. In a celebrated speech marking her conversion to Judaism, Ruth says to Naomi, "Your people shall be my people and your God my God" (1:16), confirming her loyalty to her mother-in-law, her

See also: Joseph the Dreamer 58–61 ▪ Queen Esther 132 ▪ The Golden Rule 210–11 ▪ The Good Samaritan 216–17

The story of Ruth

Ruth, a **widow, who is also a Gentile**, has no one to care for her.

↓

She **converts to Judaism** and marries Boaz, a "guardian-redeemer."

↓

God **gives Ruth and Boaz a son**, Obed, from whom King David will descend.

↓

God even provides for and works His purpose through Gentiles, such as Ruth.

people, and their God. Naomi and Ruth proceed to Bethlehem, where they live as widows.

In the next scene, it is harvest time and Ruth takes the initiative to "glean," a form of charity that permits the poor to pick up grain left behind by the harvesters. Ruth chooses fields belonging to Boaz, a relative of her late husband, and a potential *go'el*, "one with the right to redeem." In Hebrew society, a *go'el* is a near relative who can protect a family in the absence of a head of household. This could mean buying their land to provide income (while still keeping it in the wider family), freeing slaves, or even avenging murder. Boaz is impressed with Ruth's hard work and loyalty to Naomi. Although his foreman emphasizes that Ruth is a Moabite, Boaz encourages her to stay in his fields, where he can ensure she is not harassed.

Ruth reports this to Naomi, who recognizes Boaz's status as a *go'el*. Naomi tells her to approach Boaz as he falls asleep, after the hard work of winnowing the grain. Ruth follows Naomi's advice, and when Boaz wakes, asks for the protection of marriage: "Spread the corner of your garment over me" (Ruth 3:9). Boaz agrees; but first, he must speak to her nearest male relation.

David's line

In the final scene, tension mounts before all is resolved. Boaz invites Ruth's nearest relative to buy land belonging to Naomi, on the condition that he marries Ruth. The man refuses, clearing the way for Boaz and Ruth to marry. The Lord then enables Ruth to conceive a son (4:13), who will join the line of King David. The story showed the Israelites that even Gentiles can play a part in God's purpose. ■

> "Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner?"
> **Ruth 2:10**

Shavuot

Falling anytime between May 14 and June 15, which is also harvest time in the Holy Land, "Shavuot" celebrates the gift of Torah to the ancient Israelites. It is associated with the Book of Ruth, both because of its connection to the harvest and because Ruth receives the gift of Torah upon her conversion to Judaism.

Shavuot, which translates as "weeks," a reference to the seven-week period between Passover and Shavuot, is celebrated with a feast. The Apostles were observing Shavuot when the Holy Spirit descended among them and gave spiritual gifts (Luke 22:12–13). Customs associated with the feast include the reading of a celebratory poem, the consumption of dairy products such as cheese blintzes, cheesecake, and cheese ravioli, and the decoration of homes with greenery. People stay up all night reading the Torah and there are synagogue readings of the Book of Ruth.

Members of the Samaritan faith, an ancient offshoot of Judaism, celebrate Shavuot at their holy site of Mount Gerizim near the West Bank town of Nablus.

SPEAK, FOR YOUR SERVANT IS LISTENING

1 SAMUEL 3:9, THE PROPHET SAMUEL

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
1 Samuel 1:1–25:1

THEME
Obedience to God

SETTING
c.1150 BCE The Tabernacle, which is at Shiloh at the beginning of Samuel's story, and then moved to Samuel's hometown, Ramah.

KEY FIGURES
Samuel Begins as Eli's prodigy in the Tabernacle, and quickly becomes God's mouthpiece to the Israelites.

Eli Priest at the Tabernacle recognized as a judge by the Israelites. Eli's two sons are known troublemakers.

Saul Israel's first king, who turns away from God's ways.

David Israel's second king, whose legacy as Israel's greatest national leader remains to this day.

Elkanah and his wives Hannah (left) and Penninah (right) portrayed in a miniature from an illustrated manuscript produced in Utrecht in approximately 1467.

For nearly 300 years, the tribes of Israel had been loosely governed by a series of leaders, called "judges," sent by God. It had been a chaotic period, as the Israelites found themselves in repeated skirmishes with the other clans vying for control in the region. Time after time, God had raised up a judge to restore order and bring military success.

Over the lifetime of Samuel, this tumultuous situation changed. Samuel was no mere bystander to this great transition; he was God's prophet, who was entrusted with the messages and actions that would lead to the greatest king Israel ever knew: King David.

God answers Hannah

Even before his birth, Samuel is promised into God's service. His father Elkanah has two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. While Peninnah has given birth to many children, Hannah, his favorite wife, has none, which causes her great distress. Each year, when the family goes to Shiloh, where the Ark and the Tabernacle are kept, Hannah cries out to God to enable her to bear a child. One year, Hannah prays with great fervor and weeping, vowing that if God hears her prayer, she will dedicate the child to the service of God.

The priest, Eli, notices Hannah praying as he stands in the doorway of the sanctuary. When she tells him she has been praying because of her "great anguish and

See also: David and Goliath 116–17 ▪ The Wisdom of Solomon 120–23 ▪ The Suffering Servant 154–55 ▪ The Prophet Jeremiah 156–59 ▪ The Prophet Ezekiel 162–63 ▪ The Prophet Micah 168–71

grief," Eli blesses her: "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him" (1 Samuel 1). God does respond to Hannah's prayer, and when she gives birth to a son, she calls him Samuel —"heard of God."

When Samuel is around the age of 4, Hannah takes him back to the priest Eli at Shiloh and dedicates him to God's service as she has promised. She leaves him to be educated and trained by Eli.

Samuel and Eli

The early verses of Samuel's story describe how he grows both in stature and favor with God and His people. Samuel's exemplary behavior is in marked contrast to that of Eli's own sons, who steal the offerings worshippers bring to God at Shiloh.

God plans to use Samuel to bring the old leadership of Eli and his sons to an end and establish a new period of devotion to God. One night, while Samuel is asleep in the Tabernacle, he is woken by a voice calling his name. Thinking it must have been Eli, Samuel runs to Eli's bedside, ready to serve his master, but Eli says he has not called out. Back in bed, Samuel hears his name called again, so once again runs to Eli. A second time, Eli sends him back to bed; he had not called.

After a third call summons Samuel to Eli's bedside, Eli realizes that the voice Samuel is hearing must be God's. He instructs Samuel to respond with the words "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" if the voice calls again. Samuel's life had begun by God responding to Hannah calling out to him for a child; now God is calling that child to become a prophet. When God calls again, Samuel answers exactly as Eli has advised.

> The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up … all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the Lord.
> **1 Samuel 3:19–20**

Eli's rule ends

God tells Samuel that the time for Eli and his sons to lead is coming to a close. Sure enough, during the next clash with the Philistines, Eli's sons Hophni and Phinehas are killed, and the Ark of the Covenant, which the Israelites had taken with them to the battlefield as a symbol of God's presence and protection, is captured by the Philistines. On hearing of these calamities, the aging Eli falls off his chair, breaks his neck, and dies.

By this time, the Israelites recognize Samuel not merely as Eli's successor, but as someone even more important—a prophet, through whom God spoke to »

Eli questions Samuel after one of the boy's visions in this 19th-century illustration. Most depictions of the two highlight Samuel's youth and vision in contrast to the blind and elderly Eli.

History of the Books of Samuel

Telling the Israelites' story from the end of the era of the judges to the final days of King David's reign, Samuel is split into two books. Although Samuel 1 and 2 both bear his name, the prophet only appears as a key character in the first 16 chapters of 1 Samuel. After Samuel anoints Saul as king, Saul's story takes up the rest of 1 Samuel. The only subsequent mentions of Samuel are before his death in 1 Samuel 25:1 and as a ghost summoned by a medium on behalf of King Saul in 1 Samuel 28. David's reign takes up all of 2 Samuel and continues in 1 Kings.

In the original Hebrew Bible, 1 and 2 Samuel were one book, but this was split into two in Greek and Latin versions due to the book's length. It is likely that the account was compiled from a variety of sources in the time of Israel's later kings, after around 600 BCE, to remind Israel's rulers that they must remain faithful to God if they want to rule well.

the Israelites (1 Samuel 3:19–21). After the capture of the Ark of the Covenant, the people come to Samuel in great distress as they look for a solution. Samuel tells the people to get rid of the idols they are worshipping and return to the true worship of God. The people listen to Samuel, and the next time the Israelites face the Philistines in battle, the Israelites are victorious.

Samuel is hailed as Israel's new "judge," to whom the people look for leadership. However, while Samuel is recognized as a prophet and a judge, his sons, Joel and Abijah, just like the sons of Eli, prove to be impious and unsuitable to lead God's chosen people.

Samuel the kingmaker

As Samuel grows older, the tribal leaders of Israel come to him and ask him to appoint a king to lead them, rather than passing the mantle of leadership to his sons, whom they see as weak. Samuel is displeased with the request. However, when he speaks with God, He tells Samuel to listen to the people, saying "it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king" (8:7). If the Israelites want to be just like all the other nations, He is willing to let them try. Samuel relays God's response to the people, solemnly warning them that a king is no substitute for following God, but they are adamant.

Samuel anoints Saul as Israel's first king, but Saul's period of good favor is short-lived. No sooner has Samuel handed over the leadership of Israel to King Saul, than Saul fails to keep God's commands, and Samuel comes to him with a rebuke: just like Eli and Samuel himself, Saul's own son would not become ruler after his death. Samuel's last and greatest act as prophet of God is to anoint a new king, a "man after God's own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14). This new king is David, the youngest son of a sheep farmer.

> "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the Lord?" To obey is better than sacrifice.
> **1 Samuel 15:22**

Samuel anoints Saul as the first king of Israel by pouring oil over Saul's head in this undated engraving. The ritual, described in 1 Samuel 10:1, marked Saul's receipt of God's spirit.

Samuel is a central character throughout this transitional time for the Israelites. He has the unique position of being the last of the judges of Israel and the first of Israel's prophets. As a prophet of God, he is first and foremost a spiritual leader, and throughout his ministry he repeatedly has to call the Israelites back to the true worship of God.

God's mouthpiece

The role of the prophet will become more important in the Israelites' history, now that they have a royal line. As Samuel himself has done, the prophets will speak for God directly to the people, and at times even bring messages of judgment on the kings. Although the Israelites were now "like the other nations" with a royal line, prophets remind the people that they are still different from these other nations: they are the treasured possession of God, who had rescued them from slavery in Egypt and led them to the Promised Land.

Samuel is God's mouthpiece. However, from his birth and early years, he also demonstrates the importance of listening for and recognizing God's voice. In the Bible, God's voice is often ignored, or misheard, and the Israelites' inability to stay faithful to the laws given to Moses on Mount Sinai is a constant theme. When this happens, they inevitably pass through difficult times. When God's words are recognized and obeyed, God blesses the people.

Bringing the words of God to Israel will never be an easy task, since God often asks His people to change the direction of their lives. Samuel establishes the role of the prophet as someone who listens for God and who speaks what they hear, regardless of the consequences to themselves. ■

Theocracy to monarchy

At the beginning of Samuel's story, Israel could be properly called a "theocracy," which means it was a family of tribes ruled (*cratos*) by God (*theos*). God had taken the Israelites out of Egypt and given them laws to live by. Whenever they needed His intervention, God would raise up an authoritative figure, or "judge," to unite them. In theory, this meant the people still viewed God as their king.

By the time of Samuel, many Israelites wanted a more stable leadership, and they asked for a king to lead them. However, they still faced problems under a monarchy—some kings led them well (like David) while others led them astray (like Ahab).

THERE WAS NO SWORD IN THE HAND OF DAVID

1 SAMUEL 17:50, DAVID AND GOLIATH

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
1 Samuel 17

THEME
God's anointing is greater than earthly powers

SETTING
Around 1020 BCE
Valley of Elah, Judah.

KEY FIGURES
David The youngest son of Jesse of Bethlehem. He starts off as a shepherd and rises to become a mighty warrior and second king of the Israelites after the death of Saul.

Goliath A giant from Gath who is the champion of the Philistines.

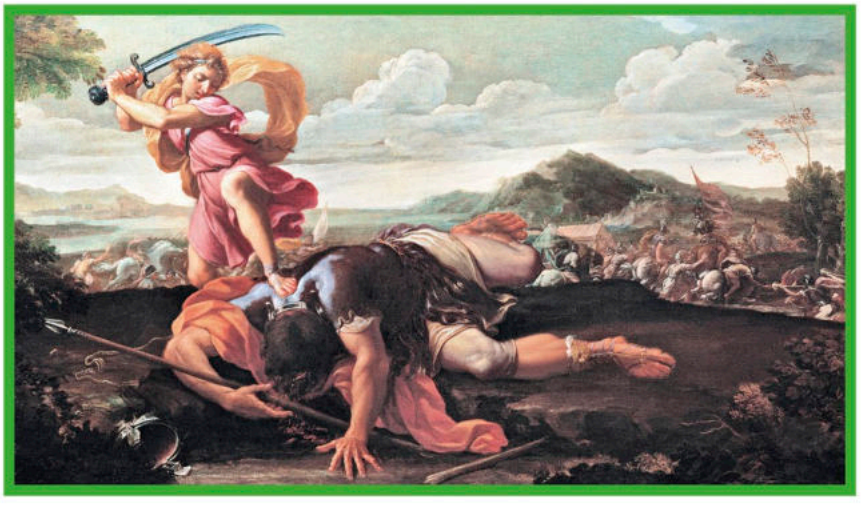
Saul Israel's first king, who proves to be a weak ruler.

Samuel The last of the judges and an important prophet who anoints Saul and David as Israel's first and second kings.

The heroic victory of a simple farm boy over a giant warrior is one of the most inspiring tales in the Bible. As the king of the Israelites, Saul, wavers uncertainly on the edge of battle, David's firm actions and his enduring faith in God grant the Israelites a decisive victory.

For 40 days, the Israelites have been locked in a stalemate with the Philistines, about 15 miles (24 km) southwest of Jerusalem. Each morning on the battlefield, a warrior named Goliath emerges from the Philistine ranks and bellows out a challenge to the Israelites, daring one of them to come out and fight him. Although sources differ on his exact height, Goliath is described as a giant, and any man foolish enough to fight him looks certain to be defeated.

David is tending sheep when his father tells him to take some food to his older brothers, who are serving in Saul's army. Although he is the youngest of his brothers,



David raises his sword to cut off the head of Goliath in this 17th-century painting by Guillaime Courtois. David's against-the-odds victory has inspired artists throughout history.

See also: Samson 104–07 ▪ David and Bathsheba 118–19 ▪ The Wisdom of Solomon 120–23 ▪ The Psalms 138–43

David's potential has already been recognized by God. As related in 1 Samuel 16, he has been secretly anointed by Samuel to be Israel's next king, although David is unaware of this at the time.

The arrival of David

When he arrives at the battlefield and sees Goliath's challenge going unanswered, David is determined to fight him. Although Saul has offered rich rewards for anyone brave enough to take on Goliath, at first he tries to deter David, telling the shepherd that Goliath "has been a warrior from his youth" (1 Samuel 17:33). David responds by telling Saul how, when tending his father's sheep, he fought off and killed a lion and a bear. David has faith that, with God on his side, taking on Goliath will not be a problem. Armed only with his staff, a slingshot, and five pebbles from the bed of a stream, he goes off to fight the Philistines' champion.

The duel starts with Goliath hurling curses at David, while the latter tells the giant he is fighting him in the name of God—whom Goliath and the Philistines have foolishly defied. "This day," he says, "the Lord will deliver you into my hands and I'll strike you down and cut off your head" (17:46). As the heavily armored Goliath advances, David seizes his chance. Reaching into his bag, he takes out one of the pebbles, slips it into his slingshot, and shoots it, striking Goliath on the forehead. The giant falls to the ground, and David uses Goliath's own sword to chop off the giant's head. The Philistines flee—pursued by the Israelites, who chase them to Gath and Ekron before returning to plunder the Philistines' camp.

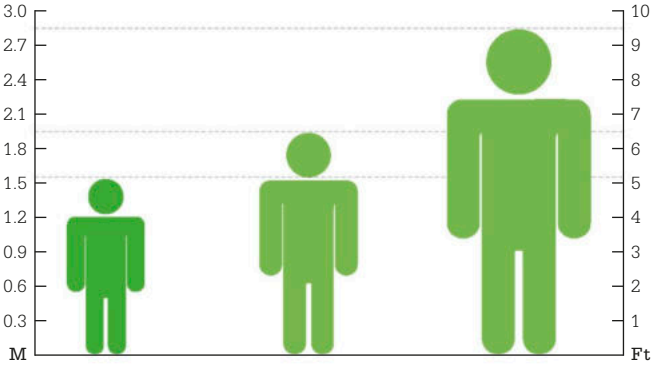
> You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty.
> **1 Samuel 17:45**

Saul's failings

David's faith in God allows him to defeat Goliath, and this story can also be seen as evidence of Saul's moral deficiencies as king, as he does not trust in God enough to have faith in victory. Although Saul rewards David by promoting him to a high rank in his army, he soon becomes jealous and begins to plot David's downfall. ■

Goliath's size varies according to the source, but it is likely that it was within human range and the result of a hereditary disorder of the pituitary gland.

Sizing up David and Goliath



David The average height of an Israelite, according to archaeology

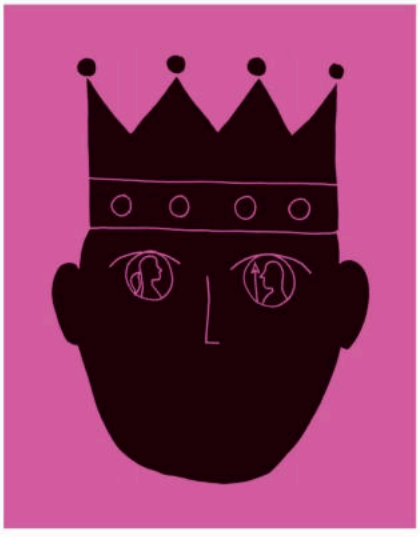
Goliath The height of Goliath according to the Dead Sea Scrolls, Septuagint, and Josephus.

Goliath The height of Goliath according to Masoretic text.

Clash of champions

David and Goliath's duel was not the only clash of champions in the ancient world, although it is the only one recorded in the Bible. In classical Greece, champions from Sparta and Argos fought the so-called Battle of the Champions in 546 BCE. It ended with both sides claiming victory. Much later, in around 133 BCE, Scipio Aemilianus accepted a challenge from an Iberian warrior parading in front of the Roman ranks, daring someone to fight him. Sources say the Iberian was a giant, while Scipio was a much smaller man. Nevertheless, like David, he prevailed.

In medieval times, the notion of champions became embedded in law. Trial by combat was used to determine God's favor and thus a person's guilt or innocence.



THE MAN WHO DID THIS MUST DIE

2 SAMUEL 12:5, DAVID AND BATHSHEBA

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
2 Samuel 11–12

THEME
Sins of the righteous

SETTING
Around 1000 BCE Jerusalem.

KEY FIGURES
David Israel's well-respected second king, who ascends to the throne after Saul's death. He sins against God by sleeping with Bathsheba.

Bathsheba The wife of Uriah the Hittite, who commits adultery with David and later marries him.

Joab The commander of David's army.

Nathan A prophet and one of David's closest advisers.

Uriah the Hittite A high-ranking officer in David's army who is married to Bathsheba.

Initially revered as a wise king, David is in the 11th year of his reign when he breaks God's laws. The events that then unfold warn of the dangers of monarchy if the king does not obey God—a theme explored elsewhere in the Book of Samuel.

David's transgression occurs during a time of war. Having secured the kingdom, he stays behind in Jerusalem rather than leading his army into another battle. While resting in his palace, the king spots a beautiful woman bathing on the roof of a nearby house. He immediately sends one of his servants to discover her identity. The servant tells him her name is Bathsheba and that she is the wife of Uriah the Hittite, a warrior serving in David's current campaign against the Ammonites.

Succumbs to sin

Despite his strength in battle, David gives in to desire. He sends for Bathsheba and sleeps with her. This seemingly uncharacteristic action by David shows us that even great men can struggle against sin. However, David's actions soon catch up with him when Bathsheba sends word that she is pregnant.

