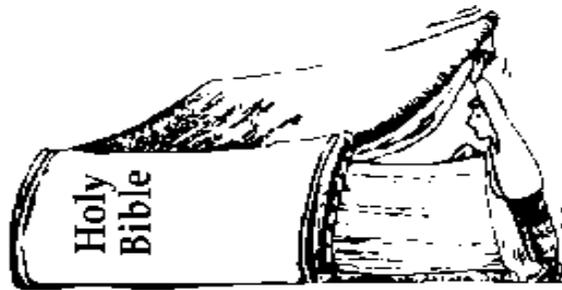


# Introduction: The Big Picture



## Opening Quotes ▾

- "God saw that it was good." Gn 1:10
- "Abram put his faith in Yahweh." Gn 15:6
- "God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO AM.'" Ex 3:14
- "The inhabitants you allow to remain will be thorns in your sides." Nm 33:55
- "In those days there was no king in Israel, and everyone did as he saw fit." Jg 21:25
- "Wherever David went, Yahweh gave him victory." 2 S 8:7
- "They scoffed his prophets until the anger of Lord was so inflamed that there was no remedy." 2 Ch 36:16
- "Isaiah said, 'Everything will be carried off to Babylon.'" 2 K 20:17
- "We must rebuild the walls of Jerusalem." Neh 2:17
- "Let anyone who has any zeal for the Law come out and follow me." 1 M 2:27
- "The Word became flesh." Jn 1:14
- "Death has no power over him any more." Rom 6:9



## Background Notes ▾

**PURPOSE OF THE BIBLE:** To preserve the "salvation history", the record of God's dealings with Israel and the early church.

**WRITTEN BY:** Kings, peasants, fishermen, tax collectors, rabbis, philosophers, statesmen, scholars, poets, doctors, shepherds, prophets, scribes, and other authors from different walks of life, all inspired, however, by the one true God.

**DATES & TIMES:** Treats the beginning of time to the end of time. Written over a span of about 1200 years from around the 12th Century BC to the end of the 1st Century AD. The books do not appear in chronological order for the simple reason that they were not written in chronological order!

**STYLES OF WRITING:** As diverse as its authors: prose, poetry, folklore, apocalypse, narrative, history, war chronicles, prophecy, direct address, romantic song, gospel, midrash, letters, and more.

📖 the BIG PICTURE		↔ : LAW, History, Writings, Prophets		↔ : key covenants in our Father's plan	
12 Periods ▾		Plot ▾	Other books related to period ▾		📖 stories in each period ▾
BC	🌐 THE BEGINNINGS	GN 1-11			Creation, Adam & Eve, Cain & Abel, Noah's ark, Tower of Babel
1850	👤 THE PATRIARCHS	GN 12-50	Job		Abraham, Isaac, Jacob (Israel), Joseph, Melchizedek
1250	⚠️ EXODUS FROM EGYPT	EX			Moses, the burning bush, the plagues, passover, exodus
1200	♣️ JOURNEY TO CANAAN	NM, Jos	LV, DT		Sinai desert, 10 commandments, Levites, Law, Joshua
1100	⚔️ THE JUDGE CYCLE	Jg	Ruth		12 tribes, Deborah, Gideon, Samson, Samuel
1030	👑 KINGS & PROPHETS	1 & 2 S	1 Ch, Ps, Prov		Saul, David, Solomon, Jerusalem, the Temple
1000	🗡️ THE DIVIDED KINGDOM	1 Kg	2 Ch, Prov, Ecc, Songs		Israel (N), Judah (S), Elijah & Elisha, Isaiah, Assyrian exile
721 587	☹️ BABYLONIAN EXILE	2 Kg	2 Ch, Tob, Hos, Am, Hab, Is, Jer, Lam, Jl, Mic, Zp, Jon, Nah, Ob, Ez, Dan, Bar		Babylonians, major prophets, Isaiah (to Israel), Jeremiah (to Jerusalem), Ezekiel (to Exiles)
538	⚙️ THE RESTORATION	Ezr, Neh	Est, Judith, Hag, Zech, Mal, Job		Cyrus, 2nd temple, 2nd Law, minor prophets, new writings
163 63	🕯️ THE REPURIFICATION	1 Mac	Dn, 2Mac, Sirach, Wisdom		Greeks, Maccabean revolt, Hasmonean Dynasty, Romans, Jewish sects (Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, Essenes)
AD	👤 JESUS CHRIST	LK	MT, MK, JN		Incarnation, Good News, New Law, Cross & Resurrection
33 70	🕯️ APOSTOLIC CHURCH	Acts	Rm, 1&2Co, Ga, Ep, Phil, Col, 1&2Th, 1&2 Tm, Ti, Phil, Hb, Ja, 1P, 2P, 1,2&3J, Jd, Rv		Pentecost, council, journeys, epistles, Body/Bride of Christ

