

**GENESIS.** The word *genesis* is derived from a Greek word meaning "beginning." The book of Genesis tells of many beginnings: of the world (Gen. 1 and 2); of the human race (1:26-27; 2:7); of marriage (2:22); of sin (3:6); of the Hebrew nation, and of God's covenant or agreement with Abraham and Sarah and their descendants (12:2-3). Greatest emphasis is placed on the last two named.

Chapters 1-3 deal with questions that have been asked in every age: "Where did the world and its inhabitants come from?" and "Why is there evil in the world?" In answer to the first question Genesis says: God created everything(1:1). The book does not give details as to how or when this was done. Innumerable fruitless arguments have raged as people have tried to use Genesis to prove or disprove various scientific theories. Genesis is simply not intended to be a scientific report. Rather, Genesis is a confession of faith. It declares that God is the Creator of all, and human beings are the climax of God's creation.

However, the people whom God created disobeyed God when they were tempted. As a result, evil spread throughout the created world (Chap. 3). The rest of the book—and of the Bible—tells how God has been active in this world to overcome the effects of sin and to enable all people to receive the eternal blessings for which they were created.

The story of Noah and the great flood (Chaps. 6-9) is a story of both punishment and grace. When people continued to reject God, the waters of the flood were sent to purify the earth by destroying its sinful people. Noah and his family received assurance that God would not again destroy the earth by means of a flood and God promised to bless Noah's descendants.

Chapters 12-50 of Genesis focus on Abraham and Sarah, who were called to leave their home (12:1) and go to a place called Canaan. There God established a covenant with Abraham, promising to give him a homeland and many descendants, and God said that other nations would be blessed because of him (12:1-3). This

promise was repeated and made more clear from time to time throughout the Old Testament, until it reached its greatest fulfillment in Christ.

Abraham and Sarah were not only the physical ancestors of the Hebrew people, but they were the founders of the Hebrew faith. The stories of their descendants— Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph— conclude the book of Genesis. They all experienced God's presence and blessing in their lives.

Though it relates the lives of several ancestors of the faith, Genesis is above all a book about God. It was God who began the action, and it was God who created the Hebrew people by calling Abraham and Sarah and promising, through a covenant, to bless their descendants and all nations. The great Creator is also the giver of blessings and a keeper of promises. This is the message of Genesis.

**EXODUS.** Exodus tells about the key event in Old Testament history. That event is identified in the title, which comes from a Greek word

meaning "going out." It refers to the "going out" of the Israelites from Egypt.

The actions of God which resulted in the Hebrews being delivered from virtual slavery in Egypt are referred to throughout the Old Testament as the prime example of God's mercy and love. (See, for example, 1 Sam. 10:18; Ps. 81:10.) This exodus was also a preview of God's deliverance of all from sin, through Christ. God liberated Israel from bondage, from the effects of the work of the angel of death in the last plague (12:27), and from the power of Pharaoh, just as Christ frees us from sin, death, and the power of the devil.

Exodus also tells of a number of key events through which God was revealed to the Israelite people. For example, God revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush (3:2); to Pharaoh and the Egyptians in the 10 plagues and at the Red Sea crossing (14:25); and to the Israelites at Mt. Sinai (19:17). Exodus reveals a God who was near at hand and concerned with the daily affairs of the Israelite people. From this standpoint, the

book reaches a high point in 40:34-35 when God came visibly to the tabernacle. This symbolized God's desire to live always in the midst of the people.

Another high point of the book is the giving of the Ten Commandments (Chap. 20). The commandments outlined how the people could show God's love at work among them. Through these Commandments, the people were called to honor God and love their neighbors. It is worth noting that the commandments were given after the people were freed, and not as a condition of being liberated.

Three types of laws for the Israelite nation can be found in the Exodus record: *moral*—aiming at personal purity (20:1-17); *ceremonial*—as an aid in worship (20:22-26; 23:14-19); and *civil*—to encourage the people to serve others (21:1—23:13).

**LEVITICUS.** Leviticus deals with the problem of how sinful persons can come near the holy God without being destroyed. The key

to this problem—and the key word in Leviticus—is *holiness*. The refrain, "You shall be holy; for I [the Lord your God] am holy" (11:45 and others), underlies the message of the book. Chapters 1-16 tell how to become holy—how to overcome the results of sin. Chapters 17-27 give instructions for how to remain holy.

The first section of the book reaches a climax in the Day of Atonement (Chap. 16) around which the entire book pivots. This was an annual day of humiliation and repentance for all sins. It was the only time that anyone, even the high priest, could enter the innermost room of the tabernacle. The day has significance for Christians as a picture of the ministry of Christ, who by the sacrifice of himself made it possible for us to come into God's presence (see Hebrews 9-10).

Leviticus in the Old Testament and the Letter to the Hebrews in the New are perhaps the strangest books in the Bible to a modern reader. They speak of the laws of sacrifice and of worship in terms of ritual offerings involving

blood. Priesthood is very important.

For the Hebrews, sacrifice was a way of acting out an inner need. They offered sacrifices to reestablish a right relationship with God after they had sinned and repented, and to express gratitude for what God had done for them. Acceptance of the sacrifice signified acceptance of the one who brought it. To sincere worshipers it brought an inner peace.