Adultery and polygamy

One of the most frequently and severely condemned sins in the Bible is adultery. It is mentioned 52 times, including in the Ten Commandments, where it is specifically prohibited; all four New Testament Gospels; and in ten other books of the Bible. Only the sins of idolatry, self-righteousness, and murder are mentioned more often. Leviticus 20:10 makes it clear how sternly God judged the crime, saying that "both the adulterer and adulteress are to be put to death." The method of execution was by stoning.

While God hates adultery, polygamy seems to be both accepted and commonplace. According to Genesis 4, Cain's descendant, Lamech, had two wives, while Abraham, Jacob, and possibly Moses are also polygamous. Scholars believe David may have had as many as 12 wives; Solomon, who "loved many foreign women" (1 Kings 11:1), had 700 wives and 300 concubines.

See also: Esau and Jacob 54–55 ▪ The Ten Plagues 70–71 ▪ The Ten Commandments 78–83 ▪ Samson 104–07 ▪ The Fall of Jerusalem 128–31 ▪ The Disobedient Prophet 166–67

Bathsheba inhabits a 16th-century world in this painting by Hans Sebald (1500–1550). She may have been taking a *mikveh*, a ritual bath performed after menstruation, when David spies her.

As both Bathsheba's husband and many other members of her family hold important positions in court, David wishes to avoid a scandal at all costs.

David plots

The king's first move is to recall Uriah from the battlefront on the pretext of wanting to hear a first-hand account of the war's progress. Once Uriah is back in Jerusalem, it would be only natural for him to sleep with his wife, who could then claim her unborn child as his.

However, Uriah decides to sleep on a mat in the palace rather than go home. Demonstrating a stricter ethical code than King David, he protests that it would be unfair for him to feast and make love to his wife while his fellow soldiers are away fighting.

David invites Uriah to dine with him and plies him with alcohol, hoping this will make him forget his scruples. However, once again, Uriah does not return home. As David gets more desperate, one sin leads to another, and his thoughts turn to murder. He feels desire for Bathsheba and wants to marry her himself.

When Uriah returns to the battlefield, the king gives him a letter for his commander Joab in which he tells Joab to order Uriah "out in front where the fighting is fiercest. Then withdraw from him so he will be struck down and die" (2 Samuel 11:14). Joab carries out David's orders and sends word that Uriah has been killed. Once Bathsheba's period of mourning is over, David promptly marries her.

God's anger

The Lord is displeased by David's actions and sends Nathan the prophet to confront the king. Nathan tells David a parable about a rich man who, despite his wealth, takes and kills a poor man's only lamb. When David condemns the injustice, saying "the man who did this must die!" (2 Samuel 12:5), Nathan replies tersely "You are the man!" (12:7) and denounces the enormity of David's sins. David repents, but God still punishes him. When Bathsheba bears their son, the child dies within days of the birth.

As well as showing how even the most righteous can fall into sin, this story is a cautionary tale about the dangers of power. Through committing the heinous sins of both adultery and murder, King David acts as though he considers himself above the laws of God. Only his true repentance for the harm he has done allows him to recover God's favor and even then, he and his family will continue to suffer the consequences of his actions. ■

> "Why did you despise the word of the Lord by doing what is evil in His eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own."
> **2 Samuel 12:9**

CUT THE LIVING CHILD IN TWO, AND GIVE HALF TO ONE AND HALF TO THE OTHER

1 KINGS 3:25, THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
1 Kings 3

THEME
God's wisdom through Solomon

SETTING
c.962–922 BCE
Jerusalem, the capital city of Israel.

KEY FIGURES
King Solomon The son of David and Bathsheba, Solomon rules Israel from around 962 to 922 BCE. He is wise, just, and devout.

King David The father of Solomon and the second king of Israel.

Two unknown women Described as prostitutes, the women ask Solomon to decide which of them is the rightful mother of a baby.

Queen of Sheba Her visit to Solomon is described in one brief biblical passage (1 Kings 10:1–13) but has intrigued readers of the Bible for centuries.

Zadok The first high priest to serve in the Temple.

Solomon is one of the Bible's most charismatic figures. His 40-year reign is widely regarded as a golden age, but it is during the first 20 years, when he builds the First Temple, that he proves himself as a glorious monarch and faithful servant of God. He fulfills his father King

See also: The Ark and the Tabernacle 86–87 ▪ David and Bathsheba 118–19 ▪ The Fall of Jerusalem 128–31 ▪ Rebuilding Jerusalem 133

David's dream of building God's First Temple and he turns Israel into one of the wealthiest and most powerful nations in the world by expanding trade and executing a program of construction.

From father to son

In around 970 BCE, King David passes the throne of a unified Israel to Solomon, his surviving son by Bathsheba. David exhorts his son to love and obey God so that the kingdom will prosper and their descendants will always be kings (1 Kings 2:2–4). Solomon follows his father's advice.

A little later (3:5), God appears to Solomon in a dream and says He will give the young king anything he desires. Modestly, Solomon asks only for a discerning heart and wisdom to distinguish between right and wrong. Pleased by this response, God grants the wish, and also bestows long life, wealth, and power "so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings" (3:13).

The wisdom of Solomon

As God has promised, Solomon is all-powerful and famously wise. He puts his wisdom to good use when two women claim to be the mother of the same baby. The women, both prostitutes, come before Solomon to plead their case. Their story is that they live in the same house and recently gave birth within days of each other. One woman claims the other has accidentally smothered her child by lying on it and then swapped the dead child for her living infant. Legally, the case is highly contentious. There are no witnesses nor any evidence, other than the word of one woman against the other. Both women are vehement in their protestations of affection for the child.

After listening to both women, Solomon devises a judgment that is simple but effective. He calls for a sword and gives orders to divide the child so that each woman can have half. One woman readily agrees while the other, horrified, pleads for the child's life. If only the baby can live, she will willingly give him up to her rival, who does not realize that she has exposed the emptiness of her claim by agreeing to the grisly solution. Solomon orders that the baby be handed to the woman who has given him up, saying, "Do not kill him; she is his mother" (1 Kings 3:27).

The Judgment of Solomon (1649) by Nicolas Poussin depicts the moment Solomon delivers his ruling. The balance of colour and form in the composition mirrors the justice of God and Solomon.

> God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore.
> **1 Kings 4:29**

Building God's Temple

Solomon achieves much during his reign—he fortifies the kingdom, builds a palace, and constructs a fleet of ships to boost maritime trade. His crowning achievement is the construction of God's First Temple, which takes seven years to complete. This Temple will be the dwelling of God and a safe home for the Ark of the Covenant. It supersedes the Tabernacle, built during the time of Moses and »

> During Solomon's lifetime Judah and Israel … lived in safety, everyone under their own vine and … own fig tree.
> **1 Kings 4:25**

used by the Israelites in the wilderness. Many detailed plans and preparations have already been drawn up by King David, who had wanted to undertake the project himself. God had told David (through the prophet Nathan) that he could not build the Temple because he was a warrior and had shed blood.

The responsibility and plans for building the Temple therefore pass to Solomon. David tells his son that these are divinely inspired, "All this … I have in writing as a result of the Lord's hand on me" (1 Chronicles 28:19).

Solomon builds the Temple, which, with pillars and courtyards, reflects the style familiar to the Phoenician craftsmen who worked on it, next to the royal palace to allow access between the two most important buildings in Jerusalem. This proximity symbolizes the king's status as God's appointed ruler.

Specifications

Although ornate and beautiful, the Temple itself is not particularly large. The specifications given in the Bible are expressed in cubits, an ancient unit of length, estimated at about 18 inches (45 cm). The Temple building is described as being 60 cubits long, 20 cubits wide, and 30 high, or three stories high, with a towering porch 120 cubits high. Modern estimates give the dimensions as 120–150 feet (35–40m) long by 45–60 feet (15–20m) wide. At the entrance are two bronze pillars known as Jachin and Boaz, symbolizing God's greatness.

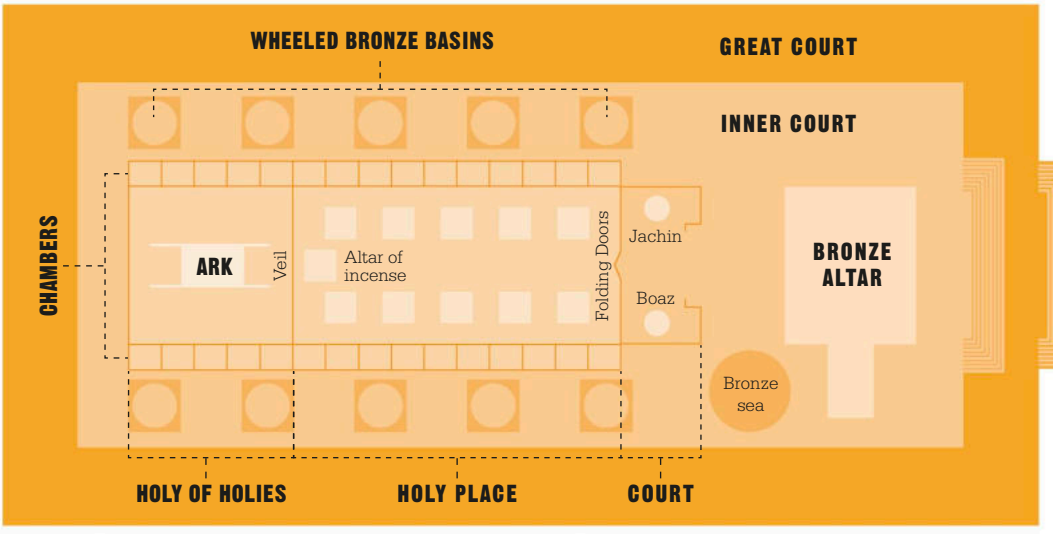
The complex consists of three main areas: the great court (1 Kings 7:9), where people assemble to worship, the inner court or court of the priests (2 Chronicles 4:9), with a large sacrificial altar, and the inner sanctuary (1 Kings 6:5), comprising the Holy Place (*hekal*), in which there are ten gold menorah, a table of showbread (for offerings), and a golden incense altar (1 Chronicles 28:18). Around the inner sanctuary are chambers for the priests.

Behind the incense altar lies the Holy of Holies, the resting place of the Ark of the Covenant and the tablets of the Ten Commandments. These are guarded by two huge statues of olive-wood cherubim overlaid with gold. One of the most striking features is the "bronze sea," a huge bronze basin that provides water for the priests to purify themselves, with ten wheeled basins for carrying water.

No expense is spared for either the construction or the furnishing of the Temple. Solomon conscripts 30,000 Israelites to build it, with a further 80,000 to quarry stone, 70,000 to carry stone, and 3,300 managers to oversee the work (1 Kings 5:13 and 2 Chronicles 2:2). Large, expensive stones are cut for the foundations, and the finest materials, including gold, silver, bronze, cedarwood, and precious stones, are used throughout. The

The Queen of Sheba

A visit to Jerusalem by the Queen of Sheba is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, the Qur'an, and the Ethiopian holy book, the Kebra Nagast. The Bible passage is brief but ambiguous. It states that the unnamed queen hears of Solomon's fame and wishes to test his wisdom. Traveling from the land of Sheba (believed to be modern-day Yemen or possibly Ethiopia), she arrives with gifts of gold, precious stones, spices, and incense. Solomon answers all her questions and she is impressed, praising God for placing Solomon on the throne. She leaves after Solomon gives her "all she desired and asked for" (1 Kings 10:13). Open to interpretation, this phrase could simply mean that she is satisfied with Solomon's answers or that she is carrying his child. Ethiopians believe that the Sheban queen bore Solomon a son, Menelik I, from whom all Ethiopian kings are descended. They also believe that when Menelik later traveled to Jerusalem to visit his father, he smuggled the Ark of the Covenant back to Axum in northern Ethiopia, where it still resides.



Solomon's Temple was similar to the Tabernacle but incorporated Phoenician elements such as the two columns "Jachin" and "Boaz," reflecting the input of architects and craftsmen loaned to Solomon by King Hiram of Tyre.

King of Tyre (Phoenicia), Solomon's ally and neighbor, supplies cedar for the paneling as well as labor. According to 1 Kings 6:7, the stone is finished at the quarry before being transported to the Temple, so that "no hammer, chisel or any other iron tool was heard at the Temple site while it was being built."

The priests move in

Once the Temple has been completed, the priests move God's ceremonial equipment from the tabernacle to the Temple and a feast is held for 14 days. From then on, a daily sacrifice of lamb is made in the morning, with a second lamb and cereal sacrificed by the high priest Zadok on the Sabbath. Singing and prayers are part of worship. Only the high priest is permitted to enter the Holy of Holies, and then only on the Day of Atonement (see pp. 86–87). Jerusalem is now established as a holy city. Zadok and his descendants control the Temple until the Babylonian Exile in 597 BCE.

It is difficult to pinpoint when Solomon's Temple was completed. The Bible says construction started in the fourth year of Solomon's reign and that it took seven years, which puts completion at around 964 BCE. Rabbinic sources say the Temple stood for 410 years, yet records show that it was destroyed by the Babylonians in around 587 BCE, 30 years earlier than those dates indicate. The most likely site is Temple Mount, now occupied by the Dome of the Rock, an Islamic shrine, where the Prophet Muhammad is said to have ascended to heaven. ■

> When the Queen of Sheba heard about the fame of Solomon and his relationship to the Lord, she came to test Solomon with hard questions.
> **1 Kings 10:1**

Raising funds for the First Temple

According to 1 Chronicles 22:14, King David sets aside funds and materials for the Temple before he dies. They included "a hundred thousand talents of gold, a million talents of silver, quantities of bronze and iron too great to be weighed, and wood and stone." In modern terms, this equates to 3,750 tons of gold and 37,000 tons of silver.

King David also appeals for donations. Gold, silver, iron, bronze, and precious stones are given by families, leaders of the 12 tribes, commanders, and those in charge of the works. Huge quantities of wood, especially cedar, are imported from Tyre. David promises King Hiram of Tyre to pay his craftsmen whatever wages Hiram requires; by the end of the project Solomon is greatly in debt and is forced to give 20 towns in Galilee to Hiram as payment (1 Kings 9:11).

I HAVE DIRECTED THE RAVENS TO FEED YOU THERE

1 KINGS 17:4, A PROPHET IN HIDING

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
1 Kings 16:29–17:24

THEME
God protects His prophet

SETTING
During King Ahab's reign (873–852 BCE) Samaria and the brook Cherith, flowing east of the Jordan River.

KEY FIGURES
Elijah A prophet of God who challenges King Ahab and then must go into hiding.

King Ahab The sinful king of Israel who rejects God and worships the Canaanite god Baal.

Queen Jezebel King Ahab's wife, who encourages him to worship Baal.

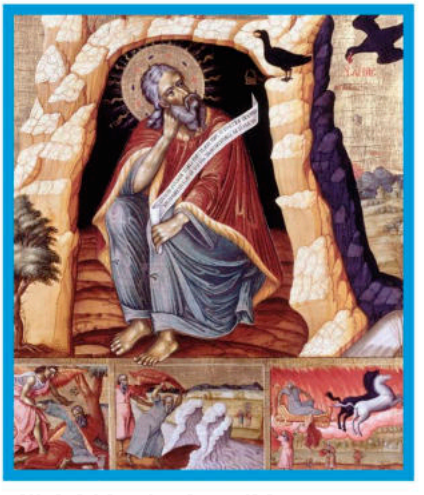
The ravens Intelligent and mystical birds that feed Elijah during the drought.

The prophet Elijah makes his first biblical appearance during the reign of King Ahab. The king marries the Tyrian princess Jezebel, who persuades him to set aside God in favor of the god Baal and the goddess Asherah. Although the Bible does not explicitly say so, scholars also suggest other acts of depravity are being committed at court, including ritual sex and child sacrifice.

It is at this point that Elijah arrives, warning the errant Ahab of a drought: "There will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word" (1 Kings 17:1). However, speaking out puts Elijah's life at risk and God tells him to go to the brook Cherith (east of the Jordan River).

Elijah survives by drinking the water and eating meat brought twice a day by ravens, as God has promised, until the brook runs dry. God then leads Elijah to Phoenicia and safety within the house of a widow, where, with God's help, Elijah performs a miracle by bringing her son back to life.

God's protection of Elijah in unexpected ways—ravens, which are unclean in Israelite law, and through the poor widow—shows His care for the faithful. Ravens also reference God's protecting love in Job 38. Their ubiquity in ancient Israel was seen as a sign that God's love is everywhere. ■



Elijah hides in the wilderness in this anonymous work from the collection of Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris. God sends ravens to bring him food.

See also: Ruth and Naomi 108–09 ▪ Elijah and the Prophets of Baal 125 ▪ The Suffering of Job 146–47 ▪ The Good Samaritan 216–17

GO AND PRESENT YOURSELF TO AHAB, AND I WILL SEND RAIN ON THE LAND

1 KINGS 18:1, ELIJAH AND THE PROPHETS OF BAAL

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
1 Kings 18

THEME
Authority over pagan gods

SETTING
During King Ahab's reign (873–852 BCE) Mount Carmel and the city of Jezreel.

KEY FIGURES
Elijah God's prophet, who challenges King Ahab to a religious duel in order to demonstrate the power of God.

King Ahab The king of Israel, who fails to recognize that the drought is God's wrath for his sins.

Obadiah The King's servant, who is secretly a loyal follower of God.

Queen Jezebel Ahab's wife, who seeks to kill prophets who worship God.

The story of the religious duel on Mount Carmel is a highly dramatic tale that serves to demonstrate God's power. The drought God had ordained has raged for three years when He tells the prophet Elijah to return from hiding in the wilderness and seek out Ahab. He promises rain will once again fall.

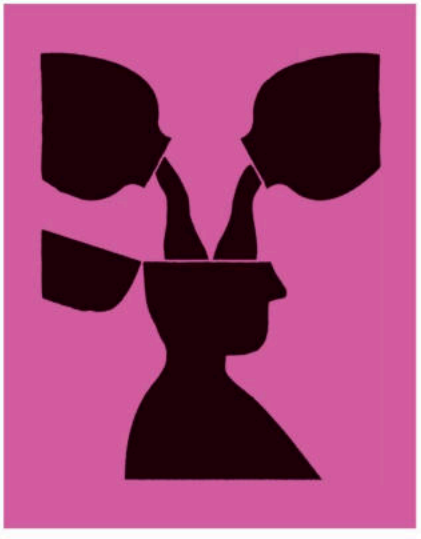
On the way, Elijah meets Ahab's administrator, Obadiah, a secret follower of God who reveals that he is hiding 100 believers from Queen Jezebel. Obadiah is afraid for his life, as he must reveal Elijah's return to Ahab. However, Elijah immediately challenges the royal couple. He blames them for the drought, as they have disobeyed God and instead worshipped Baal.

Test of two gods

To decide which god is the most powerful, Elijah proposes a public competition at Mount Carmel. The test for God and Baal is to incinerate a sacrificial bull. The 450 prophets of Baal pray, dance, and mutilate themselves, but are unable to summon lightning. Finally, Elijah takes 12 stones—one for each tribe of Israel—and builds an altar. He pours water over the wood, then prays. To everyone's amazement, a bolt of fire consumes the altar, even the water. Reminded of God's power, the people proclaim Him as the only true God. The miracle also shows how God answers the prayers of the righteous, as he sends the rain Elijah asks for and protects the faithful Obadiah. ■

> When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, 'The LORD—he is God. The LORD—he is God!'
> **1 Kings 18:39**

See also: The Fall 30–35 ▪ Tower of Babel 42–43 ▪ The Golden Calf 84–85



LET ME INHERIT A DOUBLE PORTION OF YOUR SPIRIT

2 KINGS 2:9, THE CHARIOT OF FIRE

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
2 Kings 2

THEME
The ascension of a prophet

SETTING
Around 850 BCE
Banks of the Jordan River.

KEY FIGURES
Elijah A prophet who urges the people of Israel to abandon their worship of Baal and return to the worship of the true God.

Elisha A faithful servant of Elijah and the prophet chosen by God to be Elijah's successor. Over the course of 60 years, he builds on Elijah's work by teaching the Israelites the ways of God.

Elijah's impressive exit from this world stands as testament to his importance as a prophet and faithful servant of God. Both he and his disciple Elisha know in advance that God will take him to heaven and are able to prepare.