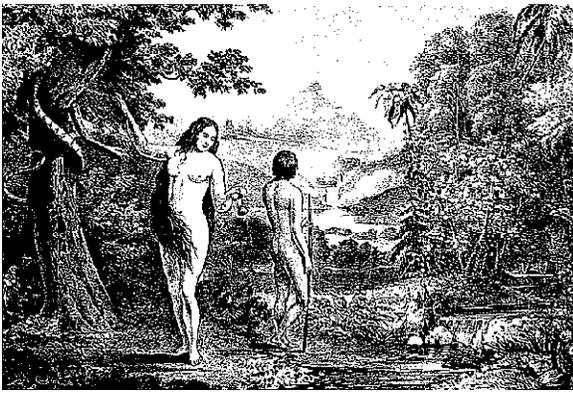


# Introduction: The Story



## I. THE BEGINNINGS

In the beginning there was nothing... yet God was there. After **creating** the world in an orderly fashion, he rested, calling it “good”. After placing the animals in the world, he created man and woman in his own image. Then his most cunning creature, the serpent, tempted **Adam and Eve** to eat the fruit God forbade, saying they would be like God, and they committed the original sin.



God punished the woman by making her subject to man and painful childbirth. He punished the man by making him work to make the earth produce food, and he promised an enemy for the serpent through the “son of the woman”.

Later their sons **Cain and Abel** offered sacrifices to God. God accepted only Abel’s sacrifice, so Cain murdered his brother out of jealousy, despite God’s warning to resist the temptation.

After mankind populated the Earth, God was not pleased with how much evil had spread and decided to destroy all of creation with a flood, saving the good man **Noah**, his family, and a male and female of every animal to repopulate the Earth. This time there would be a new world order: now man had to subdue the earth and its animals. God then made a covenant with all of creation: He vowed never to destroy all of creation by flood and left the rainbow as a reminder.

After repopulating the earth, man went back to his sinful pride and built the **tower of Babel** that was going to be high enough to touch God. In anger, God destroyed the tower and spread man throughout the world, giving them different languages to prevent them from ever collaborating again to try to reach him on their own.

## II. THE PATRIARCHS

God then chose to start his People. He chose **Abraham**, an upright man with no children. He showed

him the promised land, Canaan, where his chosen people would live. He made a new covenant with Abraham, promising him many descendants who would inherit this land. God then miraculously gave his childless wife, Sarah, their firstborn son **Isaac**. To test his faith, God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son. Abraham did not question God. Pleased with Abraham, God’s angel stopped him just before he could kill Isaac.



One day, Abraham won a battle against some kings who had kidnapped his nephew, Lot. In thanksgiving for his victory, he offered one tenth of his earnings to the priest-king **Melchizedek** from Salem. The priest-king blessed Abraham in the name of God with bread and wine.

One day, God visited Abraham in the form of three angels and showed him the destruction of Sodom, a city where many abominable sins were taking place. God reassured him that this would not have happened if there were any innocent people there.

Later, Abraham’s son Isaac had two sons, Jacob and Esau. **Jacob** tricked his brother into giving up his birthright as the firstborn, and then with his mother’s help tricked his father into giving him his brother’s blessing! Destined to be the patriarch of God’s chosen people, Jacob wrestled with God’s angel and won the name **Israel**, the new name of God’s people.

Jacob, or Israel, had twelve sons. He loved **Joseph** the most. This made the other eleven jealous, so they left Joseph in the desert one day to die, but some Midianites picked him up and sold him as a slave to Egypt. In Egypt he displayed the skill of interpreting dreams. The pharaoh was impressed when Joseph interpreted a dream of his to mean an upcoming famine, and made him governor of all Egypt in charge of storing food. When the famine did hit, Joseph’s

eleven brothers showed up from Canaan begging for food. Joseph loved his family and completely forgave his brothers, seeing God's providence in everything that had happened. He had them and his father brought from Canaan to Egypt where they lived in peace.

