

# SUMMER STUDY

July 13: Making Sense of Your Bible

## The Story Of The Bible

The books of the bible can most simply be organized into four categories- historical books, wisdom literature, prophecy and epistles (or letters). The Old Testament starts with history, moves to wisdom literature and ends with prophecy. The New Testament starts with history, moves to the epistles and ends with prophecy.

The books are categorized by genre, not chronologically- so sometimes when you are reading a particular book; it is difficult to understand where you are in the grand scheme of the story. You'll also find that in different places, parts of the story are repeated, emphasized with more detail, or described from a different perspective, so it is possible to read about an event or a person more than once. **The purpose of this basic outline is to give you an overall framework for the story of the bible, and indicate where the books, and the most well-known bible stories, fall within that story.**

The book of **Genesis** has so much history in it! It includes the historical narratives of creation, Adam and Eve's sin, Noah and the flood, the tower of Babel, the call of Abraham, the stories of the patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac (the one Abraham almost had to sacrifice on the alter), and Jacob (Jacob's brother was hairy Esau). Then there is Joseph. Joseph was one of Jacob's 12 sons. He was favored by his dad, and was given a colorful coat. Joseph had lots of dreams that made him look better than everyone else, which made his brothers mad. They sold Joseph into slavery and he was taken to Egypt. In Egypt, Joseph was falsely accused by Potiphar's wife, imprisoned, eventually released, and because he could interpret Pharaoh's dreams, he achieved a very high position in Egypt. Joseph's brothers came to Egypt in search of food during a famine which is when Joseph forgave his brothers, and saw his father Jacob again. Jacob and his brothers and all their families lived in Egypt and multiplied greatly in number. This is where the book of Genesis ends.

It is assumed that the book of **Job** is the oldest book in the bible, and was probably written during the time of Abraham. Job is wisdom literature and is all about suffering- fun stuff.

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At the beginning of **Exodus**, about 400 years have gone by. Joseph was long gone, and the Egyptian pharaohs had enslaved the Hebrews, because Egypt was intimidated by their great number. An edict was given to kill baby Hebrew boys, and it was then that baby Moses was hidden in a basket by his mom, but rescued and raised in the Egyptian palace. When Moses was about 80, he was called by God to rescue his people. God appears to Moses in a burning bush in Midian where Moses lived after he had fled Egypt because he had killed an Egyptian for mistreating a Hebrew slave. Nervous, but obedient, Moses returned to Egypt to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt. This is when the 10 plagues came from God- which culminated with the 10<sup>th</sup> plague- the death of the first-born son. This plague marked the first Passover- which was when the Hebrews put blood on their doorway to keep the angel of death away, and made unleavened bread, preparing for flight. It is during this "exodus" from Egypt that by the power of God, Moses parted the Red Sea to escape the Egyptian army. Once in the desert, God gave the 10 commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai as well as instructions on how to build the tabernacle. This is where Exodus ends.

**Leviticus** is full of laws about how God wanted the Israelites to live as HIS separate and holy people. It includes instructions on worship, sacrifice, food, health, and government. It is very detailed.

In **Numbers**, spies were sent by Moses to scout out the land God told them to go and live in - Canaan. After the spies saw the intimidating people that lived in Canaan and would have to be defeated, all but two spies (Caleb and Joshua) were too scared to obey God and go back into Canaan. As a punishment for their lack of faith, God sentenced the Hebrews to wander around the desert for 40 years until all of that "scaredy cat" generation died, except for Caleb and Joshua. Meanwhile, another generation was raised up- God provided for the Israelites with manna from the sky and led them around as a pillar of fire at night and a cloud in the day. A census was taken- which is why the book is called Numbers.

In **Deuteronomy**, the Israelites gear up to take Canaan. Before he died- Moses reminded the Israelites of what God taught them at Mount Sinai. You'll hear some repetition here, of things recorded in previous books. The first five



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books of the Old Testament are often referred to as the “Pentateuch”- meaning “five” books.

After Moses died, Joshua became the leader of the Israelites and led the charge into Canaan, all of which is recorded in the book of **Joshua**. The Israelites started in the city of Jericho, where they meet Rahab, the prostitute, who believed in the God of the Hebrews. She helped the spies, and was spared, when the walls of Jericho came tumbling down. Jesus came from Rahab’s lineage- a Gentile prostitute- pretty cool. That shows us that God’s grace can cover the worst of sins. The Israelites continued to defeat the inhabitants of Canaan- (the inhabitants of Canaan are all of those people whose name ends in “ites” in the bible). However, the Hebrews did not drive out all of the enemy in Canaan- which eventually contributed to Israel’s spiritual decline in the long run.

After their conquest, albeit incomplete, the 12 tribes inhabited the land of Canaan. Essentially, The 12 tribes were the 12 sons of Jacob (in Genesis). At first, The 12 tribes are ruled by the **Judges**: some well known judges are Gideon (the one that put the fleece out) and Samson (the strong guy who is tricked by Delilah). This is also when the story of **Ruth** takes place- during the time of the judges.

Not happy with judges anymore, the Hebrews want a king. The people picked Saul, but God told Samuel (a priest, and probably the last judge) that David- a young boy at the time, would be king. David gained fame when he killed Goliath and became a mighty warrior under the reign of Saul. Saul became jealous of David and hunted David often trying to kill him. David wrote many of the poems in **Psalms** while seeking God’s protection from Saul. Finally, Saul died and David took over as the king of Israel. David experienced great military victory and as a result the nation of Israel became big and powerful. It is then, that David committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her husband murdered. Samuel rebuked David, and David, being a “man after god’s own heart”, confessed and repented of his sin.