Devoted to Elijah to the end, Elisha refuses three times to leave his master in his last moments. Elijah uses his cloak to part the waters of the Jordan River before asking whether there is any last request he can grant his disciple. The only thing Elisha asks of his master is "a double portion of your spirit" (2 Kings 2:9), a phrasing that references Israel's inheritance laws. Although land was shared out between a man's sons when he died, the eldest would receive a larger share—two portions of land. By asking for this, Elisha wishes to confirm himself as Elijah's spiritual heir and successor.

The prophet ascends

Elijah's ascension to heaven occurs quite suddenly as the two men walk together. He is swept away dramatically in a whirlwind, as a

Elijah

Little is known about Elijah's life before his sudden appearance as a prophet about halfway through the reign of Ahab, the son of Omri. This would put Elijah's emergence as a prophet at around 864 BCE. Mostly, Elijah's activities are confined to the northern kingdom, although he is forced to take refuge elsewhere when fleeing from Ahab's wrath. Throughout his relatively brief career, Elijah has one main purpose: This is to turn the Israelites back to the worship of the one true God and away from the worship of Baal and other pagan deities.

In the conflict with Baal's priests, Elijah aims to show the supremacy of monotheism over pagan polytheism. A man of firm and unflinching faith, Elijah constantly teaches that there is no god except the God of Israel, a statement backed up by the translation of His name, which means "My God is Jehovah."

See also: A Prophet in Hiding 124 ■ Elijah and the Prophets of Baal 125

burning chariot divides him from Elisha. Indeed, it is more of a disappearance than a death, and he later returns to Earth, along with the prophet Moses (see pp. 234–35). The chariot of fire Elisha sees has connotations with God's heavenly host of angels, which further suggests that Elijah does not simply die, but joins the ranks of God's faithful in heaven.

When Elijah disappears, Elisha cries out and rips his garments in two, an action that is often a response to calamity in the Bible. He picks up Elijah's cloak and strikes the Jordan River with it. The waters part, just as they did for Elijah, and Elisha crosses the river on dry land. Prophets from Jericho witness the miracle and proclaim that "the spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha" (2:15). They hail Elisha as Elijah's chosen successor.

Two contrasting leaders

Elijah and Elisha are both chosen by God, who empowers them to carry out miraculous deeds. Yet, their backgrounds could not be more different. Elijah was born and raised in rural Gilead beyond the Jordan River, probably in a poor family, whereas Elisha is the son of a wealthy Israelite landowner.

While there is no doubting that Elijah has the harder task of the two in rekindling the Israelites' faith in God and turning them away from the god Baal, Elisha competently carries on his legacy, counseling the rulers of the time and continuing to produce many more miracles in service to God. ■

> Suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind.
> **2 Kings 2:11**

A fiery chariot carries Elijah to heaven in this 16th-century Russian icon. Although the Bible mentions horses of fire, the presence of angels, seen here, is not explicitly stated.

SO JUDAH WENT INTO CAPTIVITY, AWAY FROM HER LAND

2 KINGS 25:21, THE FALL OF JERUSALEM

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
2 Kings 24–25

THEME
Exile

SETTING
6th century BCE Jerusalem, central Judah.

KEY FIGURES
Nebuchadnezzar II The conquering King of Babylon, who invades Jerusalem.

Jehoiakim Puppet-king of Judah installed by the Egyptians from 609–597 BCE. Father and predecessor of Jehoiachin.

Jehoiachin King of Judah for three months in 598–597 BCE.

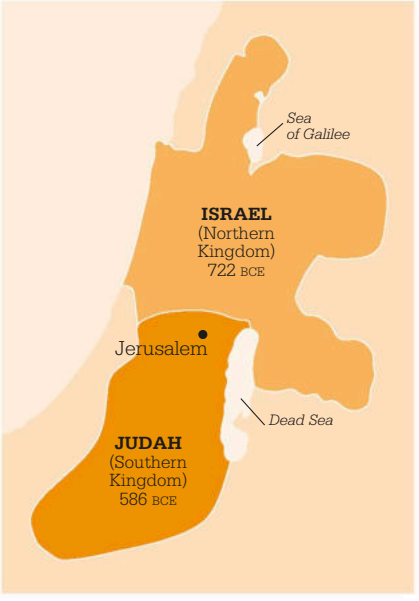
Zedekiah King of Judah from 597 BC up until the time of the Babylonian siege in 586 BCE. Uncle of Jehoiachin.

In 586 BCE, after a long siege, the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar II, capture Jerusalem, holy city of the Israelites and capital of the kingdom of Judah. The utter destruction of both the city and the Temple of Solomon mark the start of a dark period for the Israelites: a punishment from God for their misdeeds. It is nearly 50 years before they are able to return and rebuild their city.

These dramatic events are related at the end of 2 Kings, a tumultuous book, which recounts a litany of bad rulers, catastrophe, and the ultimate loss of the two Jewish nations (the Assyrians had conquered the northern kingdom, Israel, in 722 BCE). Jerusalem's

See also: Entering the Promised Land 92–93 ▪ The Fall of Jericho 98–99 ▪ The Wisdom of Solomon 120–23 ▪ Rebuilding Jerusalem 133

The Two Nations



fortunes have ebbed and flowed over the centuries, but the death of the virtuous King Josiah while battling the Egyptians in 609 BCE prompts a dramatic downturn. Josiah is a great reformer and a devoutly religious man, who serves the Lord "with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength" (2 Kings 23:25). His successors fall short of this standard and their weak and impious actions have devastating consequences for Judah.

Power struggle

After Josiah's death, the kingdom of Judah becomes a pawn in the struggle between the warring nations of Egypt and Babylon. Jehoahaz, Josiah's son and heir, is deposed and imprisoned by the Egyptian pharaoh, who then installs Jehoiakim, a younger son of Josiah, on the throne of Judah as his puppet. Egypt's power soon begins to wane, however, largely as a result of the threat posed by the Babylonians led by the conqueror Nebuchadnezzar II. He and his rampaging armies present a far greater danger to Jerusalem. As the Babylonian army approaches the walls of the holy city, Jehoiakim switches allegiances and pledges his support to Nebuchadnezzar in an attempt to appease him and persuade him to spare Jerusalem.

The arrangement works and for three years Jerusalem is unmolested. However, when a planned Babylonian invasion of Egypt fails, Jehoiakim rebels and incurs Nebuchadnezzar's wrath. In 598 BCE, the Babylonian armies attack Jerusalem and Jehoiakim then dies, possibly during the ensuing conflict.

The last days of Judah

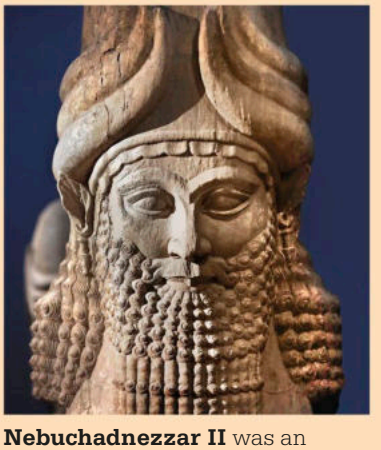
Jehoiachin, the son of Jehoiakim, becomes the new king of Judah at only 18 years of age. He rules for just three months before Nebuchadnezzar and his armies besiege Jerusalem once more, forcing the young king to surrender. Although on this occasion he spares Jerusalem from destruction, Nebuchadnezzar carries off the king, all his family and officials, and a further 10,000 Israelites, marking the start of what is known as the Babylonian Exile or Babylonian Captivity. He also seizes treasures from the royal palace and the Temple of Solomon.

Nebuchadnezzar installs Jehoiachin's uncle, Zedekiah, on the throne of Judah, where "Only the poorest people of the land were left" (2 Kings 24:14). The Bible makes it explicitly clear that God is »

Assyria and the divided kingdom

Dating back as early as the 25th century BCE, Assyria was a huge empire and an amalgamation of numerous Middle Eastern states that continually changed in size and influence until its eventual collapse between 612 and 599 BCE. At its peak, Assyria stretched from the eastern Mediterranean to Iran, as well as into Egypt, Libya, and the Arabian Peninsula.

Assyria played a key part in Israelite history between 734 and 724 BCE, when the 10-tribe kingdom of northern Israel (called Israel) was conquered by several Assyrian monarchs and many of the inhabitants were taken captive. During this 10-year period – known as the Assyrian Exile – the groups exiled by Assyria became known as the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel as, unlike those in the Kingdom of Judah, the northern Israelite tribes were never allowed to return to their homeland.



Nebuchadnezzar II was an Assyrian King of Babylon who ruled from c.605–562 BCE. During this time, Assyria was incorporated into the Neo-Babylonian empire.

The ancient city of Jerusalem lies burning after the Babylonian conquest in this engraving by 17th-century artist Jan Luyken. The people are led into exile as the city is destroyed.

unhappy with his appointment, Zedekiah "did evil in the eyes of the Lord, just as Jehoiakim had done" (2 Kings 24:19). Zedekiah is just as bad as his predecessors and leads the holy city further away from God, into the hands of its oppressors.

After nine years of presiding over a ravaged Jerusalem, afflicted by chronic famine and shortages, Zedekiah rebels against Assyria with the help of the Egyptians. His actions are quickly countered by those of Nebuchadnezzar, who marches on Jerusalem and lays siege to the city for 18 months. Jerusalem falls into utter chaos, with the famine in the city so grave that parents eat their own children in order to survive. Finally, in July of 586 BCE, Jerusalem's walls are breached by the Babylonians. Zedekiah attempts to escape, but is captured and forced to watch the murder of his children. The king's own eyes are then gouged out by the Babylonians, so that the last thing he ever sees is the death of his sons. Blind and defeated, he is taken to Babylon in chains.

Jerusalem destroyed

Over the following two months, Nebuchadnezzar orders a further deportation of the population of Judah and lays waste to Jerusalem. The city is completely destroyed, including the fortifications and the Temple of Solomon. The destruction of the Temple is especially significant. For nearly 400 years, the Temple had stood in the heart of Jerusalem as the ultimate symbol of the Israelite religion. Its destruction illustrates just how far the Israelites had strayed from God, and their failure to keep their covenant with Him. Having not heeded God's warnings, they now faced exile from their devastated city and were subject to the rule of the Babylonians.

A vengeful God

Although Jerusalem lies in ruins and the vast majority of its population is deported to Babylon, there is evidence to confirm that other parts of Judah continued to be inhabited after the exile. With the loss of their holy city and Temple, those who remained must have wondered how all this could come to pass. Why would God allow a nation of idol-worshippers—the Babylonians—to overthrow His own people, who worshipped only the one true Lord? The only

explanation was that Judah, and Israel before it, had neglected their worship of God. The Lord had repeatedly warned both nations that their ways were unjust and immoral, and they must repent of their own idol worship. He had made it clear that the penalty for failure to return to worship of Him alone would be exile.

The people of Judah had not changed their ways and now, as God warned in 2 Kings 21:12, a fearful judgment had come fulfilling the prophecies of Jeremiah (see pp.156–159). God's response to the Israelites' neglect follows a similar pattern to His treatment of Pharaoh in Exodus. In both cases, God delivers repeated warnings that are ignored. The judgment that follows is final.

As 2 Kings draws to a close, the situation is dire. The holy city is destroyed, the Temple has been obliterated, and all the most prominent members of Judah's society are in exile in Babylon. However, as if to offer a shred of hope after these harrowing events, 2 Kings ends with the release of Jehoiachin from prison, when Amel-Marduk succeeds Nebuchadnezzar as king. Although still held in Babylon, Jehoiachin dines at the king's table and is even given a regular stipend.

> "... Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble, the Temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets."
> **Micah 3:12**

Historical evidence

The biblical account of the fall of Jerusalem and the exile of the Judean people to Babylon largely corresponds with historical evidence. The narrative is corroborated by a wealth of archaeological findings and early accounts. These include a passage from the Babylonian Chronicles, a set of ancient tablets discovered in the 19th century that describes the sack of Jerusalem in 597 BCE, and also Jehoiachin's "rations tablets," which were unearthed from Nebuchadnezzar's royal archives during excavations in Babylon in the early 20th century. Evidence of the Babylonian rampage through central Judah in 588–586 BCE also includes pottery fragments, known as clay ostraca, and the world-renowned Lachish letters, a series of ancient Hebrew missives written in carbon ink on clay tablets, which were discovered during excavations at Tel Lachish in 1935.

The seismic events of the early 6th century BCE undoubtedly occurred as poor leadership and a difficult geographical position left the people of Judah vulnerable to their larger, more powerful neighbors. The Bible's message is clear about its cause, however. God's people strayed from His way and, as a result, were punished. ■

The failure of Sennacherib

The destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar II was not the first attempt to conquer Judah's holy city. Earlier in 2 Kings (18:17–35), the Assyrian King Sennacherib attempts to strike a deal with the people of Jerusalem that would allow him to take control of the city and become their ruler.

A hugely successful conqueror, Sennacherib has already colonized large areas of the Middle East and significantly expanded the Assyrian Empire. His reputation has made him arrogant, and he believes that taking Jerusalem will be a relatively simple undertaking. When making his proposal to the people of Judah, he blasphemes against God, saying that no god of any nation has ever been able to stand up to his might. Hezekiah, the king of Judah at that time, tells God of Sennacherib's heresy and his bold claims that he will take Jerusalem. He calls on God to deliver His people from Sennacherib and preserve the holy city. The angel of the Lord then goes into the Assyrian camp at night and strikes 185,000 Assyrian soldiers dead (2 Kings 19:35). Sennacherib is later murdered in suspicious circumstances by his own sons, and God is once more avenged.

I WILL GO TO THE KING … IF I PERISH, I PERISH

ESTHER 4:16, QUEEN ESTHER

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Esther 1–10

THEME
Salvation from unlikely sources

SETTING
486–465 BCE During the reign of King Ahasuerus. The Persian capital city of Susa in modern-day Iran.

KEY FIGURES
Esther An orphaned Jew who becomes Queen of Persia.

Mordecai Esther's cousin and her only family.

King Ahasuerus King of Persia and husband of Esther. Probably the historical figure Xerxes I, known as Xerxes the Great

Haman The king's chief minister and Mordecai's sworn enemy.

The story of Esther is one of only two books in the Bible that makes no reference to God (the other is Song of Songs). The tale of a Jewish queen who speaks up to save her people, it was likely included to show how even a silent God causes good to triumph.

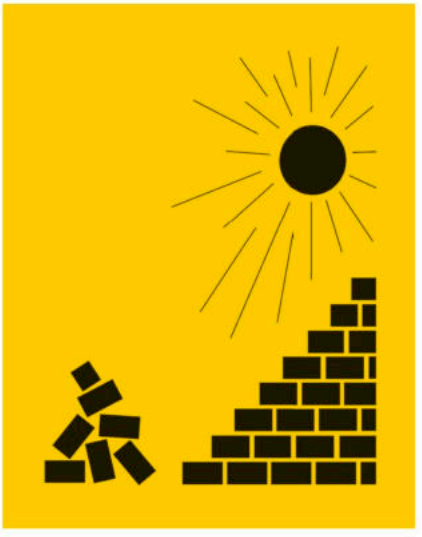
Esther becomes the wife of King Ahasuerus after he sets aside his previous wife, Queen Vashti, for refusing to appear before guests. A beautiful girl, Esther has been raised by a relative, Mordecai, but does not reveal her Jewish heritage to the king. The king is delighted with his wife and with Mordecai, who uncovers an assassination plot against him. Unfortunately, Mordecai offends the chief minister Haman, who vows to destroy all Jews and obtains a royal decree to murder and plunder, without telling the king whom he is targeting.

Mordecai asks the queen to intervene. She is reluctant, as it is punishable by death to approach the king, but the devout Mordecai believes God has placed Esther in her exalted position to do His work. At a banquet, Esther reveals her heritage and pleads for her people, thus fulfilling her divine purpose. To her relief, the king turns his fury on Haman, who is executed.

Although the royal decree cannot be withdrawn, the king allows the Jews to defend themselves and no one can stand against them. This event is still commemorated as Purim, named after the Hebrew word for the lots (dice) used by Haman to decide when to kill the Jews. ■

> Who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?
> **Esther 4:16**

See also: Ruth and Naomi 108–09



HEAR US, OUR GOD, FOR WE ARE DESPISED

NEHEMIAH 4:4, REBUILDING JERUSALEM

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Nehemiah 1–13

THEME
Jerusalem is restored

SETTING
c. 445 BCE during the reign of Artaxerxes I, king of Persia. Susa, the Persian capital, and then Jerusalem, capital of the kingdom of Judah.

KEY FIGURES
Nehemiah An important royal official who sets out to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

Ezra A scribe-priest who works with Nehemiah to restore the city of Jerusalem.

King Artaxerxes I King of Persia.

Sanballat the Horonite The Samaritan governor, who seeks to sabotage the restoration work.

Most scholars agree that Nehemiah's existence is rooted in historical fact. This great organizer and devout follower of God is credited with rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, as well as continuing to revive the city and its people's worship of God.

While serving as the cup bearer to King Artaxerxes I, Nehemiah receives his sovereign's permission to return to his ancestral homeland of Jerusalem and rebuild the city's walls. On his arrival, he organizes the wall's restoration, but struggles to motivate the demoralized and divided Jewish people.

Faith restored

Nehemiah and the Jews are also opposed by many disparate groups: Arabs, Philistines, Ammonites, and Samaritans led by Sanballat the Horonite. Agreeing on nothing else but their opposition to the Jews, they hinder their work on the walls through insults, scorn, and terror.

Nehemiah turns to God, praying for Him to acknowledge everything His people have had to endure, and his faith is rewarded. The wall is rebuilt in just 52 days. Nehemiah then gathers everyone together to dedicate the newly defended city to God and hear Ezra read the Law of Moses. The people revive the feast of Sukkot, commemorating the Israelites' years in the wilderness. Jerusalem is now reborn, with Nehemiah having corrected the disobedience to God that caused the city to fall. ■

The Jews hold weapons along with their tools as they rebuild the wall. This etching (1852–1860) by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld shows the threat of violence the Jews faced while working.

See also: Entering the Promised Land 96–97 ▪ The Fall of Jerusalem 128–31

WISDOM PROPHE

AND
TS

God gives Satan permission to **test Job's faithfulness** with a series of misfortunes.

JOB 1–2:7

Collections of **wise sayings** provide advice for young persons setting out in the world.

THE PROVERBS

Israel, in the form of the "**Suffering Servant**," seeks comfort and hope in God.

ISAIAH 52:13–53:12

THE PSALMS

Five books of 150 psalms express **praise and trust** in God.

SONG OF SONGS

The "beloved" and her companion ("He") **convey their love** for one another in sensual imagery.

JEREMIAH 1:4–9

God chooses **Jeremiah** before he is even born to be a **prophet to the nations**.

Two of the most crucial, defining moments in Israelite history are the "exile," when the Israelites were forced to leave their homes in Canaan and live in foreign lands, and the "return." The exile refers to several war-induced migrations, especially the ones resulting from the Assyrian conquest of Northern Israel in 722 BCE and the Babylonian invasion of Judah in 597 BCE.

In 538 BCE, Persia's King Darius I allowed the Israelites to return home. As they rebuilt the Temple, they reflected upon their identity as God's people. Questions arose about why God would allow them to endure such suffering, then reprieve them, and what this signified about their relationship with the divine. To process these conundrums, they wrote down, edited, and collected much of the Hebrew Bible, including the poetical and wisdom literature and the books of the prophets.

An eternal quest

The poetical and wisdom literature addresses the question of how one should interact with God and the world. These writings are particularly captivating because they leave the reader without a singular conclusion; instead, they contain a chorus of responses about who God is and how one should live. Psalms focuses on the nature of the divine—as creator, provider, and rescuer—and the human response: worship. The book includes hundreds of poems, many of which are praises to God or songs of thanksgiving for divine creation and provision. Other poems are dark and sorrowful, crying out to God for help in times of trouble. Psalms provides an array of expression, validating the range of human emotions experienced by the Israelites in times of exile and return.

The mystery of why bad things happen to good people is set out in the Book of Job, the account of a blameless man who loses everything. The story creates a murky picture of how God interacts with a being called the adversary, or Satan, who may share responsibility with God for undeserved suffering.

In contrast, Proverbs and Song of Songs focus on the practicalities and pleasures of earthly life. Proverbs provides commonsensical advice on how to behave, learn, and prosper, with wisdom exalted as a treasure to be sought above all

The **fall of Jerusalem** to the Babylonians is mourned in five poems, expressing anger toward God.