### Δ III. EXODUS FROM EGYPT

And so these first **Israelites** soon spread in Egypt and became prosperous. Several generations later, a pharaoh who never heard of Joseph was afraid of the Israelites' prosperity, so he drove them into slavery.



Enslaved and without a homeland, God's people cried out. God heard their cries and chose **Moses** as his prophet to liberate Israel. Moses was a descendant of Jacob's son Levi. In a **burning bush** God revealed His name, *Yahweh*, making it clear that he was the one true God, the god of Abraham and Jacob. Moses and his brother Aaron went to the pharaoh.

Despite the terrible **plagues** God sent to Egypt through Moses, the pharaoh was too stubborn to let God's people go. God informed Moses that He would send the angel of death on **Passover** night to kill the firstborn son of all the households, unless there was the blood of a lamb over the doorpost. The angel of death killed all the firstborn sons except for the Israelites'. The pharaoh ordered them to leave, and Moses led the people into the desert on an **exodus** back to their promised land.

### ♣ IV. JOURNEY TO CANAAN



After miraculously allowing the Israelites to cross the Red Sea by parting its waters, God gave Moses the **ten commandments** at Mt. **Sinai**, establishing a new covenant with all of Israel:

“You are my people and I am your God.” When Moses brought down the tablets, the people were already sinning by worshipping a golden calf. This covenant would depend on the people's faithfulness to Yahweh and their obedience to the **Law** given through Moses, including the practice of circumcision and the important law of keeping the Sabbath day holy.

The ark of the covenant was kept in a tent as they traveled towards Canaan. God appointed Aaron and the other **Levites** as priests to care for the sanctuary and perform the sacrifices to God. But the Israelites kept sinning against God, questioning him and his choice of Moses and the Levites. Because of this, many of them died by famine, plague, wild animals, and by war against foreign nations they encountered. They ended up wandering in the desert for forty years before finally seeing their promised land just across the Jordan river.

But there was a problem: there were already Canaanites living there, worshipping false gods, like Baal. Because morality at this stage was primitive, God called for holy warfare to reclaim the promised land in his name, the one true God, the God of Abraham and Jacob. He commissioned **Joshua** as the successor to Moses, and told him to confidently drive out the people living in the land which belonged to Israel, pronouncing a curse of destruction against them. God strongly warned the Israelites to remain faithful to him, and not to intermarry with the Canaanites or worship their gods.

### ☠ V. THE JUDGE CYCLE

The Israelites entered the land and engaged in many bloody battles, but gave in to their temptations and intermarried with the Canaanites, worshipping their gods. God punished them by making the acquisition of the promised land long and painful. (This also gave the Canaanites living there a chance to turn from their false ways and follow the Lord Yahweh.)

Piece by piece the Israelites established **tribes**, twelve in all, each bearing the name of one of the sons of Israel. In response to their cry, God would send them military heroes known as judges to deliver his people from their foreign enemies. One famous judge was **Gideon**, who was able to fight the Midianites and Amalekites even though he was greatly outnumbered.



What made Gideon a great judge was that he refused to let the Israelites make him a king, since only the Lord himself was to be the king.

Other famous judges were **Deborah**, who slew one of their enemies, and **Samson** from the tribe of Dan, famous for his fights against the powerful Philistines despite the wiles of their most powerful weapon against him – the Philistine woman Delilah!

Despite the strength of the judges the people of God were no match for the foreign kings. The Israelites cried out for their own king. Again God heard their cry, and told the last judge, the prophet **Samuel**, to anoint Saul as the king of Israel.

## ☆ VI. KINGS & PROPHETS

**I**n order to keep the king in line with God's will, God would give his instructions through the prophet. The king was to carry out these instructions faithfully. Failure to do so would result in punishment for the whole nation.

**Saul** was a strong king but not as strong as **David**, the young musician Saul admired. David's reputation as a greater warrior made Saul so jealous that he attempted to kill David. Instead of defensively killing the king, out of respect for Yahweh David ran into exile.