Leviticus, in addition to describing the rituals by which the Lord maintained fellowship with the people, also includes rules for Israel's everyday life. One of these was quoted by Jesus: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (19:18). Behind the laws there was to be the strong, motivating power of love.

**NUMBERS.** Originally none of the first five books of the Old Testament had a title. "Numbers" was the name given to the fourth book by early Greek translators, because it tells of two numberings, or censuses, of the Israelites (Chaps. 1-4 and 26).

The Hebrew Bible calls this book, "In the Desert," which is closer to the main theme. From 10:11 on, Numbers deals largely with events in the desert. At first Moses planned to invade Canaan from the south, the most direct route from Sinai. But the people, frightened by reports of their spies, balked. Then he led them the long way around the Red Sea and north to the Jericho area. While the people wandered in the desert, they rebelled against God and against the leadership of Moses. Each rebellion was followed by severe punishment. But God repeatedly demonstrated mercy by giving the people another chance. Even so, God's plan to bring the Israelites into the promised land of Canaan was delayed until an entire rebellious generation had died in the desert and a new generation was ready to carry out God's will, 40 years later (Chaps. 21-36).

A key theme of Numbers is preparation. First there were preparations for entering the promised land. When the people showed that they were not ready for this step, the nation went



through a 40-year period of preparation to make them ready. Then, at the close of the book, specific preparations were again made for entering the new land. These preparations were both military and spiritual in nature.

**DEUTERONOMY.** *Deuteronomy* is from a Greek term meaning "second law." The book covers much of the same ground as Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, but has its own particular slant. Using three long speeches, or sermons, of Moses as a framework, it develops a theme of love and obedience to Yahweh, the Lord.

The first sermon (Chaps. 1<sup>^</sup>) reviews the history of the Israelites since God gave them the Ten Commandments. In the second sermon, which takes up most of the book, Moses reminded the people how they had agreed to serve God. His review of the Ten Commandments is followed by what Jesus later called the Great Commandment (compare Deut. 6:4-5 and Matt. 22:37). It also includes a

command to parents to teach God's law to their children (6:7). This section also offers a prediction about another prophet, greater than Moses (18:15). The final sermon emphasizes that if the people were obedient to God, they would be blessed; if they were disobedient, they would be cursed.

There has been much debate about who wrote the book of Deuteronomy. Though Moses is identified as the speaker throughout, he could not have written the conclusion of the book, which tells of his death. Though some of the material may date back to the time of Moses, it was put into its present form at a later time, probably during the reign of King Manasseh (687-642 B.C.).

Later, in the reign of Manasseh's grandson, Josiah, a copy of the Law, corresponding roughly to our Deuteronomy, was found in the temple. The story of how Josiah listened to it with an open mind and of his response to it is found in 2 Kings 22:1—23:25.

**JOSHUA.** The Book of Joshua is named after the man who was Moses' assistant and military leader during the 40 years in the wilderness. Shortly before Moses' death, Joshua was appointed to lead the people into Canaan, the land promised to Abraham and his descendants.

Although Joshua is the principal character in the book and was instrumental in leading the Israelites into Canaan and in keeping them true to their faith in God, the book is really about God's actions. It was God who gave them the land (1:2,3,15). God fought their battles and won victories ("it was not by your sword"—24:12). This was made strikingly clear by the unusual way in which Israel captured Jericho (6:16) and in the defeat they suffered when they neglected to consult God before fighting Ai (Chap. 7).

The book can be divided easily into two parts. Chapters 1-12 tell of the conquest of Canaan. The remainder of the book is concerned with the distribution of the land. Although all the land

was divided up among the 12 tribes of Israel, they failed to occupy all of it (23:5,7). This led to trouble later on.

The final two chapters contain Joshua's farewell statements and his stirring declaration of faith, "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord" (24:15).

## I

**JUDGES.** The Book of Judges gives us a picture of a time when there was no king in Israel; persons did what was right in their own eyes (17:6). It is not a pleasant picture. Soon after Joshua died, the Israelites turned away from God. This brought punishment—as they had been warned—in the form of conquest by neighboring nations. In the midst of their suffering, God raised up a "judge"—a person with leadership qualities who led the people back to God and delivered them from their enemies. But as soon as this leader left the scene, the people turned to idol worship again.

This cycle—unbelief, punishment, repentance, deliverance—occurs seven times in

the book of Judges. Those who compiled the book wanted to emphasize that forgetting the Lord always led to disobedience and punishment. Repentance resulted in God's sending a savior (judge) to rescue them. Victory brought relief and peace for a while, until the cycle began once more.

The book gives three reasons why the Israelites kept turning away from God. They had failed to conquer all of Canaan as God had intended, and they began to copy the idol worship of the tribes in their midst. Secondly, when Joshua died there apparently was no leader to take his place. Finally, these people were too young to have experienced God's great acts of deliverance in Egypt and the wilderness.

The book names 13 judges, of whom four receive major attention: Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson. The title "judge" was used by Hebrew historians to distinguish them from earlier tribal chieftains and later kings. These men and women responded to God's call and were led by God's spirit. Even so, they were

not perfect. The story of Samson illustrates this point. The book of Judges reminds us that God can use even sinful and disobedient people to accomplish God's purposes.