LAMENTATIONS 1–5

God **shuts the mouths of the lions** when the **Prophet Daniel** is thrown into a lions' den.

DANIEL 6:22

The **Prophet Micah** fulminates against the **sinful behavior** of the citizens of Judah.

MICAH 3:1–12

EZEKIEL 37:10

The **Prophet Ezekiel** has a **vision** in which a **vast army arises** from the Valley of Dried Bones.

JONAH 1:17–2:9

God sends a fish to swallow the **Prophet Jonah**, who has **disobeyed His command** to preach to the Ninevites.

ZEPHANIAH 1–3:5

The **Prophet Zephaniah** calls on the Israelites to **repent** and warns of the coming **"Day of the Lord."**

else, while Song of Songs is joyful love poetry, replete with erotic imagery and descriptions of physical intimacy. Ecclesiastes, on the other hand, asks philosophical questions about the meaning of life. The author wonders at the purpose of labor and education when, ultimately, everyone dies. Nevertheless, it ends with a thread that gathers the poetical and wisdom literature together: regardless of existential realities, one must always obey God.

Major and Minor Prophets

In the Prophetic Books, the Bible returns to the theme of suffering, which is viewed as retributive punishment for Israel and Judah's sins. The prophets warn the people that if they do not follow God's laws, enemies will destroy them, all of which happened when Assyria and Babylon came to power. Yet, during the exile, the possibility of return became real, and themes of hope and restoration begin to infiltrate the prophetic texts. The Major Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel) and Lamentations contain an expectation that God will dwell among the people, love them forever, and bring them home to a new Jerusalem in the future. Daniel exemplifies what it means to act faithfully as a Jew despite constant foreign opposition.

The same themes of doom and hope are explored in the Minor Prophets, while also emphasizing commitment to God. Jonah relays the message that God accepts all those who repent and do justice, even if they are not Israelites. Yet not all Gentiles are portrayed positively. God's threat to evil foreign powers is prominent in apocalyptic literature, and its emphasis on "the Day of the Lord," a terrifying end of the world when God will judge the wicked and reward the righteous, appears in books such as Joel, Micah, Zephaniah, and Malachi.

The idea of the Day of the Lord was later paired with a Messianic expectation that the earth will one day be ruled by God, and Israel will once again be a united kingdom in harmony with its neighbors and the divine. Many scholars believe Christians reordered the canon so that the prophets would be placed immediately before the New Testament Gospels, which used prophetic texts to support the claim that Jesus was the Messiah. ■

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD, I LACK NOTHING

PSALM 23:1, THE PSALMS

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
The Psalms

THEME
The prayers of the faithful

SETTING
From 10th century BCE In the First and Second Temples of Jerusalem.

KEY FIGURES
David The second king of Israel and Judah in the 10th and 9th century BCE. An enthusiastic sponsor of singers and musicians, he was known as the "hero of Israel's songs" (2 Samuel 23:1).

Asaph A Levite, appointed by David as one of the chief musicians before the Ark of the Covenant in Jerusalem. Thought to have founded a school or guild of temple singers and musicians, known as the "sons of Asaph."

An illustration of King David marks the initial at the beginning of Psalm 1. This beautifully detailed illuminated manuscript was made in around 1450 by Leonardo Bellini.

The Book of Psalms as we know it probably dates from the 6th century BCE, after the Jews returned from the Babylonian exile. It was effectively a hymn book for Israel, used in the liturgy of the Second Temple, where Psalms would have been sung to an accompaniment of lyres, harps, and cymbals.

The Psalms can be seen as the human side of a dialogue between Israel and its God. Often they are brimming with positivity, as in the ending of Psalm 23: "Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." At other times, feelings are bleaker and more raw: "You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths," complains the writer of Psalm 88. This broad emotional variance allows the book to cover a range of experiences relating to religious life.

Origins and usage

Like all hymn books, the Book of Psalms draws on earlier collections, many of them already hundreds of years old. Some Psalms bear marked resemblance to hymns used by other Near Eastern peoples—for example, Psalm 104, which has parallels with the Great Hymn to the Egyptian sun god Aten. This is more likely to be because certain types of hymns were common across the various Near Eastern religions than because one culture consciously

See also: David and Goliath 116–17 ▪ The Nature of God 144–45 ▪ Proverbs 148–51 ▪ Song of Songs 152–53 ▪ Parables of Jesus 214–15

> Why are you downcast,
> O my soul?
> Why so disturbed within me?
> Put your hope in God,
> for I will yet praise him,
> my Savior and my God.
> **Psalm 42:5**

plagiarized hymns from another. Many of the common Psalm forms were also used in Babylonian and Egyptian liturgies.

Clues to the earlier collections from which the Jewish Book of Psalms was drawn can be found in the superscriptions at the top of some of the Psalms. There are the Psalms of Asaph, for example, which possibly emerged from a tradition associated with Asaph, son of Berechiah, appointed as a temple singer under King David. Another group are the Songs of Ascent, which may have been used by pilgrims to Jerusalem as they climbed the Temple Mount. Although King David is known to have composed songs, the collection labeled Psalms of David was almost certainly inspired by him and events in his life rather than actually written by him.

It is hard to confirm any exact dates for the Psalms, but scholars emphasize their link with early Temple worship before and after the exile, and traditional Jewish festivals—especially those in the fall before the harvest. It is likely that at least some of these songs and hymns were composed specifically for festival use and would have played a crucial part in the ritual life of early Jews.

Thematic groupings

The 150 Psalms are divided into five books—possibly to reflect the structure of the Pentateuch—and each book concludes with a doxology, a short formula of praise, usually starting: "Praise be to the Lord …" They contain a variety of styles and themes. Many are about royal events related to the reign of King David—73 in total bear his name—while others are more prophetic in nature, or impart an obvious moral lesson. Side by side with grand hymns of glory and devotion sit the more somber Psalms, often of individual or communal lamentation. In fact, laments constitute a major portion of the Psalms—around 40 of the total 150. They almost always conclude in trust and praise, but in their initial forthrightness

> I love you, O Lord,
> my strength. The Lord
> is my rock, my fortress
> and my deliverer;
> my God is my rock,
> in whom I take refuge.
> **Psalm 18:1–2**

they say much about the heartfelt directness and honesty of Israel's liturgical life.

Crying out to God

The causes of lament vary from betrayal to imprisonment and sickness. They are often on behalf of a specific figure, who typically plunges straight into his complaint. "How long, Lord?" is Psalm 13's exasperated opening. "Will you »

Hebrew poetry

Almost a third of the Hebrew Bible is poetry. The narrative books are interspersed with poetic passages; large parts of the prophetic books are in verse; and most or all of Proverbs, Lamentations, Job, and the Psalms are poetry. Meter, as it is known in the Western tradition, does not exist in Hebrew poetry, nor does rhyme. Instead, its key building blocks are short lines in pairs, as, for example, in the opening of Psalm 24: "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it." The second line often repeats the meaning of the first, to create a sense of balance or symmetry. The effect is also cumulative, with the second line amplifying the scope and resonance of the first. Another device in Hebrew poetry—one that inevitably gets lost in the translation—is the acrostic, in which each line or group of lines begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Nine psalms are organized in this way, notably Psalm 119.

forget me for ever? How long will you hide your face from me?" In this case the psalmist's troubles stem from the activities of an enemy. Having stated the complaint, the psalmist then makes a petition: "Look on me and answer, Lord my God. Give light to my eyes"—the light of restored vitality and joy. To add persuasive power to the petition, he gives reasons for God to act: if God fails to help him, his enemies will say they have overcome the psalmist, which may reflect badly on his God. Having now unburdened himself, the writer of Psalm 13, as in many of the other lament Psalms, switches somewhat abruptly to praise, remarking, "But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation."

One possible reason for this sudden change of tone may lie in the context of temple worship. The psalmist's complaint and petition may have been part of a dialogue with a priest or temple official who, speaking in God's name, then pronounced an oracle telling him to go in peace, assured that God had heard his prayer. Whatever the reason, the writer concludes that God "has been good to me."

Historical laments

Other Psalms are of communal lament, many arising out of the humiliation of defeat. For the final editors of the Psalms, no defeat was more recent or searing than the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple by the Babylonians in 587 BCE. Psalm 79, one of a small number of Psalms emerging from that experience, opens with a description of the disaster: "O God, the nations have invaded your inheritance; they have defiled your holy Temple, they have reduced Jerusalem to rubble. They have left the dead bodies of your servants as food for the birds of the sky, the flesh of your own people for the animals of the wild."

> By the rivers of Babylon
> we sat and wept
> when we remembered Zion.
> There on the poplars
> we hung our harps,
> for there our captors
> asked us for songs.
> **Psalm 137:1–3**

It continues with a mingling of praise, repentance, and anguished petitions for salvation, justice, even vengeance: "Pay back into the laps of our neighbors seven times the contempt they have hurled at you, Lord." Elsewhere, the desire for revenge burns most appallingly in another psalm of the exile, Psalm 137. Its conclusion is a howl of bloodthirsty rage: "Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is the one who repays you for what you have done to us. Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks."

Joyous Psalms

Psalms written in the light of an answered prayer are usually more jubilant. Typically, they tell or suggest the whole story:

Hymns are sung at the Sunday celebration at the Celestial Church of Christ, Missessinto, in Benin, Africa. Psalms have been used in devotional worship since the early Church.

Psalms and their authors	
Psalms 1, 2, 10, 33, 43, 66, 67, 71, 91–100, 102, 104–07, 111–18, 119, 120, 121, 123, 125, 126, 128–30, 132, 134–37, 146–50	**Unknown**
Psalms 3–9, 11–32, 34–41, 51–65, 68–70, 86, 101, 103, 108–10, 122, 124, 131, 133, 138–45	**David**
Psalms 42, 44–49, 84–85, 87	**Sons of Korah**
Psalms 50, 73–83	**Asaph**
Psalms 72, 127	**Solomon**
Psalm 88	**Sons of Korah and Heman**
Psalm 89	**Ethan the Ezrahite**
Psalm 90	**Moses**

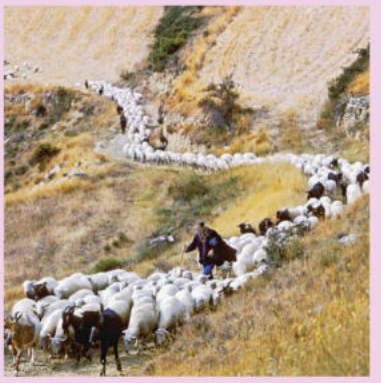
the trouble the psalmist was suffering, how he made a lament to God, and how God wonderfully intervened. "I will exalt you, Lord," begins Psalm 30, "for you lifted me out the depths and did not let my enemies gloat over me." Despite the reference to his enemies, the psalmist's distress seems to have been a sickness that brought him close to death. He cried to God for help, and God healed him, sparing him "from going down into the pit." The conclusion here is a shout of praise and thanksgiving: "You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent."

Songs of praise

Hymns of collective praise are among the most majestic of the Psalms. They tend to have the simplest structures: a summons to praise God, followed by reasons for that praise. "Praise the Lord, all you nations; extol him, all you peoples," the shortest psalm of all, Psalm 117, commands: "For great is His love toward us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever." In other cases, the opening summons leads to a list of God's interventions on Israel's behalf.

Perhaps the most beautiful Psalms are the songs of creation, such as Psalm 104, which elicit praise by extolling the creator-God. He is the God who "makes the clouds His chariot and rides on the wings of the wind." Not only does creation reflect His splendor, but also His provision for humankind: "He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for people to cultivate—bringing forth food from the earth."

What is remarkable about the Psalms is the energy and feeling behind the words. Whether they are praising or petitioning God, they each show a very human side of the Bible, where people are unafraid to confess their multifaceted emotions to a benevolent Lord. ■



A shepherd and his flock

The image of a leader as a shepherd goes back to the 3rd millennium BCE when the kings of Sumer in Mesopotamia described themselves as shepherds of their people. In societies where herders were part of everyday life, it was an obvious comparison to make, and other nations followed this example.

For the Israelites, David was the archetypal shepherd-king, who literally started life as a shepherd. But above him was the one who fulfilled that role supremely: God (as stated in Psalm 23). In the 6th century BCE, during the Babylonian Exile, the prophet Ezekiel used the imagery of a shepherd in a furious tirade against Israel's leadership: "Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! … you do not take care of the flock." Jesus continued the tradition, describing the crowds who followed Him as "like sheep without a shepherd," and later referring to himself as a "good shepherd [who] lays down His life for the sheep." The image lives on to this day in the word "pastor," Latin for "shepherd."

FROM EVERLASTING TO EVERLASTING YOU ARE GOD

PSALM 90:2, THE NATURE OF GOD

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Psalm 90

THEME
God's nature

SETTING
The universe All of which is created by God.

KEY FIGURES
Moses God's servant, to whom Psalm 90 is attributed.

Unlike any other ancient Near Eastern religion, the Israelite one had no family tree of the divine or account of how God came into being. The first verse of the Bible simply assumes God as creator of the world, a source of being beyond whom there is no other: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."

Psalm 90—which the Bible attributes to "Moses the man of God"—picks up this concept: "Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God." The sentiment behind the phrase "everlasting to everlasting" is repeated in many of the names given to God by his followers. He is "Alpha and Omega," the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. He is *kadosh*, or holy, in Hebrew, meaning transcendent, beyond and above all normal experience.

Yet He is not cut off from humanity in some other realm. His *kavod,* glory, dwells within his creation, pervading and sustaining it—which is perhaps why, in Psalm 90, the author tells God: "Lord, you have been our dwelling place" (Psalm 90:1). The prophet Isaiah combines these two concepts in an exclamation of wonder: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isaiah 6:3).

Wrathful God

Psalm 90 also teaches us more about the wrathful nature of God, as experienced by the ancient

God's glory dwells in the physical realm, according to Isaiah. As the creator of the vast and beautiful world that His people inhabit, Earth itself becomes a symbol of His might.

See also: Only One God 90–91 ▪ The Psalms 138–43 ▪ The Lord's Prayer 212–13

The names and nature of God

Judaism	The Jewish tradition has many names for God, which recognize different attributes: from *shaddai* (judge) to *kano* (jealous) to *tzevaot* (one who battles the wicked).
Christianity	The New Testament places a greater emphasis on calling God "Father," and Christians see God as having this intimate, paternal role in their lives.
Islam	Muslims use the name *Allah*, which simply means "the one God." The belief that there is no other God but God ("*la ilaha ilallah*") is the central tenet of the Islamic faith.

Israelites. The prayer emphasizes the greatness of His anger: "If only we knew the power of your anger! Your wrath is as great as the fear that is your due" (Psalm 90:11). The author describes the people as fearing God's wrath above all else: "We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation" (Psalm 90:7).

Collaborative nature

Relationships are at the heart of God's being. Even in the divine realm, He appears to enjoy some kind of companionship. There is a plural, for example, in the first creation account: "Let *us* make man in *our* image" (Genesis 2:26–28). From humans, God appears to seek collaboration, dialogue, and even friendship. His actions are responses to people's behavior or appeals. "I have heard them crying out," he tells Moses at the burning bush, "so I have come down to rescue them." God chooses a human, Moses, to carry out the rescue of his people, allowing God to work with and through him.

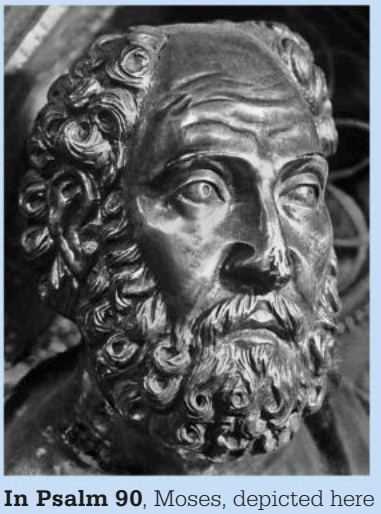
Unavoidably, the relationship brings conflict. God does not hesitate to punish His chosen people when they stray from obedience. Still, as Psalm 90 attests, God is capable of compassion: "Satisfy us … with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy" (90:14). Although the relationship between God and His people sometimes breaks down, God loves His people, and is always working to repair it. ■

> The Lord is near to all who call on Him, to all who call on Him in truth. He fulfills the desires of those who fear Him; He hears their cry and saves them.
> **Psalm 145:18–19**

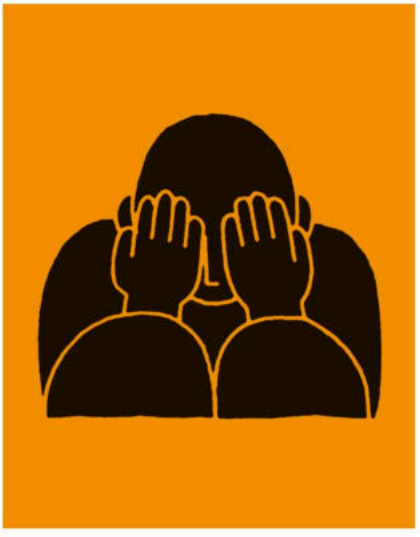
An emotional God

The biblical writers are not afraid to give God certain human attributes, including emotions. The first chapter of Genesis shows God feeling satisfaction: "God saw all that He had made, and it was very good." A few chapters later, this joy turned to regret and grief. Faced with human corruption before the Flood, the "Lord was grieved that He had made man … His heart was filled with pain."

Expressions of God's love are as frequent in the Bible as his anger: the prophet Amos describes a fiery display of God's revulsion at rituals performed without holiness of heart. "I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies." However, He is shown to be open to changing His mind when His heart is appealed to: "My heart is changed within me," God tells the prophet Hosea; "all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger."



In Psalm 90, Moses, depicted here in a sculpture by Michelangelo in Rome's San Pietro in Vicoli basilica, describes God's compassion and anger, as well as his omnipotence.



HAVE YOU CONSIDERED MY SERVANT JOB? THERE IS NO ONE ON EARTH LIKE HIM

JOB 2:3, THE SUFFERING OF JOB

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Job 1–42

THEME
The nature of suffering

SETTING
c.2000–1000 BCE Southern Edom or northern Arabia.

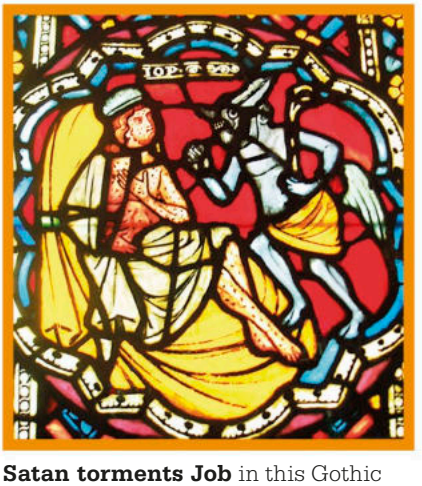
KEY FIGURES
Job A devoted servant of God, who is prosperous, fortunate, and righteous, yet faces terrible suffering at the hands of both Satan and God.

Bildad, Eliphaz, and Zophar Three of Job's friends, who come to comfort and debate with him.

Satan An adversary of God and His angels. He questions Job's constancy and offers God a bet on his faithfulness.

The Book of Job is one of the most engaging books of the Bible, as it deals in an accessible and dramatic way, using poetry and prose, with one of the great philosophical challenges of the Bible—if God is ethical, why do bad things happen to good people? Attempts to answer this question are called "theodicy."

Job is a shining example of God's perfect servant. He is "blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil" (Job 1:1).



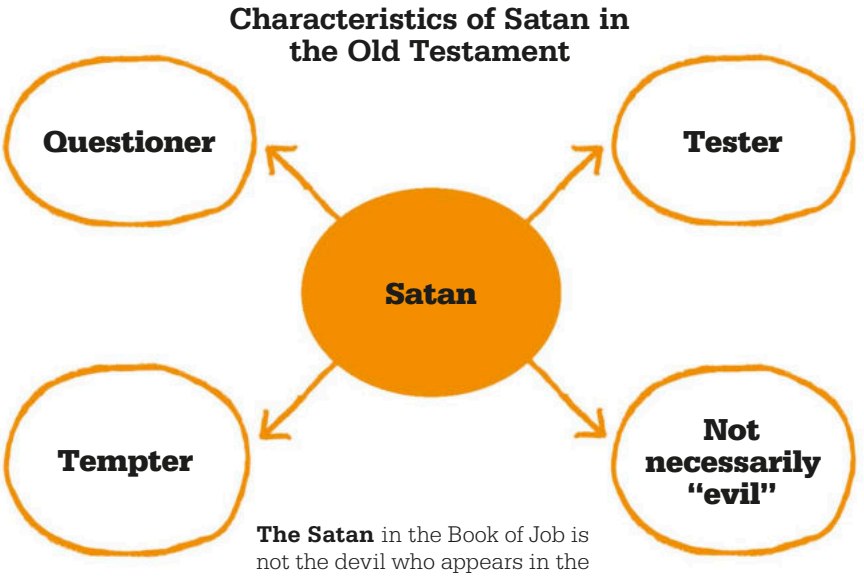
Satan torments Job in this Gothic stained-glass window from the former Dominican Church of Strasbourg. Job's skin is shown covered in the painful sores he endures as part of his trials.