After Saul died in battle, David proved to be the mightiest king Israel knew. He was the one to finally eliminate the Philistine threat. He even conquered a city for their capitol: **Jerusalem!** But not only was he a great warrior, he also humbled himself before God's prophet when he was reprimanded for sinning.



God was pleased by his repentance and chose to establish his kingdom permanently through the line of David, considered to be the greatest king by all the people, to which no subsequent king could compare.

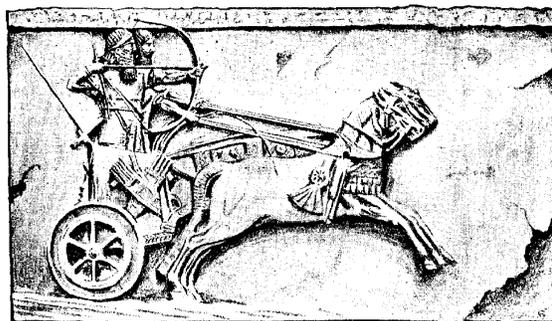
The next king, David's son **Solomon**, asked God only for the wisdom to rule his people. God was pleased and rewarded Solomon with both wisdom *and* riches. He built the great **temple** for Jerusalem, and many wise sayings are attributed to him. People would come from all around to hear him and pay him tribute.

## ■ VII. THE DIVIDED KINGDOM

**S**olomon won the admiration and respect of the foreign nations, but towards the end of his reign he lost sight of Yahweh, building temples for the gods of his foreign wives and imposing heavy taxes on the people. When his son Rehoboam threatened to tax the people even harder as their next king, ten of the twelve tribes revolted and chose their own king, Jeroboam, and eventually established their own capitol: Samaria.

For the next few centuries the kings of **Israel** and **Judah** went through good and bad kings. Especially in the northern kingdom (Israel), the worship of Yahweh became mixed with Baal worship, despite the warnings of the prophets like **Elijah** and **Elisha**. Meanwhile the smaller, southern kingdom (Judah), led by David's descendants, remained a little more faithful to Yahweh.

Eventually disobedience to the covenant would take its toll. The **Assyrians** began invading Israel. Instead of crying to Yahweh as they had done so many times before, Israel and her king ran to the foreign nations for help and even threatened to attack the king of Judah if he didn't join them! The king of Judah, in turn, appealed to the Assyrians for help! It seemed God's people had forgotten about him. "Whom shall I send to teach them?" God would ask. **Isaiah** was the prophet to answer God's call. He prophesied that Israel would be punished by the Assyrian army. The prophecy, of course, was fulfilled, and the Assyrians overthrew Israel and made Judah a vassal.



With Israel gone and Judah remaining (though a vassal), Judah would go through a few more Davidic kings. During this dark time the poor were being exploited, and Isaiah prophesied that one day the kingdom would be ruled by a prince of peace on the throne of David, a son born of a virgin. He would be called "Immanuel," or "God – with – us."

## ☹ VIII. BABYLONIAN EXILE

A century later **Jeremiah** and **Ezekiel** (two more of the **major prophets** like **Isaiah** before them) criticized Judah's false sense of security as vassals of Assyria. Their prophesies of doom came true when the **Babylonians** overthrew both Assyria and Judah. In the year 587 BC Jerusalem was destroyed and the people of God were scattered.

In the face of Judah's destruction Jeremiah stressed the importance of each individual's relationship with God. Meanwhile, the prophet Ezekiel acted out God's prophesies with similar messages to his fellow exiles living in Babylon.



Jeremiah prophesied that God's scattered flock would eventually be gathered by one of David's descendants, the one Ezekiel called a good shepherd, envisioning a humble prince riding on a donkey. Ezekiel, whom God addressed as "Son of Man", used apocalyptic visions which described a return to a new Jerusalem, not for the sake of the people who were so faithless, but simply for the glory of God's holy name.

## ⚙ IX. THE RESTORATION

Another prophet living amongst the exiles in Babylon was Second Isaiah. Since Israel and Judah were gone, the prophesies of doom were now directed at the Babylonians oppressing God's people. God would use yet another empire, the Persians, to punish the Babylonians just as he had used the Babylonians to punish Assyria and Judah. Second Isaiah did have a message for God's scattered people (now collectively called "Israel" again). That message was to prepare for a new exodus, a return to the promised land! He prophesied of "a voice crying in the desert" calling his people to prepare for an imminent "Day of the Lord".