**RUTH.** The book of Ruth stands in contrast to Judges—to show that even in this time of wickedness there were some who lived in faithfulness to God and to their families and neighbors. This beautiful short story portrays love's power to triumph over sorrow and hopelessness and to bridge differences in family, race, and religion.

Ruth, a Moabite, married into a Hebrew family. After her husband and the husband of her sister Orpah died, Ruth chose to follow her mother-in-law, Naomi, back to Judah, to live among the Hebrew people. Ruth also turned from her religion to worship Yahweh the Lord.

Before long, Ruth won the heart of Boaz of Bethlehem, and they were married. The son born to them restored the family line of Naomi and her dead husband, Elimelech. The child also

became the grandfather of David the king and thereby an ancestor of Jesus Christ.

**1, 2 SAMUEL.** These two books, which were considered a single book in the Hebrew Scriptures, have been called the finest series of historical sketches in the Bible. They cover about 100 years of Hebrew history, from the last of the judges, Samuel, through the establishment of the kingdom under Saul, to the great expansion of the kingdom under David.

The establishment of the kingdom is the main theme of these books. A turning point in the account comes when the Israelites insist, against Samuel's advice, on having a king (1 Sam. 8). The same chapter foretells some of the oppression the people would suffer under kings. In spite of Samuel's disappointment in the people's desire, which he interpreted as a refusal to let God rule them, he showed his concern for the people by promising to continue to pray for them.

These books add details about the One whom

God had promised to send. In 2 Samuel 7 God says that his future plans of blessing for the people will come through the descendants of David, who ruled Israel from about 1000 to 961 B.C.

Another turning point in the story is David's adultery with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11). Although David is praised as a faithful servant of God, the book does not picture him as a perfect person. His sin is reported in order to warn us that sin affects all people and that it brings its own evil results. But the account also emphasizes that God forgives sinners and uses them as servants. Although David repented of his sin, it seems that one trouble after another followed this incident: the death of one son, the murder of another, the rebellion of a third; then another rebellion and a famine.

First and Second Samuel tell the stories of Eli, Samuel, Saul, Jonathan, and David. First Samuel deals with Samuel and Saul; Second Samuel tells about David.

The stories of these men bring out significant



contrasts. Eli and his wicked sons are contrasted with faithful Hannah and the son she consecrated to the Lord. Saul's hatred toward David is contrasted with David's kindness toward Saul, and later with David's patience with his own enemies. There is a contrast between Saul, from whom the spirit of the Lord finally departed, and David, who is called a man after God's own heart. And there is a contrast between the promising beginning and the dismal end of Saul's reign.

A major concern of the unknown writer of these books was to show how God was involved in the history of the Israelite people. When the leadership of the nation was corrupt, God raised up Samuel to be a judge. God directed the choosing of the first king and led him to victories. When this king failed, God chose another. Neither wicked people nor weaknesses in those who served God could defeat God's purpose.

**1, 2 KINGS.** At the conclusion of 2 Samuel, the

stage seemed to be set for the greatest chapter in the history of Israel. David had completed the conquest of the promised land; the nation was at peace; and the people, led by their king, worshiped the true God.

However, in spite of a grand beginning under Solomon, the Hebrew kingdom soon split into two. First and Second Kings tell of the gradual fall of the two nations, taking in a period of more than 400 years. The larger kingdom, known as Israel, met its doom first (2 Kings 17), but by the end of the book the Kingdom of Judah has been conquered too.

The story is confusing to many readers because of the way in which the scene of action shifts back and forth between Judah and Israel. The writer or writers wanted to show how events in the two countries were related. So he would first introduce the king of one nation and tell of events in his reign. Then he would go back to tell about all the kings who had ruled the other country in the meantime.

David's son Solomon managed to keep the

kingdom united during his reign. However, he did stir up resentment by his harsh treatment of his enemies, and particularly by making the people pay large taxes and contribute their labor for his grand schemes. Eventually Solomon was influenced by his many foreign wives to turn away from the Lord.

Nevertheless, 1 Kings gives a generally favorable picture of Solomon. He is still remembered as the wisest man who ever lived—the result of God's answer to his prayer (3:6-9). Solomon's prayer of dedication for the temple he built is one of the high points of the book (Chap. 8).

Solomon's son Rehoboam rejected proposals for changes in government, and as a result all of the Hebrews except the tribes of Judah and Benjamin broke away to form the Kingdom of Israel. After a shaky start, the new nation attained some power and prosperity. But before long it became a satellite state under Assyria, attempted to rebel, and was finally crushed in 721 B.C. (2 Kings 17:6). The nation's downfall is

explained on the basis of its failure to believe in God and care for the poor of the land. The kings are blamed for leading the people astray. None of the 19 kings wins the approval of the writer. Some of the most remarkable stories in the Bible come from the attempts of the prophets Elijah and Elisha to bring the people back to faith in God.

Among the 18 kings of the smaller Kingdom of Judah, the writer considers a half dozen basically good, and gives unqualified approval to Hezekiah and Josiah. Josiah brought about the last great religious reform in Judah (Chaps. 22-23). But evil kings followed him and the nation was eventually conquered by Babylon in 587 B.C. (Chap. 25) where many were taken into exile.

**1, 2 CHRONICLES.** Among those exiled to Babylon following Jerusalem's fall in 587 B.C. were writers and editors who not only updated the history of the kingdoms but also organized the earlier accounts from creation through Moses.