He is also blessed with numerous children, livestock, and servants. However, his entire life soon falls apart. One day, when God is holding court in heaven, he is attended by Satan, "the adversary." They discuss Job, whom God describes as uniquely faithful. Satan disagrees, contending that Job is only loyal because God protects him and gives him everything he wants. He makes a bet with God that if he is permitted to take away all of Job's possessions, Job will lose faith and curse God. This bet serves to illustrate the wider theme of the Book of Job: that goodness is hollow and worthless if it is only in search of reward.

Tests of faith

A series of disasters then befall Job. He first discovers that his oxen and donkeys have all been taken. Next, all his sheep perish in a fire. Third, his camels are stolen during an army raid. By this time, all his servants but one have perished. Finally, Job learns that a house has collapsed on all ten of his children and they have also died. Job is distraught, but refuses to curse God. In fact, such is the extent of his faith that he still

See also: The Temptations of Christ 198–99 ▪ The Way of Love 296–97



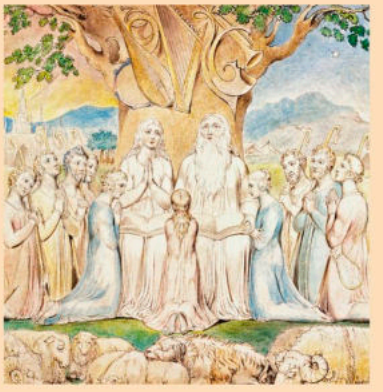
The Satan in the Book of Job is not the devil who appears in the New Testament. Here "Satan" refers to an adversary or an opposer.

acknowledges God in his misery. The adversary does not easily give up on his bet. This time, he challenges God to harm Job in person. God duly afflicts Job with sores from head to toe. The pain is great, and Job scrapes his skin with broken pottery and sits in a pile of ashes, possibly in grief or to signal his repentance. Appalled by his suffering, Job's wife urges him to curse God and die. However, still Job will not speak ill of the Lord.

Three of Job's friends, Eliphaz, Zophar, and Bildad, arrive to comfort Job. The four companions discuss the situation, and conclude that Job must have sinned greatly to have incurred God's wrath to such a degree. The narrative then becomes more philosophical, challenging the long-standing wisdom of the time that prosperity was an indication of piety and suffering a punishment for sin. Job insists that he has not sinned and challenges God to a fair trial. God appears to him and asks a series of questions, but Job realizes that his human brain is no match for God's wisdom and repents. In light of Job's unbreakable faith, God restores everything that Job had possessed, and more, blessing "the latter part of Job's life more than the former part" (42:12).

The mysteries of life

While the Bible often offers clear-cut solutions to vexing questions, Job presents a challenging debate on the purpose of suffering. The book serves to illustrate that suffering is a natural component of human life, and that it is how the righteous respond to that suffering that defines the strength of their faith. Ultimately, Job accepts that the mysteries of the divine, and by extension the reasoning behind suffering, are beyond human comprehension. ■



The Book of Job

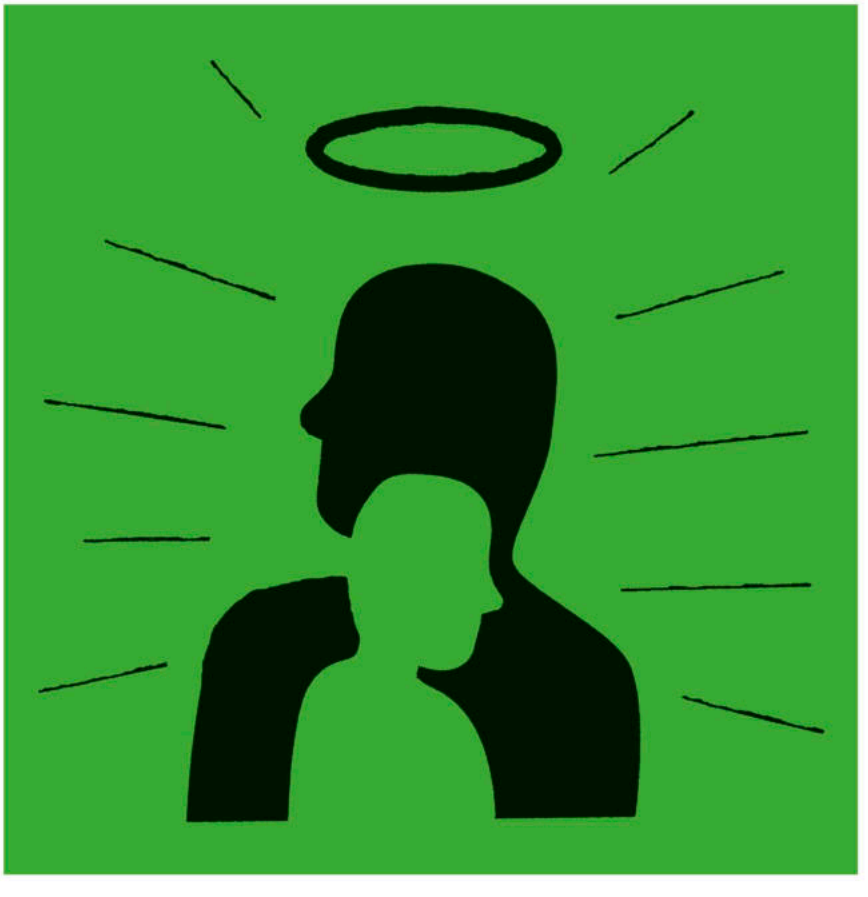
There are very few clues to the author of the Book of Job, or to the time of its composition, but scholars place Job as living sometime between 2000 and 1000 BCE. It is likely that the book was written by an Israelite, due to the use of the term "Yahweh" for God. Jewish tradition attributes the book to Moses.

Whoever the author might be, it seems that the purpose of Job's book is not to give a true historical account of the man's life. Instead of writing from a purely theological perspective, the author takes a closer, sympathetic approach to Job's story, and therefore deals with the question of why humans suffer on a personal level.

When judged against the conventional criteria of what it means to be faithful, Job is one of the finest human beings depicted in the Bible—perhaps purposefully and hyperbolically good as he continues to prevail in his faith. The almost superhuman nature of his resolve, with his exemplary righteousness and strong convictions, has even given rise to the modern idiom of "having the patience of Job."

BLESSED IS THE ONE WHO TRUSTS IN THE LORD

PROVERBS 16:20, PROVERBS



IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Proverbs

THEME
Blessings for the faithful

SETTING
c.700–500 BCE King Hezekiah's palace and a place of instruction post-Exile.

KEY FIGURES
Solomon A king of legendary wisdom who is said to have uttered 3,000 proverbs. The bulk of the book of Proverbs is attributed to him.

Hezekiah King of Judah from 715–698 BCE. According to Proverbs 25:1, the earliest maxims, contained in chapters 25–29, were transcribed at his court in Jerusalem.

The book of Proverbs is a book of advice, or wisdom literature, which seeks to instill "knowledge and discretion" (1:4) in young men about to forge their ways in the world. The aim is that such men will not only live a fulfilling and prosperous life, but also a moral one. While the book of Proverbs makes it clear from the outset that the "fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (1:7), much of the book's focus is not directly on God, but on the choices and dilemmas faced in daily living.

The pragmatic advice comes in the form of short admonishments and pithy encouragements. A warning against laziness, for

See also: The Ten Commandments 78–83 ▪ The Wisdom of Solomon 120–23 ▪ Sermon on the Mount 204–09 ▪ The Golden Rule 210–11 ▪ Parables of Jesus 214–15

example, says: "Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!" (Proverbs 6:6). Many of the book's maxims date back millennia, and a number come from outside the Israelite tradition—some, for example, are borrowed from Egyptian wisdom literature.

Historical collection

Authorship of much of the book of Proverbs is attributed to King Solomon, although this is unlikely. It is more probable that the Proverbs were gathered into collections at various times in Israelite history and then copied at the Judean court of King Hezekiah in the late 8th century BCE. In view of the customs mentioned and the pure monotheism espoused by the text, the book as it appears today almost certainly dates from the late 6th century or 5th century BCE, after the Judeans had returned from exile in Babylon.

The scribes organized Proverbs into five sections with four short appendices at the end. The first section or prologue (chapters 1–9) most obviously bears the imprint of the post-Exile period, although it is labeled "The Proverbs of Solomon." Next comes a long section (10:1–22:16) of short, mostly two-line proverbs, attributed to Solomon, and then the section entitled "the sayings of the wise" (22:17–24:22), which shows Egyptian influence.

Idleness is one of many vices that the proverbs warn against. In Proverb 6, sluggards are advised to follow the productive ways of the ant.

This is followed by another short section on the same theme (24:23–34), and then another longer section (chapters 25–29) attributed to Solomon. The appendices make up the last two chapters and conclude with a famous poem extolling the virtues of "The Wife of Noble Character" (see p. 151).

Twin strands

Wisdom in Proverbs is delivered through two voices. One is that of an elder—a parent, teacher, or sage—giving instruction to a younger person. The book's very first exhortation is in this style: "Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching" (1:8). The »

Wisdom literature

Proverbs, along with the Books of Job and Ecclesiastes, belongs to a well-established genre of the ancient Near East: wisdom writing. Consisting of maxims and tales that reflect upon life wisely lived, this body of literature has deep roots. One of the oldest known works is the Maxims of Ptahhotep, from the end of the 3rd millennium BCE, which details the instructions of a vizier to his son. The Instruction of Amenemopet—written down around 1000 BCE but probably older than that—also follows a similar format. The section in Proverbs entitled "sayings of the wise" is clearly modeled on Amenemopet's maxims and includes some that are almost identical. Similarities also exist with a Mesopotamian work: the Story of Ahikar. The tale of a chief counselor at the Assyrian court, it is peppered with wise sayings. The sayings include an earlier version of the Bible's famous "spare the rod, spoil the child" proverb.

figure who conveys teaching is Wisdom, personified as a woman. "Out in the open Wisdom calls aloud, in the street, she raises her voice in the public square" (1:20), the first proverb in the book relates.

There is a contrast in tone between the two strands. While the maxims of the elder, the bulk of the book, tend to appeal to reason and good sense, the teachings of personified Wisdom are more emotive, approaching at times the admonishing tones of the biblical prophet: "How long will you who are simple love your simple ways?" Wisdom cries out. "How long will mockers delight in mockery and fools hate knowledge?" (1:22).

Teaching in the proverbs is mostly presented in one of two forms: the instruction and the saying. Used in the first nine chapters, the former develops an idea—the perils of idleness, for example—in a poetic paragraph a few lines long. The saying, the form that dominates most later chapters, is more succinct. It is a statement, usually of two lines, that presents a truth in a way intended to stay in the mind, often by virtue of a paradox. Possibly the most famous proverb of all works like this: "Whoever spares the rod hates their children, but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them" (13:24).

A variation on the paradox is the numerical proverb, which lists items that have something in common and then ends with an ironic twist. One example is this reflection: "There are three things that are too amazing for me, four that I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a snake on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a young woman" (30:19).

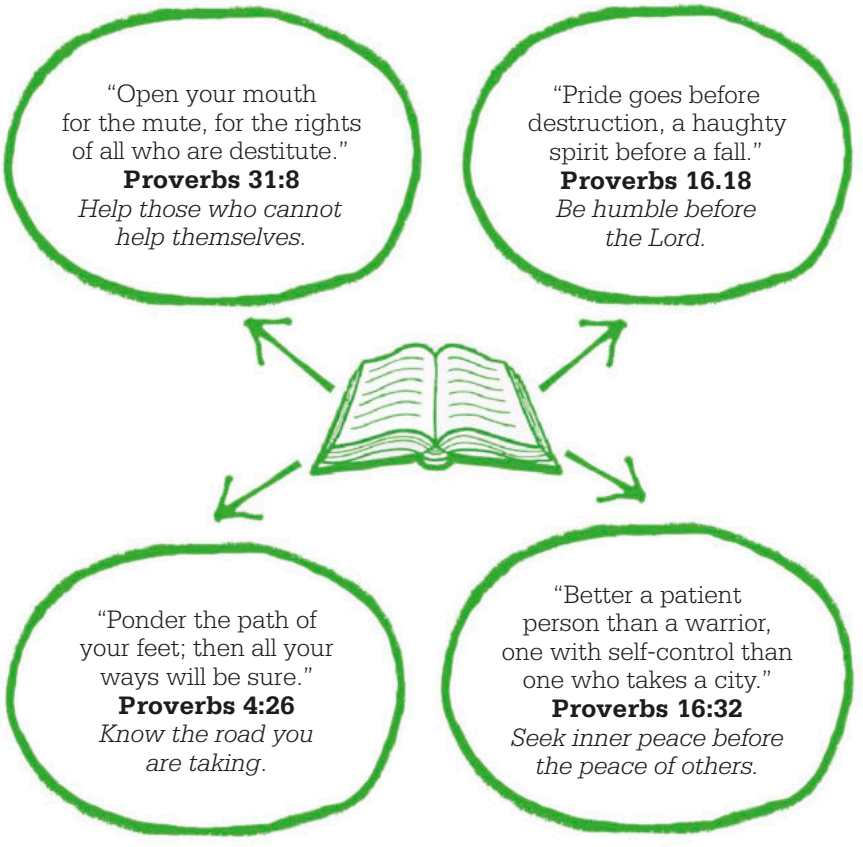
St. Sophia the divine wisdom is depicted in this 16th-century Russian icon. In some forms of Christianity, her figure of personified wisdom is seen as the second part of the Holy Trinity.

Domestic focus

Perhaps because of its place within the wider wisdom tradition of the Near East, the Book of Proverbs differs from much of the rest of the Hebrew Bible in that it never mentions Israel's history. Its approach is for the most part

> Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold.
> **Proverbs 3:13–14**

Familiar Proverbs



observational. Proverbs is clear that God lies at the heart of reality and about the need to be humble as a result. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding" (3:5) is one of its admonitions. Wisdom, it suggests, is learned through God. The maxims it offers on human affairs focus on areas such as family, anger, poverty, and righteousness, but cannot be truly heeded without fear of the Lord.

Wisdom incarnate

Proverbs makes intriguing claims about God and heaven in the voice of personified Wisdom. She speaks of how she is "the first of His works" (8:22), continuing: "I was there when He set the heavens in place" (8:27). She even claims to have been a craftsperson at God's side during creation.

This idea would be later picked up and developed by New Testament writers, notably the author of John's Gospel. He sets out the idea of the Logos, or Word, who "was with God in the beginning," through whom "all things were made" and who became incarnate as Jesus. Proverbs' personified Wisdom contributed to the idea of God's wisdom incarnate being a part of the Holy Trinity, leading to the establishment of the later doctrine of Jesus's incarnation (see pp. 298–99). ■

Eshet Hayil

Proverbs' final half chapter is an acrostic poem—one in which each stanza begins with a succeeding letter of the Hebrew alphabet—extolling the virtues of a woman of "valor" or "noble character." *Eshet Hayil* in Hebrew, this woman is the perfect wife and mother, whose "worth is far more than rubies" (31:10). By no means confined to the home, she works hard, has a good business head, and is generous to the poor. Presiding over her household with dignity, she brings honor to her husband, who finds himself "respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land" (31:23).

The portrait the Eshet Hayil creates has resonated over the centuries, and in devout Jewish households it is often sung or recited at the start of the Kiddush, the Friday evening ceremony that ushers in the Sabbath. According to the mystical kabbalistic tradition of Judaism, it refers to God's Shekhinah, or divine presence, associated with a maternal, nurturing role. In other interpretations, it can be seen more simply as the family paying tribute to the mother. The passage that proceeds the acrostic narrates the lessons King Lemuel has received from his mother, so the poem may also be his own glorifying eulogy for her in return. In some households the Eshet Hayil is balanced with a recital of Psalm 112: "Blessed are those who fear the Lord, who find great delight in his commands."

I AM MY BELOVED'S . . . MY BELOVED IS MINE.

6:3, SONG OF SONGS

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Song of Songs 6:3

THEME
God's love for His people

SETTING
c.970–930 BCE, Solomon's kingdom

KEY FIGURES
He An unspecified king. It could be Solomon himself, but it is not clear whether he wrote the poem or if it is about him.

She A dark-skinned woman and the king's new bride, sometimes referred to as "Shulammite" – either the female form of "Solomon" or possibly a reference to her place of origin.

Friends An unnamed chorus of commentators.

Song of Songs is one of the Bible's sweetest sections: a paean to marital ardor. The book opens with the line "Solomon's Song of Songs" and goes on to mention the ancient Israelite king six more times (Song of Songs 1:5; 3:7; 3:9; 3:11; 8:11–12), leading some scholars to believe that the book was penned by Solomon himself. This theory is supported by 1 Kings 4:32, which says that Solomon composed 1,005 songs. Others believe the link with Solomon is an editorial intervention to enhance the status of the poems.

Whoever the author was, Song of Songs is considered to be a masterpiece of erotic literature that captures the yearning of love. It is a conversation between "He" (the "king") and "She" (a woman sometimes referred to as Shulammite). The couple are occasionally interrupted by interjections from "friends," who perform the role of an audience.

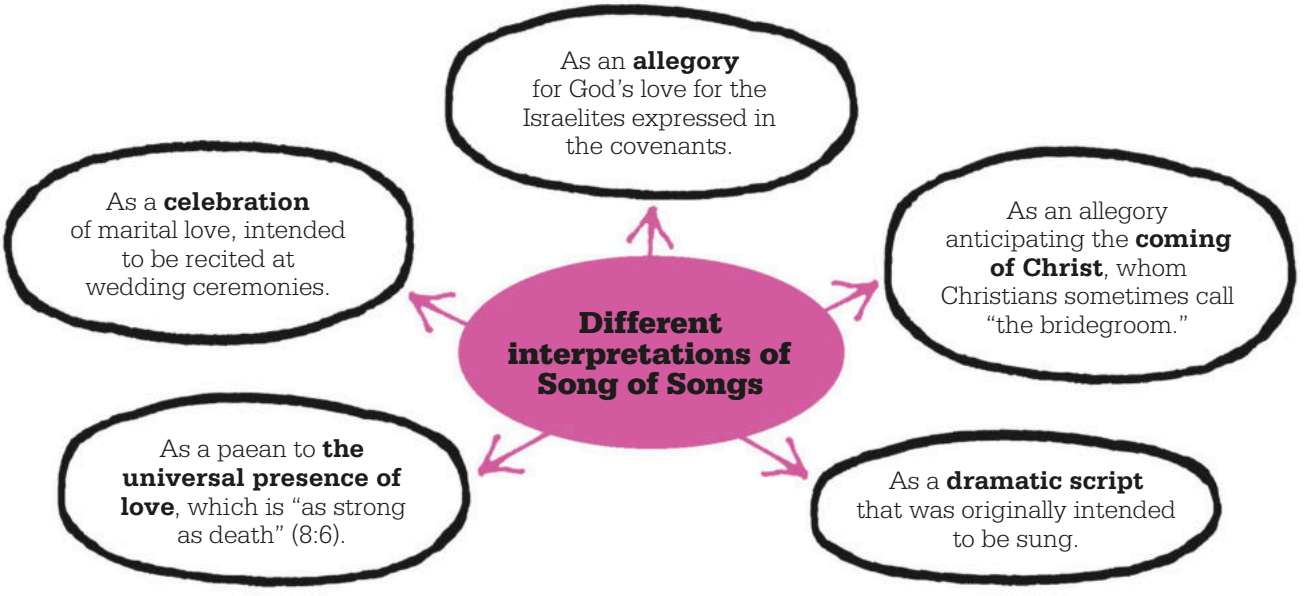
Celebration of sexuality

Early in the piece, the woman entreats the king to take her to his bedchambers. Explicit

Sensuality in Song of Songs

"Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth" (1:1). From the opening verse of Song of Songs, sex, love, and the senses are at its heart. Throughout the book the narrators—the Beloved and her companion, the Lover—convey their love for one another with sensual imagery: perfumes incomparable to her smell, his kisses more delightful than wine, her breasts like clusters of fruit, his fruit sweet to her taste. This tantalizing imagery brings into vivid clarity the tension and longing that exists between the two narrators, while the multiple references to vineyards and wine help build the impression of lovers who are intoxicated with one another. The image of the vineyard in bloom is just one of many metaphors drawn from nature. Twenty-five different plants, many fruit or perfume-bearing, are mentioned in the Songs, underlining the relationship between nature and fertility and sexual desire.