He told them not to be afraid, for the Lord Yahweh was near. He prophesied in songs about a "servant of the Lord", sometimes describing Israel, but sometimes describing one man in particular whose very life would be a sin offering that would save God's people.

His prophesies began to be fulfilled when King **Cyrus** of the Persians allowed the scattered exiles to return to Judah. The region was now called Judea, and the few faithful exiles who returned were called Jews. They mourned bitterly when they found their holy city and its temple in ruins.



But with the encouragement of the "**minor prophets**" Haggai and Zechariah, these new Judeans rebuilt the **second temple**. They found opposition from the Samaritans, a mixed breed of Israelites who were never deported by the Assyrians during the exile, but mixed in with outsiders who were brought in by the Assyrians. Considered inferior by the Jews because of their mixed ancestry, these Samaritans attacked the Judeans' efforts to rebuild Jerusalem. In response to the opposition, the man Nehemiah led a campaign to rebuild the city walls.

On the religious front, the Levite scribe Ezra had found a long lost copy of the Laws of Moses in the ruins. This inspired a deuteronomic (which means "**second law**") religious reform, emphasizing the Sabbath and the purity of the race, dissolving any foreign marriages. The Jews established a theocracy based on the rediscovered laws, and they lived rather peacefully for a couple of hundred years.

Like the prophet Zechariah, the book of Daniel used apocalyptic writing to describe Yahweh destroying the four empires which suppressed his people. These and other prophetic writings also gave various descriptions preparing for the coming of God's anointed Messiah.

**M**uch of the Old Testament was written at this time, including the psalms, a collection of lamentations, prayers and songs praising and petitioning Yahweh, and sayings of wisdom. Many of the psalms were attributed to King David, proclaiming fearlessness before men and the comfort of God's protection: "The Lord is my shepherd, Whom shall I fear?" The Psalter came to be known as the songbook of the temple.

Also written were the proverbs, pieces of advice collected since the days of the kings. Many were often attributed to the wise King Solomon. The goal of the proverbs and the other wisdom literature was how to attain the good life. Although the concept of a good life at this time was measured largely by longevity, prosperity, and prestige, it was also a time when the fear of the Lord was considered to be the beginning of real wisdom. In fact, in light of the harsh experiences of life, some of these writings actually attacked the traditional view that the good are rewarded and the wicked are punished. The problem of the innocent suffering was treated in a play called Job, and the meaning of life was treated in a discourse called Ecclesiastes. Though the belief in an afterlife had not yet fully developed, these books find hope and wisdom in steadfast faithfulness to God, despite how useless life may seem to be at times.

## ❖ X. THE REPURIFICATION

**A**lexander the Great brought an end to the tolerant rule of the Persians over the Jews. The **Greeks** conquered the Jews not so much militarily, as culturally. Many Jews were fascinated (as usual) with the other gods. After Alexander's death the empire had been divided into factions. To the west were the Ptolemies in Egypt, and to the east were the Seleucids in Syria. Sandwiched inbetween these warring Greeks were the remnant Jews.



Like the Persians, the Greeks were tolerant of the Jews for a while. It was at this time that the Ptolemies had a Greek translation of the scriptures known as the Septuagint prepared by a group of 72 Jewish scribes.

Greek tolerance of the Jews' religion ended when the Seleucid king Antiochus IV, intent on Hellenizing the world, decided to wipe out the worship of Yahweh. Some Jews, disgruntled with Yahweh's apparent lack of success, abandoned faith in him in favor of the Greek gods, like Zeus, while the faithful **Maccabees** led the Jewish resistance against the Greeks.

The Jews eventually established themselves politically as the **Hasmoneans**, a successful dynasty almost the size of David's kingdom of old. The books of Maccabees and other deuterocanonical writings reflect the influence of Greek thought in the Jewish religion, emphasizing life after death, and the concept of the separation of body and soul.