In 539 B.C. Babylon fell to a Persian conqueror,

Cyrus, who freed the exiles of many nations held captive by Babylonians. Among them were people from Judah, who could now return to their former homeland.

Well over a century after the first exiles came back from Babylon, someone known as "The Chronicler" wrote a history to bring things up to date. The Chronicler wrote at least two books (1 and 2 Chronicles) and may also be responsible for the books Ezra and Nehemiah, though the evidence for this is mixed.

The main purpose of 1 and 2 Chronicles was to enable the broken nation to rediscover its identity as the people of God. To accomplish this purpose, he picked out elements of the history of Israel (most coming directly from the books of Samuel and Kings). He used these elements to teach certain lessons to the Jews of his day. These lessons focused on: 1) how God's promises to the Israelite people were kept, as demonstrated in the continuing reign of David and his descendants; and 2) how God should be worshiped, with emphasis on the temple at Jerusalem.

The historical accounts in Chronicles show a definite point of view. The Kingdom of Israel is not mentioned if it can be avoided, because it had rejected God. Similarly, King Saul's reign gets only one short chapter because he too turned from God. Events are often explained on the basis of the leaders' attitude toward God. The events picked out from the lives of David and Solomon seem to give greater glory to the royal family of David and his descendants, and to add details about worship at the temple. They also tell more about some of the religious reforms in Judah, probably with the intention of urging readers to be more faithful in their worship of the true God.

**EZRA AND NEHEMIAH.** The two books of Ezra and Nehemiah, which originally were a single volume, give a glimpse of Jewish history in the period following the captivity. They begin where 2 Chronicles left off. When Persia succeeded Babylonia as the great world power, the emperor Cyrus permitted the Jews to return to their homeland. He even returned the furnishings that had

been taken from their temple.

Not all the Jews returned to Judea, nor did those who went back go at the same time. When Cyrus gave his permission (about 538 B.C.), about 50,000 people returned (Ezra 2:64-65) under the leadership of Sheshbazzar, who was probably a descendant of David. Their return fulfilled a prophecy (Jer. 29:10) that God would bring the Jews back after 70 years of captivity.

The exiles began to rebuild the temple at Jerusalem. Soon the people who lived nearby asked if they could help. They were harshly refused; the Jews did not consider them true Israelites either by race or religious practice. The sincerity of these Samaritans is open to question when we see how they began at once to oppose the work of the Jews with force. They were able to persuade a new emperor to stop the building. However, under prodding from the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, the exiles eventually completed the temple.

It was after this that Ezra and Nehemiah came upon the scene. Scholars disagree as to who came first; probably both were present at the

same time, at least for awhile. Ezra was a priest whose function was to rebuild the spiritual life of the Jews (Ezra 7:14-18). He gathered together the books that form the Old Testament and taught the people, stressing obedience to the Law. Ezra also instigated the dissolution of marriage ties between Jews and non-Jews in Judah. Thus he sought to foster the concept of one people, one religion, one God (Ezra 7-8; Neh. 8-9).

Nehemiah's job was more political. He is remembered especially for rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem. His humble attitude and sincere identification of himself with the sins of his nation, along with a consistent prayer life (see Neh. 2:4), may account for the fact that Nehemiah made some headway in his attempt to bring his people back to obedience to God. He, however, credits his success to the fact that "the gracious hand of my God was upon me" (Neh. 2:8). This statement runs like a refrain throughout the two books.



**ESTHER.** The name of God is not even mentioned in this book; in fact, it has no references to religious belief or practice. The book's main purpose seems to be to tell the origin of the Feast of Purim. This was not observed before the exile, and it is commanded nowhere else in the Bible. In the Book of Esther, the feast is authorized by letters from Esther and her uncle Mordecai (9:20,29), following the deliverance of the Jews from destruction planned by Haman.

The feast gets its name from a Babylonian word which means "lot." Haman, the prime minister, cast lots to pick the day on which to kill the Jews (3:7; 9:24). The day of the feast is actually the following day, when the deliverance of the Jews had been assured after the king permitted them to defend themselves.

King Ahasuerus is identified with Xerxes of history. Many scholars, however, question whether Esther is meant to be a historical account. Persian records make no mention of the events described in this book; and it seems

doubtful that Mordecai could still have been living in the time of Xerxes if he was exiled during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, more than a century earlier.

Another purpose of the book is to show how God preserved the Israelite people. Even in a foreign land and in the face of powerful enemies, God directed events, and raised up leaders like Esther and Mordecai, so that God's saving will could be carried out.

**JOB.** The theme of the book of Job is the problem of apparently undeserved suffering. It may have been written to counteract the popular belief that people suffer in direct proportion to their sins. This was the attitude of Job's three "friends," who first tried to get Job to admit he had done something wrong, then flatly accused him of sins. The book clearly teaches that a person's misfortune is not necessarily related to his sins. It also does not attempt to explain the mystery of suffering or to "justify" God's dealings with human beings.

The opening section (Job 1:1—2:13) and closing (42:7-17) make up an ancient story about patient Job that circulated for centuries before being written down in Hebrew, perhaps between 1000-800 B.C. An anonymous poet, probably writing during the exile, added the lengthy poetic sections: Job's discussions with his three friends (3:1—31:40) and the Lord's discourses from the whirlwind (38:1—42:6). Yet another poet probably added Elihu's speeches (32:1—37:24) at a later time.