Although their first baby died, David and Bathsheba had another son- Solomon, who succeeded David as Israel’s third and last king while it was still one nation. Solomon was granted wisdom from God, and became very rich and

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powerful. Under his rule, Israel was at the peak of its power and the temple is built. Solomon wrote **Song of Songs** as a young man in love and wrote much of **Proverbs**, because of his great wisdom. Despite his blessings, Solomon sinned greatly throughout his life- he married pagan women, built temples to false gods and lived a life of extravagance, selfishness and immorality. At the end of his life, he wrote **Ecclesiastes** and many assume this book was his act of repentance.

After Solomon died, Israel split over the disagreement of who should succeed Solomon as king. The northern part (made of 10 tribes) was called Israel. The southern part was called Judea (made up of Judea and Benjamin).

The accounts of Saul, David, Solomon and the division of Israel are recorded in the books of **1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings and 1 & 2 Chronicles**. These books are written by different people about the same time frame in Israel's history, so the story doesn't continuously flow at this point, as it has through Judges. It can get a bit confusing.

During this time, God started speaking to his people through the prophets. The books of prophecy are the last section of books in the Old Testament. They start with the "major" prophets (because they wrote the longest books) and then list the 12 "minor" prophets. Because the prophets lived at the same time that Israel was dividing, sometimes you have to compare the information in the prophetic books to the information in the historical books of 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings and 1 & 2 Chronicles in order to know where you are in the story. In my opinion, this is the trickiest part- there are a lot of kings and prophets to keep track of!

After Israel divided, both the northern and southern nations were ruled by kings- most of whom were evil. While the evil kings ruled, the people fell into a moral and spiritual decline, certain prophets spoke to the northern kingdom- now called Israel (**Amos, Hosea**), some to the southern kingdom- now called Judea (**Joel, Micah, Isaiah, Zephaniah, Habakkuk** and **Jeremiah**), and some prophets spoke to the enemies of the nation as a whole (**Obadiah, Jonah and Nahum**). During this time, prophets like Elisha and Elijah lived and interacted with the kings.

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The north, or Israel, was the first to be overthrown by the new world power, Assyria, in 722 B.C. The south, or Judea, had a few more good kings, like Hezekiah and Josiah, so they hung on a little longer- but eventually, Judea fell to the next world power, Babylon (which had overtaken Assyria), in 586 B.C. As a result of Israel's demise, promising young men of Israel were exiled to Babylon- Among them were Daniel. This was when Daniel and his friends proved their faith: in the lion's den and in the fiery furnace. Daniel received many prophetic visions from God which are recorded in the second part of the book of Daniel.

All of the prophets before the exile are referred to as pre-exilic prophets. All of the prophets during the exile are referred to as the exilic prophets: **Daniel**, **Ezekiel**, **Jeremiah**. (Jeremiah also wrote **Lamentations**- which was written before the exile, on the cusp of Judea's overthrow).

The Israelites stayed in exile until Persia became the world power. King Cyrus, of Persia, allowed the Israelites to return to their homeland of Canaan in 538 BC. The books of **Nehemiah** and **Ezra** record the history of this return, which happened in three waves of people. When the Israelites returned, they rebuilt their temple, their walls and their city. Post-exilic prophets spoke on behalf of God at this time, which are recorded in the books of **Haggai**, **Zachariah** and **Malachi**.

Some of the Israelites did not return to their homeland, but stayed in the places that they were exiled. Esther was one of these people. She became the queen of Persia, and was used by God to protect his people- her story is recorded in **Esther**.

400 years passed by and God no longer talked to his people through the prophets, this is referred to as the "silent years" and is the time between the Old Testament and New Testament. During the silent years in the bible, the world's power changed hands from Persia, then to Greece under Alexander the Great, and then to Rome. Jesus came to earth during the time of the Roman Empire.

The life and teachings of Jesus are recorded in the gospels- **Matthew**, **Mark**, **Luke** and **John**. When Jesus lived he referred to the Old Testament scriptures many times, validating their truth. After Jesus returned to heaven, he

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sent (as he had promised) the Holy Spirit to empower the new Christians. The disciples of Jesus (now apostles) were influential in spreading the gospel, teaching Christian doctrine and establishing churches. This is commonly known as the "church age". All of the disciples were persecuted and eventually martyred one by one, with the exception of John, who lived longer. Paul was converted and traveled on many missionary journeys, spreading the gospel to the Gentiles (the people who did not come from Israel's heritage). The book of **Acts** records many of these events- but does not include the death of Paul or of Peter, who are presumed to be executed under the reign of the Romans emperor, Nero.

During his life as a Christian, Paul wrote many letters to the new churches. The books of Paul are not organized chronologically in the bible. They are organized first by those letters addressed to groups of peoples (longest to shortest) then those letters written to individuals (longest to shortest). Books like **Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians and Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians** were written to groups of people. For instance, Ephesians was written to the church in Ephesus. **1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon** were all written to individuals. Five of these books were written while Paul was in jail: Philemon, Colossians, Philippians, Ephesians, and 2 Timothy.

Other epistles not written by Paul come after the Pauline epistles in the bible: **Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter and 1, 2 & 3 John**. Where Paul's letters are named after the audience of the letter, letters not written by Paul are named after the author of the letter (with the exception of Hebrews). The last book of the bible is Revelation. The book of **Revelation** was written around 90AD by the apostle John. In it, John describes his prophetic visions concerning the return of Jesus, the defeat of Satan, judgment and the establishment of God's earthly kingdom.