See also: The Psalms 138–43 ▪ Proverbs 148–51 ▪ The Way of Love 296–97



sexual references follow, with the woman's body compared to a palm tree, her neck a rounded goblet, her breasts like twin fawns of a gazelle. Subsequent analogies and a series of similarly explicit metaphors make it clear that sexual love is the principal subject of discussion. Some of these comparisons may be amusing to a modern audience: 6:6, for example, says: "Your teeth are like a flock of sheep, coming up from the washing. Each has its twin, not one of them is missing."

In the course of the book, the woman describes herself to the "daughters of Jerusalem," likening her dark skin to the "tents of Kadar" and the "curtains of Solomon," while the king describes his lover's great beauty and her visits to him. The book is further embellished by the sighting of a royal wedding procession and third-party accounts of the woman's beauty.

A bride and groom exchange vows during an Armenian wedding. Viewed by many as an ode to physical love within marriage, the Song of Songs is often chosen as a reading at weddings.

Interpreting the Song

The meaning and purpose of Song of Songs is a matter of debate. Rabbi Saadia Gaon al-Fayyumi, a medieval Jewish commentator, described the book as resembling "locks to which the keys have been lost." God is not mentioned once in the poem. However, some commentators believe that the "king" in the poem symbolizes God, and the woman the Israelites, and what appears to be an erotic ode is an allegorical piece describing God's love for Israel. At the same time, Christians have viewed the song as a celebration of the love of Jesus for the Church. ■

> Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot sweep it away.
> **Song of Songs 8:7**

SURELY HE TOOK UP OUR INFIRMITIES AND CARRIED OUR SORROWS

ISAIAH 53:4, THE SUFFERING SERVANT

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Isaiah 40–55

THEME
Suffering

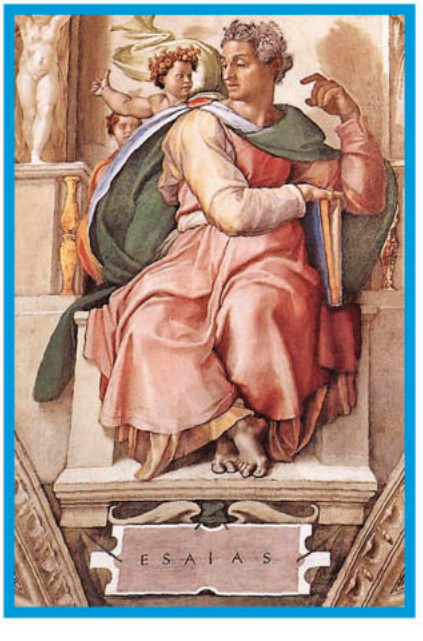
SETTING
6th century BCE
The Babylonian empire, which is under threat from the Persians led by King Cyrus.

KEY FIGURES
The Suffering Servant
A metaphorical character who symbolizes the Israelites' suffering.

"Second Isaiah" Unnamed prophet who is thought to have authored chapters 40–55 of the book of Isaiah in the 6th century BCE.

Cyrus King of Persia from 558 to 530 BCE. Seen by Second Isaiah and his disciples as a savior and Yahweh's "shepherd."

Biblical scholars divide the book of Isaiah into three sections. The first, believed to be the work of Isaiah himself, was written when Assyria was expanding westward, threatening Judah. The book fulminates against the sinful leaders of Jerusalem and urges reform to avert calamity. The second section (chapters 40–55), by an anonymous source known as the Second Isaiah, or Deutero-Isaiah, is believed to have been written from exile in Babylon in the 6th century BCE, after Jerusalem has fallen; a third section (56–66), Third Isaiah, is believed to date from after the Exile.



Isaiah is one of seven Old Testament prophets painted by Michelangelo in the Vatican's Sistine Chapel (1508–1512). Isaiah (Greek "Esaias") holds the Book of Isaiah under his arm.

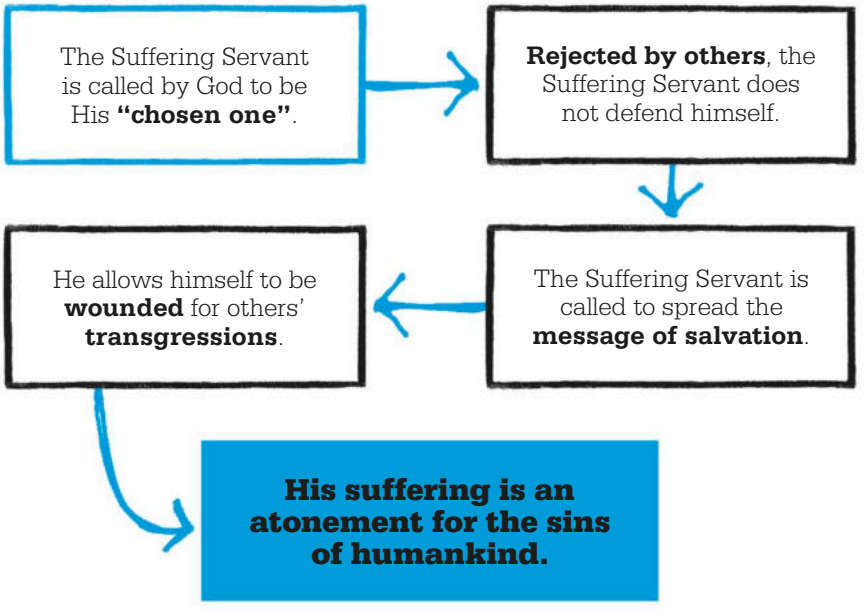
God's chosen one

Central to the Second Isaiah are the Servant Songs: four poems that present a mysterious servant of God, His "chosen one." The poems have the same themes as First Isaiah, but preach a message of greater hope and comfort.

The Servant Songs revolve around the wretched character of the "Suffering Servant." There is nothing majestic or beautiful about him. Far from treating him with respect, people despise and reject him, beating him and plucking out his beard. He utters no words of protest. Instead, he sets his face "like flint" (50:7) and endures. He does this for the sake of God and of others, even his very tormentors. He is: a "man of sorrows" who takes up and carries the failings of others.

See also: The Suffering of Job 146–47 ▪ The Coming of Salvation 189

The Suffering Servant



Anointed with God's spirit, the man is gentle and unassuming—a "bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out" (42:3). He is the one God calls not only to restore the exiled and dispersed people of Israel, but also to carry out an even wider task: to be "a light for the Gentiles," spreading God's salvation to the world. The life of the Suffering Servant is an atonement for sin. In exchange for him bearing "the sins of many," God will raise him up. He will "give him a portion among the great"; kings and princes will one day bow down before him.

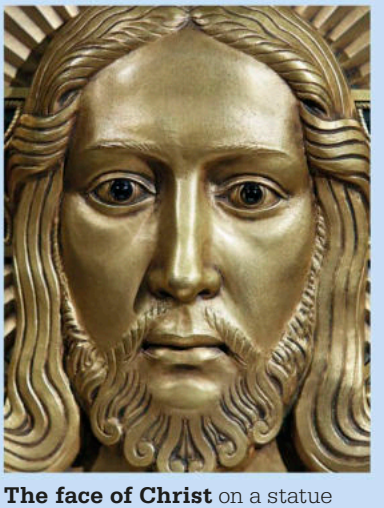
A mysterious figure

The identity of the Suffering Servant has long been debated. One theory is that he could be Cyrus, the Persian king, who would overthrow the Israelites' hated Babylonian oppressors. Cyrus would be a friend and savior to the Jews, allowing them to return home and rebuild Jerusalem and their temple. Many Christians, however, view the Suffering Servant as a prophecy of Christ, in line with other messianic references in Isaiah. Most rabbinic scholars believe he is a metaphor for Israel itself, or rather those Israelites who have stayed true to God through humiliation and suffering. They are the "faithful remnant" (Malachi 3:15–16) of prophetic tradition, who have endured persecution not just from foreign oppressors but from the Israelites who rejected the message of repentance. Suffering has become part of their identity, but in the Servant Songs this is not a negative thing: it is redemptive and transforming. Through their suffering for the failings of others, humankind will be healed. ■

Jesus Christ: the servant savior

The image of the Suffering Servant sank deep into the Jewish imagination, enduring into the early Christian one. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus announces His public ministry with a passage from Isaiah closely associated with the Servant passages. "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing," Jesus tells the synagogue in His hometown of Nazareth. The people promptly reject Him, as was the case for the Suffering Servant. The servant theme comes up time and again in Jesus's teaching. He tells His disciples that "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."

Echoes of the Servant Songs are unmistakable. Peter writes about Jesus's silence in the face of His accusers. "When they hurled their insults at Him … He did not retaliate."



The face of Christ on a statue in Paris. The Book of Isaiah contains so many messianic references that it is sometimes called the fifth Gospel.

BEFORE I FORMED YOU IN THE WOMB I KNEW YOU

JEREMIAH 1:5, THE PROPHET JEREMIAH

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Jeremiah 1–52

THEME
Predestination

SETTING
Around 626–570 BCE
Jerusalem.

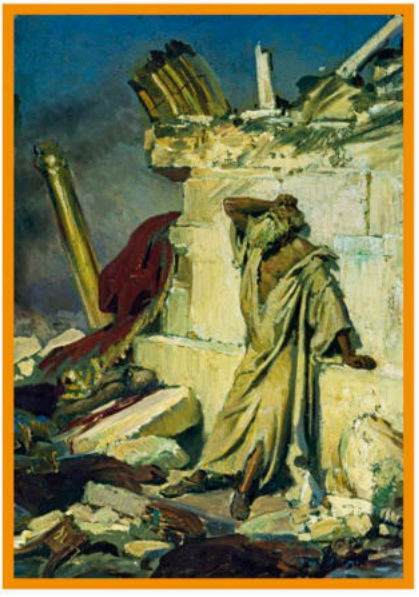
KEY FIGURES
Jeremiah Selected by God to be a prophet "to the nations." Born in Anathoth, a few miles north of Jerusalem, where his father Hilkiah was a priest.

Hananiah A false prophet preaching against Jeremiah.

When God declares Jeremiah a prophet He assigns him an unenviable mission: Jeremiah must make the people of Judah repent for years of bad behavior. Though faced with hatred and adversity, the reluctant prophet continues to discharge his task and spread the word of God right up until the end of his life.

Jeremiah is regarded, after Isaiah, as the second major prophet of the latter "writing" prophets in Judaism (earlier figures, such as Elijah, were "oral" prophets, who did not record their words). He is also known as the "Weeping Prophet," as his eponymous book, written around 585 BCE, with the help of the scribe Baruch, is deeply melancholic. The epithet is apt, given the nature of the prophet's lifelong travails. Such is the notoriety of Jeremiah's thankless struggles that to this day an angry or miserable person is often referred to as a "Jeremiah."

See also: Moses and the Burning Bush 66–69 ▪ The Golden Calf 84–85 ▪ Elijah and the Prophets of Baal 125 ▪ The Fall of Jerusalem 128–31 ▪ Rebuilding Jerusalem 133



The desolation of Jeremiah is captured with dramatic intensity in *Cry of prophet Jeremiah on the Ruins of Jerusalem*, painted in 1870 by the Russian artist Ilya Yefimovich Repin.

God selected Jeremiah before he was even born to exhort the people of Judah to mend their idolatrous and disrespectful ways. He later tells Jeremiah He made him a prophet "in the womb" (Jeremiah 1:5). Despite an initial reluctance to accept his role, Jeremiah ultimately accepts that his life's work is predestined, and faithfully follows God's carefully mapped plan throughout his life.

Called to God's work

Jeremiah was born in Anathoth, a small village 4 miles (6km) north of Jerusalem, the son of Hilkiah, a priest. His lineage can be traced back to Moses, and there are several parallels in the two men's lives. Just as Moses demurs when God instructs him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, the young Jeremiah makes excuses as to why he is not fit to extract the repentance of the people of Judah and fulfill the mission that God has assigned to him. He protests to God that he is too young to take on such a role and, like Moses, is not a sufficiently good speaker to cope with such a weighty task. In response, God reassures Jeremiah, as He did Moses, telling the prophet not to fear, as He will support and rescue him. The Lord then touches Jeremiah's mouth and says to him, "I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant" (1:9–10).

A dangerous mission

Won over by God's words, Jeremiah prepares to try and reconvert the errant sons and daughters of Judah. He begins his ministry around 626 BCE, in what was a tumultuous period for the people of Israel. The message was dire. God was calling on him to prophesy a severe, cataclysmic event to the people—the destruction of their holy city Jerusalem by the Babylonians. Jeremiah's task was to remind the people of their covenant with God and to dissuade them from breaking the laws associated with it, despite any opposition he faced. Of their many crimes, the idolatrous worship of the false god Baal represented a particularly disturbing offense. »

> Call to Me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.
> **Jeremiah 33:3**

Predestination

The theological concept of "predestination" holds that all events are willed and predetermined by God. The theory is aired in the Bible in Jeremiah 1:5, Romans 8:29, and Ephesians 1:5–14. The "paradox of free will," long a subject of theological debate, is the apparent incompatibility between God's omniscience and the free will of a human being. In the ways shown in the Bible, predestination usually amounts to a form of religious determinism or predeterminism. The dilemma that Christians face is whether they are able to freely make choices of their own volition, as opposed to choices that are predetermined by God. Scholars have labored over the question for centuries. The general consensus is that not all people live predestined lives and therefore enjoy free will. However, in Jeremiah's case, he had little choice in the path that his life would take; the events shaping his existence were preordained by God when he was in his mother's womb.

Angry officials of King Zedekiah lower Jeremiah into a well for daring to prophesy the capture of Jerusalem. The punishment is illustrated here in a 19th-century engraving by T.O. Barlow.

They had constructed high altars to Baal, in which they burned their own children as sacrificial offerings.

Jeremiah's prophecies of doom and destruction are unpopular and he becomes the target of much mockery, and several attempts are made to kill him. When Jeremiah complains to God that he has become a laughing stock for spreading the word of the Lord, he is told that he is destined to endure more painful attacks over the course of his mission. He cries and laments (the following biblical book, Lamentations, is a further highly poetic expression of grief). Still God insists that the prophet must continue to disseminate His dire warnings to the people of Judah. Further misfortunes befall Jeremiah; he is beaten and held in the stocks for a day (20:2), and at one point is thrown into a dark and muddy well (38:6).

Battles with false prophets

While Jeremiah is busy spreading his apocalyptic messages, other prophets are at work, sending out a more positive message of peace and prosperity (Jeremiah 27–28). The most famous of these is Hananiah, with whom Jeremiah clashes throughout much of the central part of his narrative.

Things come to a head early in the reign of King Zedekiah in Jerusalem. Jeremiah is determined to ensure Jerusalem's surrender in the face of the rapidly advancing Babylonian forces. He puts on a yoke, or oxen harness, to symbolize what God has told him about the coming enslavement of the Israelite people to the Babylonians. The prophet then goes to Zedekiah, wearing the yoke, and says, "Bow your neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon" (27:12–13), so that he and the nation might not die by "the sword, famine, and plague." Jeremiah denounces the false prophets who favor opposition to Babylon, as God has told him that can only lead to Judah's downfall. He goes on to tell the priest and people, "Serve the king of Babylon and you will live. Why should this city become a ruin?" (27:17).

The people, angry and afraid, react badly to Jeremiah's words. Later, the false prophet Hananiah seizes his chance and tears the yoke from Jeremiah's neck and breaks it on the ground, declaring that the Lord will break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar II within two years.

As in many other parts of his story, Jeremiah continues his mission despite his humiliation. The Lord tells him to go to Hananiah and say that in place of a wooden yoke, he will get a yoke of iron. Jeremiah also prophesies that Hananiah will be dead within a year, for inciting rebellion against the Lord—a statement that proves accurate.

Destruction foretold

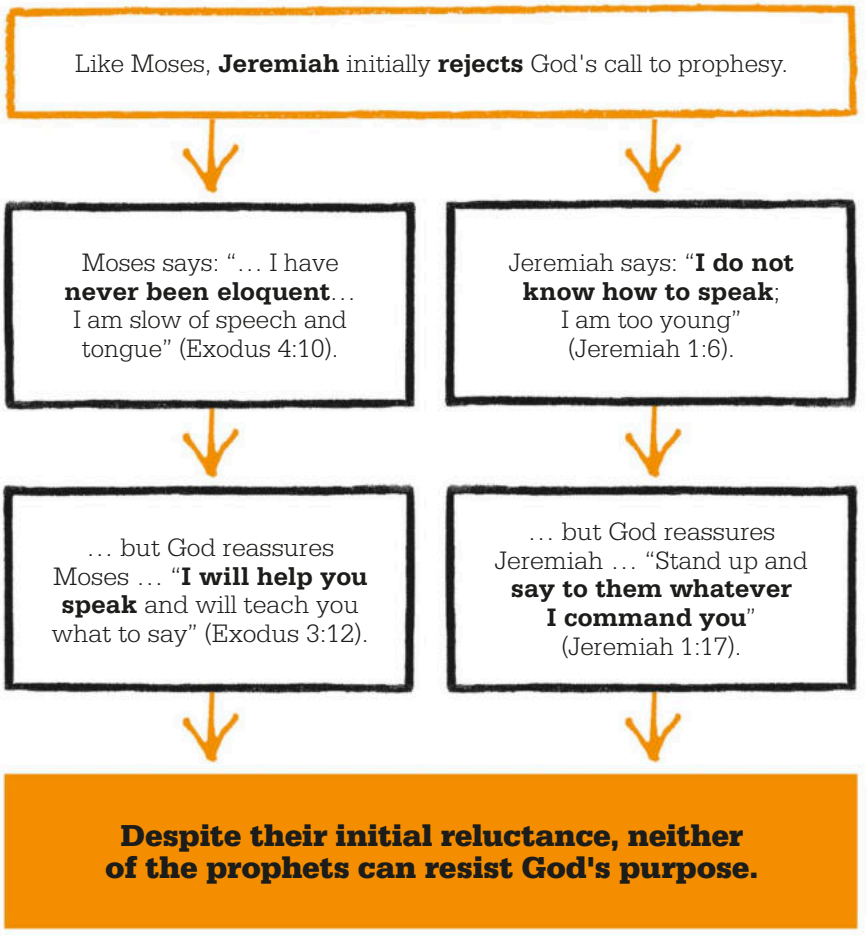
Jeremiah's terrible prophecies do eventually come true; the people witness their city being completely destroyed by the Babylonians and most of their people are taken into captivity. The survivors go to Jeremiah and ask for forgiveness. They acknowledge that they should

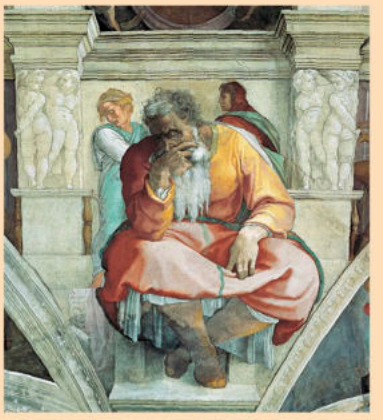
have listened to him and repented of their wrongdoing. They also ask his advice for where to go next. However, when he tells them "Do not go to Egypt" (42:19), Jeremiah is once more maligned by the people he is trying to save: he is branded a liar and taken to Egypt with the Israelites, where he dies soon afterward. Some extra-biblical sources suggest that he was stoned to death by his angry countrymen.