At the end of the book, God confronts Job. Job, God declares, was right. Sin did not cause Job's sufferings. On the other hand, since Job is human, with limited human understanding, God cannot explain to him why he has suffered so. Yet by confronting Job, God shows great concern for him and responds to his need.

We are left, in the end, with the mystery of suffering, counterbalanced by the greater mystery of the God who is with us in life's most trying moments.

**PSALMS.** The book of Psalms was the hymnbook of Israel. These psalms were written over a number of centuries and finally collected and grouped in the present form which has five divisions (1-41; 42-72; 73-89; 90-106; 107-150). This may represent an attempt to parallel the five books of the Law. Each book of psalms concludes with a song of praise, or doxology, and the entire collection concludes with a psalm of praise (150).

Most of the psalms were probably written to accompany acts of Israelite worship. The following categories are used to describe the various types of psalms.

*Thanksgiving and Praise.* About one-third of all the psalms fall into this category. They express thanks for God's deliverance.

*Lament.* Individuals seek deliverance for illness or injustice, or the nation asks for help in time of distress, such as famine or enemy attack.

*Songs of Faith or Trust.* Persons or the nation express trust in God's ability and willingness to help.

*Confession.* A person confesses sin and asks for forgiveness.

*Royal and Enthronement.* These are used at times like the coronation of a king or to confess the Lord's kingship over Israel.

*History and Creation.* Some psalms recount the acts of God in history and in creating the world.

*Wisdom.* Meditations on the ways of God and the place of human beings in relationship to God and others.

A novelty among the psalms is the acrostics, in which each verse begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet, in order. Psalm 119 (the longest chapter in the Bible) is the most complex of these. In it each verse within a paragraph begins with the same letter, and each paragraph has a different initial letter.

The chief characteristic of Hebrew poetry is what is known as parallelism, in which two or more lines make up a unit. Several types can be observed in the psalms. Some parallelism repeats the same thought in different words (19:1). Two lines "rhyme" in meaning, rather

than rhyming according to the sound of the words. Sometimes the parallelism involves a direct opposite (1:6), or it may be a further explanation of the thought of the first line (23:1).

Great contrasts of mood can be seen in the various psalms: anguish and despair in some; joy in others. Intimate personal communication with God stands side by side with community celebration. It's no wonder that both Judaism and Christianity have treasured the Psalms over the centuries.

**PROVERBS.** Proverbs brings together into a vast, infinitely varied collection wisdom literature from many sources and ages. Scholars have identified at least eight collections of sayings in the book. The wise men in Solomon's court, where wisdom writing flourished, probably dedicated their work to him, a fact which would account for the phrase "the Proverbs of Solomon" that occurs at the beginning of several of the collections.

Wisdom literature consists mainly of advice to the individual in daily affairs. The book of Proverbs was part of this body of wisdom literature and was likely compiled after the exile and used to instruct Jewish youth. It seeks to show the people of God the difference between good and bad, right and wrong, wise and foolish in the many situations that they face. The foundation stone of a wise person's life is the fear—that is, reverence, respect, acceptance—of the Lord, Yahweh (Prov. 1:7).

**ECCLESIASTES.** The title for this book in Hebrew is *Qoheleth*, which may roughly mean "Preacher" (1:1; 12:9,10). This word may also be related to the Hebrew root word *qahal* ("assembly") and means one who conducts an assembly or school.

Ecclesiastes offers the philosophical observations of an unknown Jewish thinker, probably written between 300-250 B.C. This places the book in the Greek period, and influences of Greek thought are evident.

Actually, much of the author's philosophy challenged accepted Hebrew beliefs. Most importantly, he challenged the idea that human beings can influence God. God is described as the one who determines human fate. So all work, all seeking of wisdom or pleasure or riches, is vanity and as fleeting as the wind. Even so, Qoheleth encourages his listeners to accept life as it comes. His advice is to take life with both hands as God gives it to you, living it to the full, and leaving the future to God. He would have agreed with the modern saying, "You can't take it with you," and added, "Enjoy it while you can."

The book of Ecclesiastes was taken into the Hebrew canon perhaps because it was long associated with Solomon and because it contained a final admonition to "fear God, and keep his Commandments" (12:13-14), probably added later by an orthodox editor.

Ecclesiastes was read at the Feast of Tabernacles, probably to act as a balance to the happy, carefree spirit of that occasion.



**SONG OF SOLOMON.** This book is a love song, or series of songs. The theme of love runs through these very personal, colorful, and frank poems. We are here not reading a discourse about love but the impassioned words of people in love. Some of the poems may have been recited at weddings. Even today, in parts of the Near East, villagers address the bridal pair as king and queen during the marriage celebration.

The Bible, touching upon every facet of human experience, does not avoid the area of sex. The Song of Solomon celebrates love between man and woman and treats this phase of life with beauty, wonder, and honor.

God is not mentioned in Song of Solomon. To justify its inclusion in the Bible, both Jews and Christians have taught that it is an allegory. This means that its language is symbolic; it doesn't mean what it appears to mean, but has a deeper, more spiritual meaning. Thus the description of love between a man and a woman has been interpreted to refer to the love of God for Israel, or to the love of Christ for his church.