**S**ince the Hasmonean Dynasty was essentially a political state, the concern for religion gave rise to new **Jewish factions**: the **Essenes**, a simple religious community which kept itself isolated from society in preparation for the Messiah, the **Pharisees**, a group of scribes which took upon themselves the job of interpreting the scriptures in the absence of a prophet, and the **Sadducees**, the Levitical priests who considered themselves the rightful interpreters of Scripture. The Pharisees would cling to the Law, following it to the letter, paranoid of losing the promised land again because of unfaithfulness to God's covenant. They would avoid contact with **Gentiles** (non-Jews), Samaritans, and anyone considered unclean by the old Law. Their interpretation of the Law and the Prophets, mixed with their own traditions, summed around some seven hundred rules and regulations, which became very cumbersome to follow.

The Sadducees took a simpler route, accepting only the first five books of the Law (the Torah). But they were also open to Hellenistic influence and did not share the Pharisees' view of life after death.

The Essenes in their own communities took great care in copying the scriptures. Although they lived in the Dead Sea area, they had a reason to suddenly hide the scrolls in the caves at Qumran. This reason was the **Roman Empire!**

The Hasmoneans were gradually swept aside by the growing Idumean family, Antipater. Palestine found itself ruled by Pompey, Julius Caesar, Cassius, Mark Antony, and Octavian (Augustus). Eventually one of Antipater's sons, Herod the Great, took control of Palestine as a puppet king of Emperor Augustus. Herod was bent on killing his rivals, including any "messiah" which would oppose him. After Herod's death, Palestine was ruled on and off by Roman procurators who never quieted down the troublesome Palestinian Jews. A new nationalistic group developed from the old Hasmoneans – **Zealots**, anxious for a king to lead them to a military victory over Rome. Inspired by the memory of the Maccabees, they often resorted to terrorist tactics against the empire.

And so, what was once the promised land was now a religious and political mess. *The "fullness of time" had been reached . . .*

## ✠ XI. JESUS CHRIST

“**B**e it done to me according to Thy word.” With these words, the virgin **Mary** conceived of the Holy Spirit the child **Jesus**. Later in the desert, the followers of John the Baptist were being baptized with water in preparation for the one who would baptize with the Spirit. When Jesus was baptized, he took up the message, “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand” and began his ministry. After resisting temptation by Satan in the desert, he chose twelve apostles, and preached in Galilee and Judea, performing miracles along the way, never for worldly attention, but only to emphasize his teachings, or to cure and feed the people around him. News of his powers and teaching authority spread quickly.

He often taught the people using parables in such a way that the simple would understand, but not the “wise”. Jesus reversed human judgments, teaching that the kingdom of heaven belonged to the children and to the poor in spirit, not to the self-righteous elite who prided themselves on wealth or on their showy religious practices. Jesus demanded of his followers a radical change of heart, challenging the Jewish leaders who were the “blind leading the blind.” At times Jesus would simply reiterate the teachings of Moses, like when he told them that the two most important laws upon which all others depended were “Love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, soul, and mind” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.” But at other times he took it upon himself to update the Laws himself – “It was written in the Law of Moses... *But what I say to you is this...*” This caused great division amongst the people and the religious leaders alike.

Many Jews had hoped that this was the long awaited military leader that would lead them to victory over their oppressors. They were disappointed when he taught them instead to “turn the other cheek” and to *love* their enemies and pray for them! He lost even more followers when he told them that he was the bread of life and that they must eat his flesh in order to have eternal life.

Jesus’ action challenged and angered many of the Jewish leaders. He hung out with all of the socially unacceptable people: tax collectors, Roman soldiers, prostitutes, and all sorts of “sinners”. He rode into Jerusalem like a prince, went to the Temple and flipped the money-changers’ tables, yelling at them for turning his Father’s house of prayer into a den of thieves. He angered them further by doing good works on the Sabbath, like curing the sick. But if there was one thing that Jesus did that they considered outright blasphemy, it was when he said to people who had repented of their sins the words that only God himself had the authority to say: “Your sins are forgiven.” This was enough for them to plot against him and kill him.

A Jew himself, Jesus expected that his own people would forsake him, but he was astonished at the great faith expressed by some of the Gentiles, one of them a Roman centurion. “Not even in Israel have I found such faith.” He prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem in their generation, and the end of the world at an unexpected time that no one would know.

Turning to his apostles, he instructed them to go out and spread the **good news** that the kingdom of God was at hand, and that now was the time to repent. He asked his apostles who people said he was. When Peter professed that he was the Christ, the Son of the living God, Jesus founded his church on the rock of Peter, and that not even the gates of Hell would prevail against it.