A new covenant

Not all of the Book of Jeremiah prophesies misery and despair. Chapters 29–31 strike a fresh tone of positivity. In a letter to those exiled in Babylon, God speaks through Jeremiah, telling him he will bring them back after 70 years and promising them a new covenant. This covenant will succeed because God will put it in their mind, "write it on their hearts" and "forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Jeremiah 31:33–34).

This prophecy at the heart of the Book of Jeremiah gave the Jewish people great hope after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. Early Christians often applied the prophecy to Jesus. His death on the cross was seen to herald the promised new covenant, as it showed God's forgiveness of their sins (Luke 22:20). ■





Jeremiah

The Prophet Jeremiah was the last prophet that God sent to preach to the southern kingdom, home to the tribes of Benjamin and Judah. God had repeatedly warned the Israelites to cease their idolatrous worship and evil deeds, but his preaching had been continually ignored. With the 12 tribes split, and the 10 northern tribes lost among the Assyrians, God's decision to appoint Jeremiah as His prophet constituted His final attempt to bring the errant southern tribes back into His fold. Jeremiah was around 17 years old when God called upon him. Privy to God's most terrible plans for his compatriots, he cried tears of sadness, because not only did he know what was going to happen to the Israelites, he was unable to convince them of his knowledge. Although he preached for 40 years, often entirely unaided, he was unable to change or soften the stubborn hearts and minds of the Israelite people. In the face of great hardships, Jeremiah's legacy lies in the courage he showed by teaching the word of God despite the significant aversion to His message.

MY HEART IS POURED OUT ON THE GROUND

LAMENTATIONS 2:11, LAMENT FOR THE EXILES

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Lamentations 1–5

THEME
God suffers when His people suffer

SETTING
586 BCE, Jerusalem

KEY FIGURES
Narrator Widely believed to be Jeremiah, the "Weeping Prophet," to whom the Book of Lamentations is attributed.

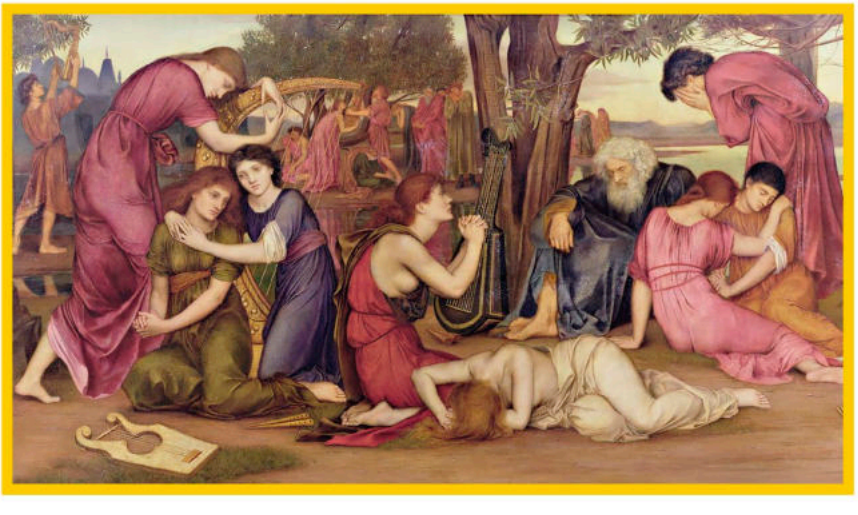
The people of Jerusalem Survivors of the Babylonian invasion, desperately trying to remain alive.

Nebuchadnezzar II King of Babylon, who leads his army in destroying the holy city of Jerusalem and is supported by God as punishment for the Judeans' unfaithful behavior.

The aptly named Book of Lamentations concerns the destruction of Jerusalem at God's behest. The book is traditionally attributed to Jeremiah, known as the "Weeping Prophet," and it serves as a postscript to the Book of Jeremiah. However, most scholars believe that it is by an anonymous source.

The book comprises five poems, each arranged in a series of short, rhymeless stanzas, describing the state of Jerusalem after its annihilation by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar II. The prophet Jeremiah lived in Judah during the Babylonian invasion, which culminated in the siege of the holy city in 586 BCE.

Lamentations opens with the foreboding words "How deserted lies the city, once so full of people!" From this gloomy start, the narrative becomes progressively darker, describing the Babylonian army breaching the city walls of Jerusalem, killing or enslaving



By the Waters of Babylon (1882–1883), an oil painting by Evelyn De Morgan, depicts an exiled patriarch (under the tree) with other exiles weeping over the loss of their Promised Land.

See also: Entering the Promised Land 96–97 ▪ The Fall of Jerusalem 128–31 ▪ The Prophet Jeremiah 156–59 ▪ Daniel in Babylon 164–65

all the people, and burning the city to the ground. The survivors are described in detail, with harrowing accounts of how mothers ate their own children in order to survive, children beg for bread but no one gives them any, and young and old lie in the dust of the streets (Lamentations 2:20–21 and 4:4).

Terrible punishments

After the fall of Jerusalem, worldly possessions and wealth now mean nothing: Chapter 4:1 describes how gold has lost its luster and precious stones are scattered on every street corner. It appears that all hope is lost, such is the misery and despair that is recounted. Nevertheless, despite inflicting such a terrible punishment on His people, Jeremiah suggests that there is still reason to hope: "For no one is cast off by the Lord for ever. Though He brings grief, He will show compassion, so great is His unfailing love. For He does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone" (3:32–33).

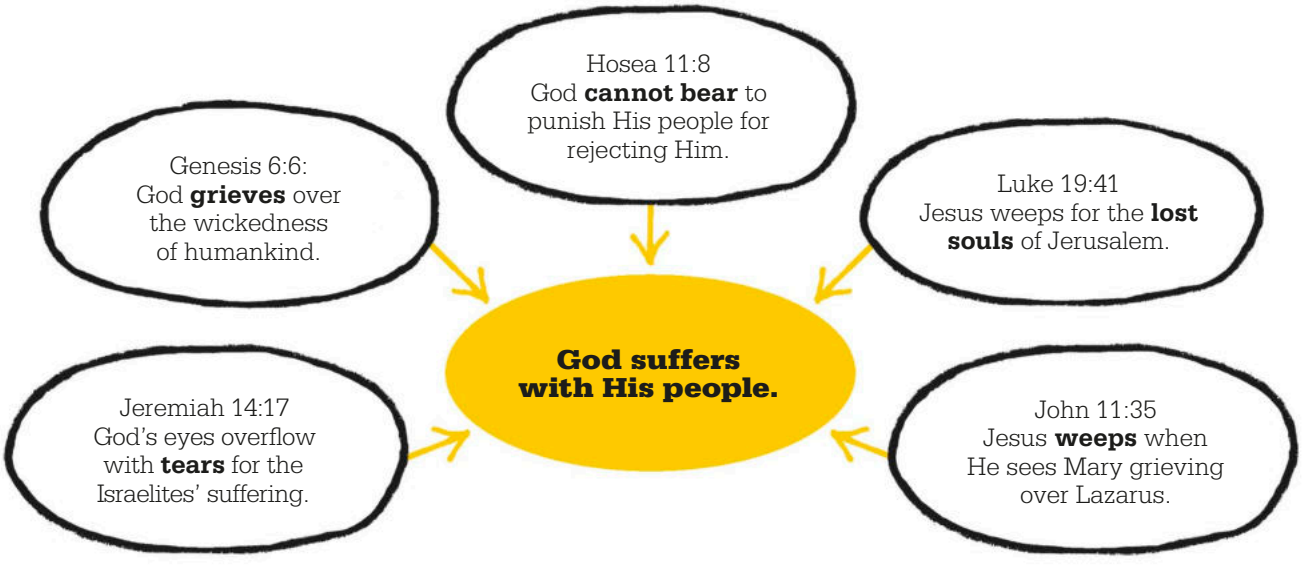
Lamentations is full of references to tears and crying, including the agonizing and despair of Jeremiah himself. Lamentations 4:6 states that the punishment of the people of Jerusalem is greater even than that of the people of Sodom. The extent of God's wrath is made abundantly clear as the narrative unfolds. However, the underlying tone throughout the book is that, though His anger knows no limits, God suffers Himself at having to wreak such terrible carnage in the first place.

At the heart of Lamentations is an important message of peace and reconciliation, which points to the inexhaustible possibilities for redemption and forgiveness if the exiles maintain their faith in God. He is angry—but He also grieves that the longstanding heinous behavior by the Israelite people has forced Him to punish them so harshly. The message of Lamentations is clear: when God's people suffer, God suffers, too. ■

City of Babylon

Babylon, where the Israelites were taken as slaves and exiles, was the capital city of Babylonia in southwest Asia, now southern Iraq. The city sat on the Euphrates River, north of the modern town of Hillah.

The fall of the city, and the end of the neo-Babylonian empire with it, is predicted by the prophets in Isaiah 14:4 and 21:9, as well as Jeremiah 50–51. The city was under Babylonian control until 539 BCE, when Cyrus the Great of Persia invaded and killed king Belshazzar. However, Babylon was fairly unscathed by the invasion and continued to flourish under Persian rule.



I WILL REMOVE … YOUR HEART OF STONE AND GIVE YOU A HEART OF FLESH

EZEKIEL 36:26, THE PROPHET EZEKIEL

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Ezekiel 1–48

THEME
God's people will be restored

SETTING
c.590s–570s BCE Babylon, Mesopotamia.

KEY FIGURES
Ezekiel A priest from the Temple in Jerusalem, now exiled in Babylon. He is a prophet of the Lord, appointed to help instruct the exiles.

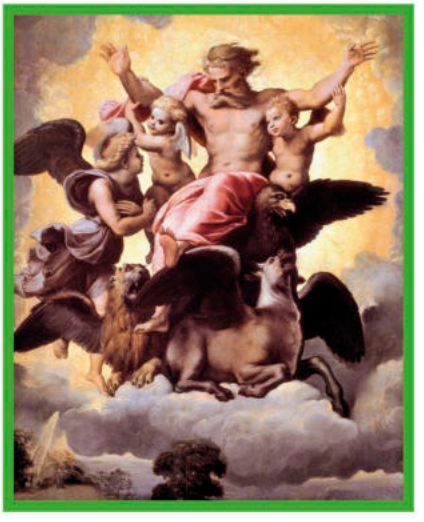
The Israelites God's chosen people, now living in exile in Babylon, Mesopotamia.

The Book of Ezekiel charts the lives and experiences of the Israelites during Babylonian captivity. For most of the book, the picture is bleak but the last section (Ezekiel 33–38) offers hope and the prospect of revival and redemption in the wake of the destruction of Jerusalem.

Ezekiel was a contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah and a priest at the Temple of Jerusalem, prior to the destruction of the city. He therefore occupied a prominent role in Israelite society. Owing to his elevated status, Ezekiel was among the first wave of exiles that went to Babylon with King Jehoiachin and his court in around 597 BCE, nine years prior to Jerusalem's final destruction in 586 BCE. This meant that, while Jeremiah stayed in Jerusalem, trying to persuade the Israelites to reform their ways, Ezekiel was prophet to the exiles, 1,000 miles (1,600km) away in Babylon.

Amazing illusions

Ezekiel's strange, intensely mystical career as a prophet begins when he experiences an incredible vision beside the River Chebar. God appears before him in the form of a man, yet from the "waist up He looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire … and brilliant light surrounded Him" (1:27). God is standing astride a throne-like chariot made of lapis lazuli with wheels that resemble topaz. The chariot flies through the air at great speed and is surrounded by a ring of fire. It is borne by cherubim with lions' bodies and eagles'



In Raphael's *Ezekiel's Vision* (c.1518), the prophet sees God in all His majesty raised by cherubim—fantastical winged creatures that perform a protective role in the Bible.

See also: Entering the Promised Land 96–97 ▪ The Fall of Jerusalem 128–31 ▪ Lament for the Exiles 160–61 ▪ The New Jerusalem 322–29

wings, each of which have four aspects to their faces—one of a human, one of a lion, one of an ox, and one of an eagle.

God hands Ezekiel a scroll with the words, "Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the people of Israel" (3:1). He tells Ezekiel to eat the scroll, so that his words will literally be those of God. Ezekiel does as he is bidden and then climbs aboard God's incredible flaming chariot. He is then transported to Babylon, where Ezekiel joins the exiles and begins his life's work preaching about the restoration of the Jewish people and nation.

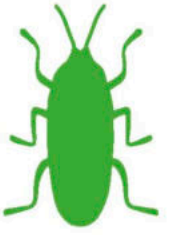
Coming redemption

Ezekiel's strange vision is designed to emphasize two key points at this important stage in the plight of the Jewish people. First, it is made clear that although God's chosen people are in exile in Babylon, He will still be with them. This is why He flies in His flaming chariot from Jerusalem to Babylon. Second, God's appointment of Ezekiel as His spokesman—which is forcefully underlined by His command to eat the scroll—shows that the Lord is leaving an important prophet, whose word is true, with the exiles. Thus, the Israelites are assured that if they follow Ezekiel's prophecies and return to God, their nation will ultimately be restored.

This message is reinforced by three more significant visions. In the first, Ezekiel is taken to the Temple of Jerusalem, and finds it covered in crawling things and unclean animals. As he stands there, the "glory of God" rises from the sanctuary and leaves the temple and Jerusalem. In the second, however, he is shown a valley of dried human skeletons, called "the people of Israel," whom God restores to full life before his eyes (37:11). The third is a profoundly positive vision of the future. Ezekiel sees Jerusalem's Temple—huge and magnificent—and imagines a "New Jerusalem," a fully restored Israelite kingdom that henceforth will be ruled only by God (40–48). ■

Visions of Ezekiel

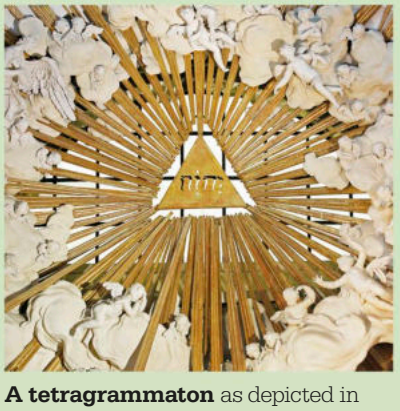
The wheels of God's chariot are able to move "in any one of four directions." This is a metaphor for His omnipresence.



Crawling things and unclean animals (Ezekiel 8:10) are symbolic of the false idolatry that led to the downfall of the Israelites.

The dry bones of "the people of Israel" are given life in Ezekiel's visions, which represent their ultimate return to their own land.

Jerusalem's future temple will be measured according to God's law. Once restored, it will be honest, pure, and true.



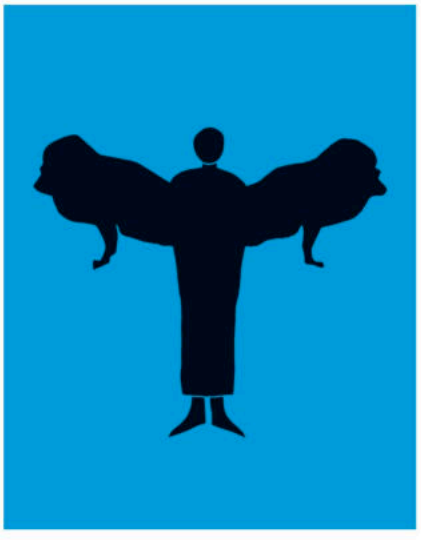
A tetragrammaton as depicted in the window of the Karlskirche, Vienna. Often translated as Yahweh, this symbol asserts God's omnipotence.

Glory of God

In the Christian religion, "glory"—derived from the Latin *gloria*, meaning "renown"—is used to describe the manifestation of God's presence when it is actively perceived by human beings. In Ezekiel, and elsewhere in the Bible, God appears in many different guises and various fantastical forms—or is merely heard or sensed by His subjects. Divine glory is an extremely important motif in theology, in which God is the most glorious being in existence.

However, due to the fact that human beings are created in His image, they can share (albeit imperfectly) in disseminating divine glory as "image bearers." They cannot match the glory of God Himself, but can spread it among others. This concept is best explained in Matthew 5:16, which states: "let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."

In religious media today, glory is often conveyed by the use of a halo, or white robes, crowns, jewels, gold, or stars.



MY GOD SENT HIS ANGEL, AND HE SHUT THE MOUTHS OF THE LIONS

DANIEL 6:22, DANIEL IN BABYLON

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Daniel 1–12

THEME
God's protection

SETTING
c.605–538 BCE Babylon.

KEY FIGURES
Daniel Wise man and prophet in exile from Judea and interpreter of dreams.

Nebuchadnezzar II King of Babylon, patron of Daniel, and destroyer of Jerusalem.

Belshazzar Son of King Nabonidus and the final documented ruler of Babylon.

Darius the Mede Successor to Belshazzar as King of Babylon, according to the Book of Daniel. His historical existence is doubted by most researchers.

The eventful Book of Daniel celebrates people of vision and courage—those who dare to stand steadfast in their faith in the Lord, whoever the adversary and no matter how bad the situation.

In 586 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon destroys Jerusalem and deports many of its citizens to Babylon. Several of the exiled aristocrats are given official positions, including the Judean Daniel. Despite being offered choice food and wine from the royal table, Daniel remains true to his religion, resolving to "not defile himself" (Daniel 1:8) by eating food the Israelites considered unclean.

Although he is a Judean exile, Daniel is made "ruler of the entire province of Babylon" (2:48) after he interprets a mystifying dream of Nebuchadnezzar's. Daniel's elevated status lasts into the reign of the king's successor, Belshazzar.

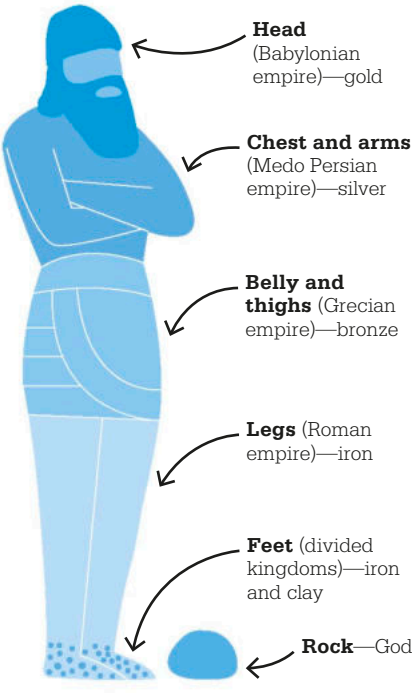
Writing on the wall

In Daniel 5, a hand appears from thin air to write on the wall as King Belshazzar holds a banquet. Daniel is brought in to translate and interpret the four Hebrew words for the astonished king: "God has numbered the days of your reign … You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting … Your kingdom is divided" (5:26–28). Daniel is again rewarded for his efforts and becomes the third highest ruler in the kingdom. King Belshazzar is slain "that very night" (5:30). Darius the Mede becomes the new

Blessed with the protection of an angel of the Lord, Daniel is saved from the lions' mouths in the den. He is replaced by King Darius's jealous advisers, who are all eaten alive.

See also: ▪ Joseph the Dreamer 58–61 ▪ The Fall of Jerusalem 128–31 ▪ The Prophet Jeremiah 156–59 ▪ Lament for the Exiles 160–61

Nebuchadnezzar's dream



Nebuchadnezzar dreamed of a statue made of various materials that crumbled as a rock struck its base. Daniel interpreted the dream as the impending destruction of all kingdoms.

king. Advisers jealous of Daniel's growing power dupe King Darius into decreeing that all should pray only to him, knowing that Daniel would refuse. When Daniel violates the decree by continuing to pray to God, Darius reluctantly has him thrown into the lion's den overnight as punishment. The king returns to his palace and frets over Daniel's fate.

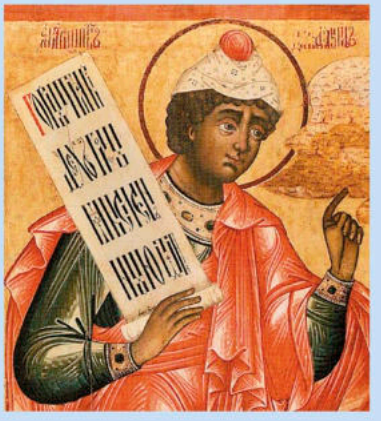
When Darius returns the next morning, he finds Daniel unharmed. Daniel tells him, "My God sent His angel, and He shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in His sight" (6:22). Darius issues a decree that praises both God and Daniel. The episode of Daniel in the lions' den is thus seen as proof that God protects those who honor Him.