**ISAIAH.** The Book of Isaiah falls into three divisions. The first unit, Chapters 1-39, is made up of prophecies from Isaiah, a prophet who was active in Judah from about 742 to 701 B.C., a period when the growing Assyrian Empire was moving westward. In 722 B.C., Sargon, the Assyrian king, conquered the northern kingdom, Israel. Judah, though forced to pay tribute, retained its national identity. However, there was tremendous pressure on the southern kingdom to take sides in the power struggle between Assyria and Egypt.

Isaiah, a man of some standing in Jerusalem, persistently warned that Judah should not ally herself with any earthly power. God would protect the people if they trusted God alone.

The second division of the book, Chapters 40-55, comes from a different author many years later, about 540 B.C. It contains sermons to the exiles in Babylon. The anonymous prophet is known as Second, or Deutero, Isaiah.

The changed historical situation shines through

these messages. After being captive in Babylon for over half a century, the Jews were looking with fascination at the rise of a new conqueror, Cyrus the Persian. He had won control of lands on three sides of Babylon and was apparently preparing to move in for the kill.

In all this, the prophet of the exile saw the hand of God opening a door of freedom for his people. His poems, among the most beautiful in Scripture, ring out themes of comfort, hope, coming deliverance, and redemption. They are filled with assurances of Yahweh's love for the Hebrew people.

They also point to a new role for them, that of servant. Four poems in particular show God's will that the people, through patience, suffering, and spreading their knowledge of God, should be God's light to the nations. The last in this series, Isaiah 52:13—53:12, is the famous Suffering Servant passage. The Christian church has always understood the suffering of Christ on the cross as the supreme example of the creative suffering described in Isaiah 52-53.

The last division, Chapters 56-66, which may or may not have come from Deutero-Isaiah, reflects a still later historical situation. Leaders from the exile have returned to Jerusalem. Former glorious hopes have faded, and the prophet tries to inspire the community to serve God faithfully. He looks ahead to a new deliverance, a mighty action of Yahweh which will make Jerusalem the religious center of a world converted to serving God. This kind of prophetic dream, not based upon historical events then in progress, is known as apocalyptic.

Many passages in Isaiah are familiar because of their use in music and from frequent (120 times) quotations in the New Testament.

**JEREMIAH.** Jeremiah lived about 100 years after Isaiah, during the religious reforms begun by King Josiah. He criticized the shallowness of these reforms, and as he warned, they apparently did not last. Jeremiah's preaching seemed to be ineffective too. The king cut up his book of

prophecies. Jeremiah was put into prison as a traitor and contradicted by false prophets. Those who respected him either had little influence or were afraid to follow his advice.

Perhaps partly because of the lack of response to his message, added to the fact that he had to talk so much about coming punishment, Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet. He often expressed his misgivings to God, and this is recorded in the book. But these moments of doubt were between himself and God alone. When he faced the people he showed great courage and carried out his task faithfully, as he condemned the sins of the people and the nation.

Jeremiah had a strong positive message as well. His purpose in warning about coming punishment was always to cause people to repent so God wouldn't have to carry out the judgment. And he held out hope for a better day to come. Jeremiah promised a return of the Jews from exile in 70 years. He also saw, far in the future, a "day of the Lord" when all evil would

be overcome. Then God would establish a new covenant with the people, based on the forgiveness of their sin, and everyone would know and obey God (Jer. 31:31-34).

We owe the present Book of Jeremiah to his faithful scribe Baruch who preserved many of the prophet's sermons and meditations, adding to them biographical material of his own.

**LAMENTATIONS.** The year 587 B.C. brought disaster on Judah. Jerusalem was sacked and burned. The temple was destroyed. Five hundred years of rule by the Davidic dynasty ended. Babylonian guards herded many of the people into exile.

Lamentations consists of five poems lamenting or expressing sorrow over the fall of Jerusalem. The poems give a vivid description of the destruction of the city and with great feeling tell of the sufferings and anguish of the people. Yet the tone is not bitter nor self-righteous. God was righteous in bringing this judgment, the writer says. He confesses his nation's sin and calls on

the people to repent.

And beyond punishment, what? God does not afflict human beings willingly or without a purpose. Lamentations voices the faith that God will forgive and restore the covenant relationship with the chosen people, Israel.

Tradition, in keeping with its tendency to assign anonymous writings to well-known persons, ascribes these psalms of lament to Jeremiah. But Lamentations may be the work of more than one author, reflecting on the tragedy that fell upon Jerusalem.

**EZEKIEL.** Ezekiel, a priest, preached to the Jewish people during the first part of their exile in Babylon. He was among the thousands of Jews who were deported from Jerusalem when the Babylonians defeated Judah in 597 B.C. His message, at least to begin with, was not one to comfort the exiles. Even the tragedy of their exile had not brought them back to faith in God. They felt sure they would soon be returned to Jerusalem, whether or not they turned to God.

Ezekiel told them their exile would last a long time, and that Jerusalem would be destroyed. In part, Ezekiel's message was an explanation of why God had allowed his people to be conquered. He pointed out that God had repeatedly withheld punishment the people deserved. They had finally been destroyed because they were guilty of all kinds of sin.

Later, Ezekiel encouraged the exiles to look forward to a time of restoration. When some, believing they were helplessly suffering for the sins of their ancestors, became discouraged, Ezekiel preached the doctrine of individual responsibility. God would deal with them on the basis of their own actions and not on the basis of what their ancestors did.