The night he was betrayed, he celebrated his last meal, telling his apostles to remember him by eating the bread and drinking the wine as his body and blood until he would drink with them again in heaven. That night he wept bitterly for the suffering he was to undergo the next day, asking in his humanity to be spared if possible.



But his will was united with his Father’s, and he humbly accepted his will, allowing himself to be handed over by the Jewish Sanhedrin for blasphemy to the Roman authorities. He was **crucified** under the procurator Pontius Pilate, an unexpected turn which his followers only learned later was necessary in order to fulfill the new and everlasting covenant between God and a new people – any who would follow Christ. Only through Christ would God the Father be revealed. Above his head on the cross was a sign mocking him as the “King of the Jews.”

Fulfilling his prophecy when he said that the temple would be destroyed and that he would rebuild it in three days, he **rose** from the dead on the third day and appeared to his apostles for forty days. He promised to send them the Holy Spirit and then commissioned them to go out, baptize all the nations in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He told them to teach them and forgive their sins, and that anyone who listened to them listened to him. He then ascended into heaven after promising them that he would be with them to the end of the world.



## XII. APOSTOLIC CHURCH

After receiving the Holy Spirit at **Pentecost**, Peter and the other apostles proceeded to spread the “gospel”, or “Good News,” and were given the ability to perform miracles in the name of Christ. As they baptized households and formed the early churches, they also found themselves persecuted by Romans and Jews who had not converted. Stephen was the first martyr, stoned to death for his “blasphemous” faith in Christ.

One of those persecuting them happened to be both a Jewish Pharisee and a Roman citizen. His name was Saul. The risen Christ appeared to Saul and converted him. Now named Paul, he became the apostle to the Gentiles (all non-Jews). He embarked on three **journeys** to the various churches, writing them letters of instruction in their new Christian faith.

Paul’s main message in his **epistles** was that just as all of us, Jewish or not, are under the dominion of sin, so are all of us now called to be his people, a new Israel. Paul explained how the Jews of the old covenant, unable to keep the law perfectly, were instructed by God to sacrifice innocent animals as an atonement for their sins. But this was only a preparation for a new and everlasting sacrifice: God’s own Son, whose death on the cross was the ultimate sacrifice. To prove this he rose from the dead and appeared to Paul, commissioning him to preach the good news to any who would accept it: anyone, Jew or Gentile, who professed and truly believed that God raised Jesus from the dead, would be saved from their sins, baptized with the Holy Spirit to become the adopted children of God. They were to carry out not the works of the old Law as if they could boast of deserving salvation, but the good works that God had laid out for them, with the assurance that their salvation had been purchased for them at a great price.

Meanwhile Peter and the other apostles had met in **council** at Jerusalem to discuss early church matters such as appointing successors (Matthias was the first) and whether converts had to observe the Jewish Law. When Paul checked with Peter and the others for their approval of his mission to the Gentiles, he made sure that Peter did not impose Judaism on new converts!

Paul knew that Jesus’ atoning death on the cross would be a stumbling block for Jews who clung to the Law as well as for Gentiles who clung to their sinful lifestyles. He explained that Jesus was the fulfillment of all the Jewish prophecies, and of the Greeks’ belief in an “unknown god”. Trying to be “all things to all people,” Paul found himself constantly persecuted and beaten, and told his listeners that following Jesus necessarily entailed taking up his cross, but that this suffering was nothing compared to the glory that awaits us in heaven. He was glad to endure suffering, for in his flesh he was finishing what Christ had started for the sake of the Church, the mystical **Body** of Christ. This Body was made up of all believers in Christ, a “communion of saints” praying for one another, interceding in the name of Jesus to the Father.

In his pastoral letters he reminded the early churches that they were a priestly people, not only the anointed elders who were to lead the people, but that *all* the believers were to share their spiritual gifts for the benefit of the whole church, just as the members of a body work together. Paul chastised any divisions between the churches who were all one body of Christ, and called on them to hold firm to the gospel that he and the other apostles gave them by word of mouth or by letter.

Other apostles wrote letters as well, not to individual churches, but to all the churches, also exhorting them to good works with faith in Christ, alongside warnings of false gospels. One such false teaching was the belief that they no longer had to do anything once they were saved, a wicked distortion of Paul’s teaching of salvation by faith apart from works of the Law. James made it clear to them that faith is completed by good works, for without works faith is dead, like a body without a soul.