Purpose and meaning

After Daniel 6, the book shifts and becomes apocalyptic in tone. Daniel interprets his visions and describes events in which empires will fall and the kingdom of heaven will be established forever. For many readers, this signifies the literal end of the world.

Notably, in the Hebrew canon Daniel is not regarded as a prophet. However, in the Christian Bible the book of Daniel is included among the Major Prophets. As the Book of Daniel was largely written in Aramaic, and explicitly describes the coming of Alexander (10–12) and the wars that followed, scholars date it to the period after the region was conquered by Alexander the Great. For this reason, some believe the Book of Daniel essentially functions as propaganda, describing the fall of an oppressive empire and the rise of an Israelite kingdom. ■

> "No wise man, enchanter, magician, or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries."
> **Daniel 2:27–28**

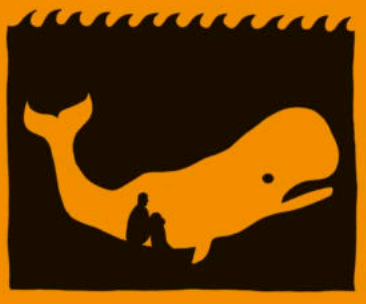


Daniel

The name Daniel means "God is my Judge." He is said to have been selected to be an official for Nebuchadnezzar because he was handsome, without blemish, and "quick to understand" (Daniel 1:4). However, Daniel believes he derives all of his abilities from the Lord. As an interpreter of dreams for a foreign king, Daniel's experience echoes that of Joseph in Genesis (37–50), who interprets dreams for Pharaoh in Egypt.

Daniel is considered a prophet by Christians and his apocalyptic visions are mentioned in the Apocryphal book 2 Esdras and in Matthew 24. In Judaism, Daniel is often represented as a wise man, but his book is not included in those of the prophets in the Jewish canon. In pre-Israelite Canaanite literature, there was a figure named Daniel, who was a wise man and adjudicator of justice. Scholars liken the biblical Daniel to this figure.

Regardless of the slightly differing views of his status, Daniel is consistently described as being devout, morally astute, and unwavering in his devotion to God.



JONAH WAS IN THE BELLY OF THE FISH THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS

JONAH 1:17, THE DISOBEDIENT PROPHET

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Jonah 1–4

THEME
God's omnipresence

SETTING
786–746 BCE The reign of Jeroboam. The Mediterranean Sea; Nineveh, the capital of Assyria.

KEY FIGURES
Jonah Reluctant prophet, son of Amittai.

Sailors The polytheistic crew of a ship that Jonah boards to escape God's command to preach in Nineveh.

Fish or whale An instrument of God.

The Ninevites Enemies of Israel whose wickedness has drawn the attention of God.

The story of Jonah, which also occurs in the Qur'an, is found among the short prophet books, often called the Minor Prophets or the Twelve Prophets. Most biblical scholars extrapolate two major themes from the story of Jonah: first, the omnipresence of God, and second, His willingness to forgive those who repent. Although Jonah hears God, he does not want to listen.

Punished prophet

The story opens with God telling Jonah to go to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, to preach against sin. Instead, Jonah runs away to Joppa (Jaffa) and boards a ship sailing to Tarshish, whose location is unknown today. However, he cannot run from an omnipresent God. While Jonah is on the boat, the Lord sends a violent storm.

When the sailors discover that Jonah is a Hebrew, and that the Lord is angry with him, they ask Jonah what to do to calm the sea. Jonah tells them to throw him into the water. At first, they ignore Jonah's advice, as they do not want to kill an innocent man, but when their attempts to row back to land fail, they throw him overboard. The sea calms and the sailors offer a sacrifice to the Lord. God then sends a fish to swallow Jonah, who stays in the belly of the fish for three days and nights.

Jonah is devoured by a "huge fish" with gills in this 15th-century French miniature from the Bible of St. John XXII. Contrary to popular myth, the Bible does not specify a whale.

Jonah's prayer

While in the fish, Jonah says a prayer in poetic form similar to that of many of the Psalms of lament. He

See also: The Tower of Babel 42–43 ▪ Sodom and Gomorrah 48–49 ▪ The Ten Commandments 78–83 ▪ The Psalms 138–43 ▪ The Empty Tomb 268–71

describes how he has been brought low, but the power of the Lord will save him, suggesting he is willing to do what is commanded of him. Jonah appears to allude to the Psalms in the prayer. He includes the word *sheol* in Hebrew, which is typically translated in the Psalms, and elsewhere, as the grave, or abode of the dead. Little is known about the ancient concept of *sheol*, but scholars believe it is a place where the presence of the Lord cannot be felt.

Jonah ends the prayer by vowing to reform. Echoing Psalm 3:8, he says: "Salvation comes from the Lord" (Jonah 2:9). After this, the fish spits Jonah out.

God's compassion

Chastised by his experience, Jonah travels to Nineveh, where he fulfills God's command. He tells the sinful Ninevites to repent and prophesies their destruction. However, when they do repent, and the Lord forgives them, Jonah is angry that God should show mercy to enemies of Israel and deny his prophecy. He obstinately sits outside the city, waiting for its destruction.

The disobedience of Jonah

Jonah shirks God's command to **preach in Nineveh** and flees.

↓

He is angry that **God is compassionate** toward Nineveh.

↓

He then asserts his own **prophecy and judgment**.

↓

Jonah is rebuked by God for wanting to influence what only He controls.

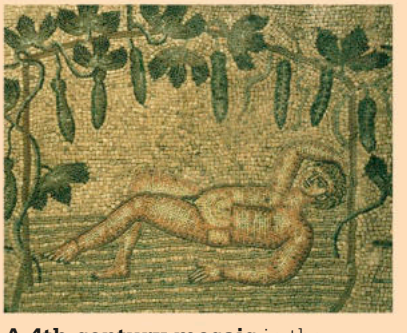
To teach Jonah a lesson—prophets are the messengers of the Lord; they are not supposed to punish or act independently—God grows a vine (generally thought to be a gourd) over Jonah to provide shade while he waits near Nineveh, but then commands a worm to eat the vine, and sends a scorching east wind so that Jonah grows faint.

Through this act, God both forgives and punishes Jonah. But Jonah remains angry. God then says to Jonah, "Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand?" (4:10). While Jonah believes salvation should be for the Israelites alone, God's mercy extends to all. ■

Interpretations of the story of Jonah

For many, it is puzzling to see a prophet of the Lord being disobedient and the enemies of Israel receiving forgiveness. However, God mentions that all nations are under the Lord's dominion and Ezekiel 21 states that even Babylon is the tool of the Lord. In Matthew 12:39–41, Jesus equates Himself to Jonah: He applauds that the people of Nineveh repented, but says that His work will be greater. Jesus also mentions that, just as Jonah was in the fish for three days, He will be three days and nights "in the heart of the earth."

Many readers focus on the fish, or whale, but what all the interpretations show is the centrality of repentance and forgiveness. In Judaism, Jonah is read during Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) in remembrance of God's forgiveness, even to the enemies of Israel.



A 4th-century mosaic in the Basilica di Santa Maria Assunta, Aquileia, Italy, shows Jonah resting under the gourd vine sent by God.

AND WHAT DOES THE LORD REQUIRE OF YOU?

MICAH 6:8, THE PROPHET MICAH

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Book of Micah

THEME
Forgiveness through repentence for sinning

SETTING
c.750–700 BCE The Southern Kingdom of Judah.

KEY FIGURES
Micah A prophet from Moresheth in the Shephelah region of southwest Judah.

Jotham King of Judah until 742 BCE. Micah's earliest prophecies are said to date from his reign.

Hezekiah King of Judah from 727–698 BCE. He repels the Assyrian King Sennacherib's attempt to destroy Jerusalem in 701 BCE, but loses territory and remains a vassal.

Hoshea Last king of the Northern Kingdom, Israel. After his reign, the Assyrians destroy the northern capital, Samaria, in 722 BCE and deport large parts of the population.

For hundreds of years, the ancient Assyrian Empire, based in the northeast of what is now Iraq, posed a constant threat to smaller, neighboring nations, including the two Israelite kingdoms of Israel and Judah. In 722 BCE, during the prophet Micah's lifetime, the Assyrians destroyed Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and deported the

See also: The Fall of Jerusalem 128–31 ▪ The Suffering Servant 154–55 ▪ Lament for the Exiles 160–61 ▪ The Birth of Jesus 180–85

An 1865 engraving of Micah by Gustave Doré. The prophet reproaches the Israelites for idolatry in the days of Jotham and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and exhorts the people to repent.

bulk of its population. In 701 BCE, they came close to doing the same to the Judean kingdom and its capital, Jerusalem, in the south.

Micah was from Judah. Unlike the urban aristocrat Isaiah, Micah was a country dweller from the village of Moresheth, southwest of Jerusalem. Micah was aware of the Assyrian threat to Judah, but his main concern was the suffering he saw in the farmsteads, villages, and small towns of Judah, caused not by foreign oppressors, but by his people's own rulers and leaders.

Inspired by God

The book that bears Micah's name alternates between threats of doom and promises of God's mercy. As a prophet, Micah speaks not in his own name, nor even in the name of a cause or of an abstract concept of justice. Instead, he speaks to the people on behalf of God. He has holy visions, and is "filled" with God's power and spirit (Micah 3:8).

Micah paints a disturbing picture of Judah. He describes how, in the early hours of the morning, people who are already rich and powerful lie in bed plotting ways in which to further increase their wealth. The moment dawn breaks, they start executing their plans, seizing the fields and houses of the poor and weak. Micah describes how the women of Judah are driven onto the streets, their children deprived of a secure home; social dysfunction and injustice are rampant as the rich get away with murder; and the poor and »

The Book of the Twelve

The Hebrew Bible's 12 short writings known as the "Minor Prophets" were kept on a single scroll and regarded as one book, the Book of the Twelve. These writings clearly reflect the historical context in which each prophet was active. Hosea, Amos, and Micah, for example, are contemporaries of Isaiah, and date from the 8th century BCE—a time dominated by the threat of the Assyrian Empire, which destroyed Israel's capital of Samaria in 722 BCE. Habakkuk, Zephaniah, and Nahum prophesied just prior to the fall of Nineveh in 612 BCE. By this time, Assyria was in decline and a renewed Babylon now threatened the southern Kingdom of Judah.

Hosea	Prophesies to the Northern Kingdom, Israel.
Joel	Prophesies after the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple.
Amos	Prophesies to Israel, though he was from Judah.
Obadiah	Prophesies against the Edomites.
Jonah	Disobeys God's command to prophesy to the city of Nineveh.
Micah	Prophesies to the Southern Kingdom, Judah.
Nahum	Prophesies against the city of Nineveh.
Habakkuk	Dialogues with God about injustice in the world.
Zephaniah	Prophesies to Judah.
Haggai	Exhorts returned exiles to finish rebuilding Jerusalem's temple.
Zechariah	Foretells the coming of a savior or Messiah.
Malachi	Prophesies a catacylsmic future Day of Judgment.

Battle scenes depicted on a relief in King Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh, in present-day northern Iraq, show the conquest of the Judean city of Lachish by the Assyrian Army in 701 BCE.

vulnerable have no redress. Crying out in God's name, the prophet compares his nation's rulers to cannibals "who eat my people's flesh, strip off their skin, and break their bones in pieces" (3:3).

Nation of sin

God's feelings toward the sinful people of Judah are expressed in an alarming vision at the start of the Book of Micah, in which, enraged, He comes "from his dwelling-place" treading the "heights of the earth"; this causes mountains to melt and valleys to split asunder (1:3).

Micah warns that the Israelites' sins have mounted to the point where God can no longer ignore them. Divine judgment has become necessary, and God delivers this judgment through the foreign, Assyrian oppressor. In Micah's prophecy, God promises to turn Samaria into rubble: "I will pour her stones into the valley and lay bare her foundations" (1:6). This reference to the brutal destruction of the Northern Kingdom shows what could also happen to Judah: society itself is broken, so judgment will come from an outside source.

The sins of Judah are myriad: they include idolatry; the rich dispossessing the poor of land and houses; cheating by merchants and traders; judges who take bribes; and thuggery. Religious leaders are as venal as the rest, with priests teaching "for a price" and so-called prophets telling fortunes for money.Other prophets in Judah try to silence Micah, convinced that his message of doom is exaggerated. They ask, "Is not the Lord among us?" (3:11) and give bland, empty assurances that no disaster would befall the nation. Micah, however, is adamant. Through its sins, the nation is treating God as an enemy. Judah could not expect Him to continue to give His protection.

Repentance and mercy

By Micah's final chapter, Judah is depicted as a dystopia: a society in which "the powerful dictate what they desire" (7:3). People cannot trust their neighbors or friends, even spouses have to be careful what they say to each other, and family members turn on each other and become enemies.

Yet judgment alternates with mercy, or the possibility of it, arrived at through repentance. God asks His people to explain themselves: "What have I done

> "I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression, to Israel his sin.
> **Micah 3:8**

> Your rich people are violent; your inhabitants are liars and their tongues speak deceitfully. Therefore, I have begun to destroy you, to ruin you because of your sins.
> **Micah 6:12–13**

to you? How have I burdened you?" (6:3). He reminds them how He brought them out of Egypt and into the Promised Land.

The people do not know how to respond. Should they come before the Lord with extravagant ritual sacrifices: burnt offerings, calves a year old, thousands of rams, whole rivers of olive oil? They even go as far as to suggest child sacrifice as a means of regaining God's favor. Nothing could be farther from God's mind, however. "He has showed you, O man, what is good," Micah announces. The answer is simple: to "act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). Sincere internal repentance reaches God, not empty external displays.

Scholarly interpretation

The Book of Micah is not confined to the words of the prophet alone. For the ancient Israelites, prophecy was for all time. The words of a prophet would be reflected upon, edited, reinterpreted, and added to over generations in the light of time and unfolding circumstances. Key later events that affected the text of Micah were the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 587–586 BCE, the Jews' subsequent exile in Babylon, and their return from exile 50 years after the fall of the capital. It is thus impossible to fully disentangle Micah's original prophecies from later editing and additions.

Generally, however, it seems that the messages of doom are Micah's. Many, but not all, of the messages of hope were added later. The experience of divine mercy in the return from exile did not detract from the prophet's original stern message, but provided it with a setting. Judgment leading to a change of heart and repentance came to be seen as evidence of God's love for His people. The final verses of Micah, almost certainly a later addition, show this: "You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the … sea. You will be faithful to Jacob, and show love to Abraham, as you pledged on oath to our ancestors in days long ago" (7:19–20). ■

> Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry for ever but delight to show mercy.
> **Micah 7:18**

The Bethlehem prophecy

Micah prophesies that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem. But after Jesus's birth, wise men, or magi, arrive in Jerusalem from the east asking for "the one who has been born king of the Jews." They have seen his star and come to worship him. Puzzled, Jewish priests and scholars inform them that, according to prophecy, Israel's expected savior will be born in Bethlehem.

The magi head to Bethlehem, where they find the baby Jesus and his parents. While it may have been elaborated after Micah's time (during the Babylonian exile or later), the prophecy was part of a growing expectation among the Jews that a new ruler would emerge to restore the nation's greatness. In the Micah prophecy, he would be a true shepherd under whom Israel would live peacefully.

Bethlehem was significant. It was King David's birthplace, suggesting a new ruler from the same royal line, and it was small and rural. For Micah and the tradition he represented, that was important. Like David, the new ruler would be from the fringes, not the center of society.

THE REMNANT OF ISRAEL WILL TRUST IN THE NAME OF THE LORD

ZEPHANIAH 3:17, CALL FOR REPENTANCE

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Zephaniah 1–3

THEME
God's righteous remnant

SETTING
640–609 BCE Jerusalem.

KEY FIGURE
Zephaniah Prophet of Judah.

The Book of Zephaniah is the ninth book within the short prophetic texts called the Minor Prophets, or the Twelve Prophets. The book was written during the reign of King Josiah (640–609 BCE) by, it says, the son of Cushi and a descendant of King Hezekiah. This has led some scholars to believe that the author may have been from Cush in Ethiopia or a descendant of King Hezekiah, a former ruler of Judah.

The book probably formed part of the religious reforms of Josiah, who outlawed the non-Yahwistic cults that had sprung up during Assyrian domination of Judah. It calls Judah "you shameful nation" (2:1) and berates Jerusalem whose priests "profane the sanctuary and do violence to the Law" (3:4).

The text, modeled on many other prophecies and structured in a similar way to other biblical narratives, is about destruction and restoration. The people of Judah and its neighbors Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Cush, and Assyria have angered the Lord. Their prophesied destruction on the Day of Judgment, the "great day of the Lord," is described in words that centuries later will be turned into the somber Latin hymn *Dies israe* (Day of Wrath) used in the mass for the dead.

Rising from the ashes

The restoration portion of the book begins at Zephaniah 3:9. Some scholars believe this section was written after the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile because it mentions the "remnant" of Israel and gathering those who have been scattered. It describes how the Lord will punish Israel's enemies and save the righteous, who are now purged from sin. Chapter 3:14–20, beginning "Sing daughter Zion; shout aloud Israel" tells how the Lord will remove sorrow and punishment from the Israelites. ■

> "I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. The wicked will have only heaps of rubble when I cut off man from the face of the earth,' declares the Lord.
> **Zephaniah 1:3**

See also: The Fall 30–35 ■ The Flood 40–41 ■ Sodom and Gomorrah 48–49 ■ The Fall of Jerusalem 128–31 ■ The Final Judgment 316–21

SURELY THE DAY IS COMING; IT WILL BURN LIKE A FURNACE

MALACHI 4, THE DAY OF JUDGEMENT

IN BRIEF

PASSAGE
Malachi 1–4

THEME
Wrath and judgment

SETTING
500–600 BCE Judah.

KEY FIGURE
Malachi Prophet of Judah.

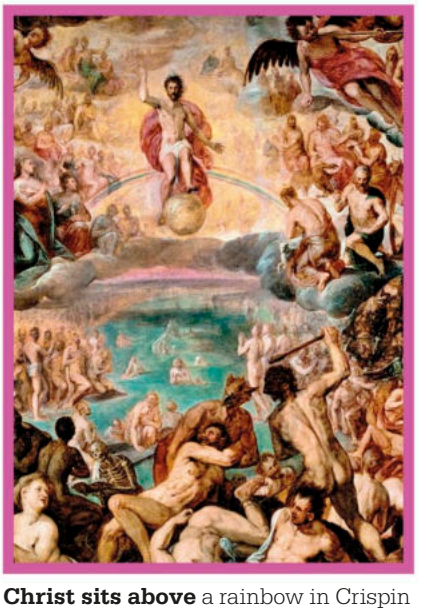
Malachi is the last book of the Minor Prophets, or the Twelve Prophets, and for Christians, it is the last book of the Old Testament. It is hard to know when it was written, but use of the word *pechah* (governor) in 1:8 fits the period after the Persian conquest of Judah (539 BCE) and the building of the Second Temple.

Malachi means "my messenger," or "angel," and Malachi says that "God will send a messenger who will prepare the way before me." Some believe this "messenger" is Malachi, although the phrase is also used by Jesus to describe John the Baptist (Luke 7:27), leading Christian commentators to see the promised messenger as Christ.

Catalogue of rebukes

The text begins by invoking the Genesis story of Jacob and his brother Esau (see pp. 54–55), in which Jacob is loved by God, and receives His blessing, while Esau is rejected. This sets the stage for the remainder of the text, in which God reminds the Israelites of His covenants with the ancestors and asks "Where is the respect due me?" (1:6). He rebukes the priests for not keeping the Law and the people for disobedience; taking wives who worship foreign gods; and sacrificing blind, lame, or diseased animals as offerings.

The book ends with a proclamation that the Day of the Lord will come, when "every evil-doer will be stubble" (4:1) to be set on fire. However, God renews His covenant with the faithful and states that He will send the prophet Elijah—a precursor to the Messiah in Judaism and to Jesus Christ in Christianity—before striking the land with "total destruction" (4:6). ■



Christ sits above a rainbow in Crispin van den Broeck's *The Last Judgment* (1560), recalling the rainbow that God created as a symbol of his covenant with Noah after the Flood.

See also: The Flood 40–41 ▪ Covenants 44–47 ▪ Esau and Jacob 54–55 ▪ The Ten Commandments 78–83 ▪ The Coming of Salvation 189 ▪ The Final Judgment 316–21