A long section, Chapters 25-32, contains prophecies against the nations. The judgment on his own people will be followed by a reckoning with the world powers. Justice will be done because God is both just and ruler of the earth.

The concluding section, Chapters 33-48, is Ezekiel's vision of the future with God in full



control. God will give his people a change of heart so that they will abide in holiness. And God will set them on a cleansed land, in a new community centered around the temple, rather than the royal palace.

The Book of Ezekiel is full of unusual and often puzzling elements: visions, allegories, parables, proverbs. His language is similar to that of the Revelation of John. His messages are also very similar to those of Jeremiah, who probably had an influence on Ezekiel. In the face of impending judgment, both prophets hold out the possibility of hope because of the mercy of God.

**DANIEL.** After the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C., the Jews came under the political control of his successors. Conditions were tolerable until one of the Syrian rulers, Antiochus IV, decided to stamp out Judaism in his tiny subject state of Judah. He underestimated the stubborn faith of the worshipers of Yahweh. Many died rather than

deny their religion. A rebellion started that incredibly succeeded in winning independence. The account of this story in 1 and 2 Maccabees (part of the Old Testament Apocrypha) helps us to understand the book of Daniel, which was most likely written about 167 B.C., when the persecution was the hottest. The writer of Daniel chose the exile as the setting for the book, because setting the characters amidst the events of the day may have caused instant censorship. The author's intention was to encourage other Jews to resist Antiochus to the death. God, he said in the latter part of his book, would defeat the foe and give victory to the people.

The first six chapters include stories about how Yahweh rescued faithful Jews from the fiery furnace and from the jaws of the lions. The point of these stories is that the heroes stood up faithfully for their religion in the face of death. By the power of God they came through. So you, the writer implies, may trust in our God. God, not our Syrian tyrant, will have the last word.

Using the literary form of the vision, in Chapters 7-11 the writer reviews the history of the four great empires which had ruled over the Jews since the decline of the kingdom after Josiah. He uses animal symbolism: a lion for Babylon, a bear for the Medes, and a leopard for the Persians. A fourth with horns and great iron teeth and bronze claws stood for the Greeks (7:1-8).

In Daniel 11:31 and 12:11, mention is made of the "abomination that desolates." This is an indirect reference to the desecration of the temple in Jerusalem by Antiochus, an act remembered with horror ever since. It is described in 1 Maccabees 1:54.

We cannot interpret all the symbols in Daniel, but when he writes of the history close to his own time his clues are unmistakable.

The author did not look to the zealous Jews who fought with the sword to save his people. He relied on the supreme power of God. Unlike Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who walked away from the superheated furnace

unsunged, there were many who were killed resisting Antiochus. The author believed that God would bring these faithful ones to life again (12:2). This is the first clear statement of the resurrection hope in the Old Testament.

**HOSEA.** The Book of Hosea is the first of the Book of the Twelve, also known as the Minor Prophets. Hosea lived in the prosperous period when Jeroboam II ruled the northern kingdom of Israel around 750 B.C. Hosea knew only too well the moral and religious sickness of his people. Many worshiped the god Baal.

A broken home and an unfaithful wife are the basis for the message of Hosea. Hosea was told to marry a prostitute. After a time she left him. Later he found her in a slave market, bought her, and brought her back to live with him as his wife. This, Hosea said, was similar to the relationship between the Israelites and God. They had committed spiritual adultery. They had broken their covenant with God and had been unfaithful to the One who loved them. It was

not just a matter of wrong deeds and broken laws; more serious was their indifference to God's great love. Yet in the face of this rejection by the people, God continued to love them and was willing to take them back, as Hosea had taken back his wife.

**JOEL.** Little is known of the prophet Joel, except that he was the son of Pethuel (1:1). He probably prophesied to the people of Judah sometime after the return from exile in Babylon (3rd-4th Centuries B.C.). Joel has also been associated with the temple in Jerusalem and because of this has been called a "cultic prophet."

The occasion for Joel's message was a plague of locusts, described in Chapters 1 and 2. Joel implied that this had come upon the people because of their sins. But he was more concerned to interpret it as a preview of greater destruction to come. This would take place in the "day of the Lord," a time of judgment that was close at hand and which would also be

fulfilled to a greater extent in the distant future.

Yet Joel pointed out that this day of judgment could also be a day of salvation for some, because God is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love" (2:13). He repeatedly called on the people to repent and return to the Lord. If they did this, he promised, they would be saved. His prophecy that God would pour his spirit on all flesh (2:28) was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:16ff.).

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**AMOS.** Amos, a contemporary of Ho-sea, was a shepherd who made a living from his flocks and sycamore trees. This unprophet, as he called himself, was inspired to speak the word of the Lord so forcefully that a modern reader can still feel the impact. The Book of Amos preserves for us some of his sermons and a brief account of a confrontation he had with the priest Amaziah.

Periodically Amos traveled from his home town, Tekoa in Judah, to market cities in the northern kingdom. There he observed the evils

that still plague urban centers today: degrading poverty, corruption of justice, oppression of the lower classes by the rich, luxuries without regard for cost and at the expense of honesty and integrity.