Peter also warned the believers that the Scriptures and some of Paul’s difficult teachings were getting distorted. How were we to discern the true gospel taught by the apostles from false teachings? John’s letters answered this in two ways: if the teachings deny Jesus to be the Son of God, or if they claim the love of God while exhibiting hatred towards others, they are clearly teaching a false gospel.

In a revelation to John, Jesus showed him a vision of a time of great tribulation, a battle between God’s armies and the followers of the beast fighting the children of the woman whose child the beast failed to devour. This was followed by the final judgment, a Day of the Lord when God would call his **Bride**, his chosen ones, to join Him forever in the heavenly Jerusalem. Until then, Jesus told John, “Let the sinner keep sinning and the upright keep being upright. I am coming soon.”



## Defending the Faith: Other Holy Books

*"Different religions have their holy books – the Hindu Vedas, the Upanishads, Hammurabi's Code, the Koran, the Book of Mormon, the Sayings of Buddha... Isn't the Bible just one of many holy books?"*

The Vedas of India are older than the Old Testament. The Koran and the Book of Mormon are newer than the New Testament. Why, then, should we believe the Bible is any different from the holy books of other religions which came before and after the Bible?

For starters, none of writings prior to the Bible claims to be the Word of God. They claim only to be sayings from enlightened men recommended for their learning, their experience, or their wisdom. The prophets of the Bible, on the other hand, claim that the Word of God had come to them, in spite of who they were.

And while Hammurabi thanked the gods for giving him his kingdom, he never attributed his code of laws to them. The Ten Commandments, on the other hand, were given to Moses on tablets written by the finger of God himself.

Another difference between the Bible and other writings concerns divine communication about the future. The ancient practice of the occult finds its modern counterpart in New Age, scientology, card and palm reading, and phone psychics whose predictions are concerned only with man's welfare here on earth, not with the will of God, which is the *only* thing the Hebrew prophecies cared about. While a modern psychic earns "95 cents for each additional minute", the prophets of old earned only mockery, persecution, and death, announcing the will of God regardless of the will of the people.

Another difference between the ancient writings and the Bible concerns historical assertion. A good Hindu will tell you that it doesn't matter whether any character in the Upanishads is historical, and that it's the moral of his story that counts. The apostle Paul, on the other hand, hangs his entire theology on a cross made of real wood, which held a living, bleeding carpenter from Nazareth whose birth in Roman Palestine is our basis for knowing what year it is.

As for the Koran, while it mentions Abraham, the prophets, the Virgin Mary, and Jesus, the Jesus of the Koran is not the original Jesus. In the Koran he is a prophet inferior to Mohammed, dismissing as "inappropriate" the idea that God should have a Son, in spite of the existence of His Church and their scriptures.

As for religions which have arisen in the last couple of centuries, some do not deny, but add to, the New Testament. The Book of Mormon calls itself "another testament" and is the book of the "Church of Jesus Christ of *Latter* Day Saints." Such books must do one thing to maintain credibility: they must deny the New Testament church that gave us the New Testament! They must assert that the church which assembled and guarded the Bible itself throughout the centuries is not *really* the actual Church Jesus founded and promised to be with always and until the end of time.



## Expressing the Faith: The Red Letters

The words of Christ in red-letter editions of the Bible inspired this powerful song by DC Talk.

*Pages filled with a holy message  
Sealed with a kiss from heaven  
On a scroll long ago  
Phrases, words that were bound together  
Now have the power to sever  
Like a sword evermore*

*Heed the words divinely spoken  
May your restless heart be broken  
Let the supernatural take hold*

*There is love in the red letters  
There is truth in the red letters  
There is hope for the hopeless  
Peace and forgiveness  
There is life in the red letters  
In the red letters*

*One man came to reveal a mystery  
Changing the course of history  
Made the claim he was God  
Ageless, born of a virgin Mary  
Spoke with a voice that carried through the years  
It's persevered  
(Heed the words...)*

*What You say moves me, revelation, come and take me  
The more I look the more I see  
The Word of God is what I need  
It's the book of love  
It's the book of love  
(Heed the words...)*

*Speak to me, breathe in me new life  
Let Him in your heart*

➡ **Next time: "In the Beginning..."** ↩