Outwardly religion was flourishing. The royal sanctuary at Bethel enjoyed an abundant share of the expanding economy. Sacrifices were regular and generous.

Amos, however, measured Israel by the tightness of her deeds, as shown in the whole life of the people, rather than by attention to God in the sanctuary. His indictments of the specific sins of particular groups of people remains today one of the most impressive statements of the justice of God. He condemned empty worship practices and proclaimed that true faith was more than participation in religious rituals. He urges, in a key passage, "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an overflowing stream" (5:24).

The heart of Amos' message expresses the grief of God over the people's sin, and he appeals to

them to "see the Lord and live." Amos' warnings apparently went unheeded, as the day of the Lord's judgment did come (6:11-14).

After the heavy note of judgment throughout the book, Amos closes with an unexpected message of hope (9:11-15). The Day of the Lord will be a time of restoration as well as of punishment, and will finally bring the kind of world God wants.

**OBADIAH.** The message of Obadiah—an unknown prophet—is primarily one of doom for the nation of Edom, who were the descendants of Esau. Soldiers from Edom had served as auxiliary forces when Nebuchadnezzar's army captured and burned Jerusalem in 587 B.C. Sometime afterward, the bitter indictment recorded in Obadiah was made, charging Edom with deceitful conduct and enumerating a list of "you-should-not-have's." Judah will be God's instrument to punish Edom, the oracle goes on. This will be part of a larger restoration which will see Israel ruling the territory in her vicinity



that was once part of David's empire.

Obadiah is the shortest book in the Old Testament and often overlooked because of its vengeful message.

**JONAH.** A man named Jonah lived in Israel in the eighth century B.C. (2 Kings 14:25). We don't know who wrote the book bearing his name—nor when. It is different from other prophetic books; it tells the experiences of a prophet rather than repeating his message. Most scholars are of the opinion that the book was written long after Jonah's lifetime, probably in post-exilic Judah, because it opposes the type of narrow Jewish nationalism present at the time. It was also not intended as a historical account, but rather as a parable, similar in many respects to the parables of Jesus.

For many people Jonah is the story of a man swallowed by a whale. But Jonah is a story about God's power over all the earth—over the sea, the animals, and powerful nations. Even more, Jonah is a story of God's patience and

loving concern—for a reluctant missionary, for uninformed sailors, for a cruel, pagan city. The most significant truth of the book is that God is concerned about everyone—even God's enemies.

The author wanted to give his message to the people of Israel. Instead of using a spoken prophetic oracle, he chose the short story as his means of communication. Beneath the quiet humor, gentle sarcasm, and exaggerated situations, he was trying: 1) to portray in the figure of Jonah the selfishness, stubbornness, and lovelessness of the Jewish people of that day; 2) to convince his fellow Jews that other people—even their enemies—could love and serve Yahweh as well as they; 3) to remind the Jewish people of their mission to preach to all nations about God's mercy and forgiveness (Gen. 12:1-3; Is. 42:6-7; 49:6).

**MICAH.** Micah came from Moresheth, a small village in the hills southwest of Jerusalem. He was a contemporary of Isaiah, Amos, and

Hosea. His prophecies were spoken to both Samaria (Northern Kingdom) and Jerusalem, the capital of Judea (Southern Kingdom). In the first three chapters of the book, Micah declares the same fate for both kingdoms: national punishment and destruction.

Chapters 4-7 are collections of prophecies that may date back to Micah or may have been added at a later time. Some of the passages in this section are especially well known, such as the vision of nations beating swords into plowshares (4:3); the prophecy that a messianic ruler would come from Bethlehem (5:2); and the clear requirement of the Lord that all people "do justice, and . . . love kindness" (6:8).

**NAHUM.** In its day, the Assyrian Empire was feared and hated by many subject peoples, including Israel, which it destroyed, and Judah, which was subject to it. Nineveh, Assyria's capital, had become the symbol of cruel oppression and of lust for wealth and power. Small wonder that with the defeat and fall of

Nineveh in 612 B.C. there was general rejoicing.

A few years before Nineveh's fall, the prophet Nahum (the name means "comfort") predicted the event in some of the most striking poetry in the Old Testament. Chapters 2 and 3 brilliantly describe the attack and defense of the city. The closing lines are like a triumphant shout: "All who hear the news about you clap their hands over you. For who has ever escaped your endless cruelty?" (3:19).

Only the relatively short oracle on Nineveh remains out of all that Nahum prophesied. Though its single-minded attention to the wrath of God is understandable, it should be balanced with the broader view of Jonah that God loved even Nineveh.

**HABAKKUK.** The theme of Habakkuk is similar to that of the Book of Job. The prophet complained that God was allowing wickedness to triumph. God replied that he was doing something about it by "rousing the Chaldeans" to bring punishment on the sins of Judah. At that

Habakkuk wondered how God could permit the Jews to be punished by the people of the nation of Chaldea, for they were even more wicked. God asked him to be patient. Eventually all the wicked would be dealt with; only the righteous would live—by faith (2:4). This thought is picked up and given deeper meaning by Paul (Rom. 1:17).

Verses 1:2—2:5 are a dialog between the prophet and God; 2:6-20 consist of five prophetic woe oracles; and Chapter 3 is more like a psalm in the form of a prayer, which may have been used as liturgy in worship.

Little is known about Habakkuk, but he probably lived about the same time as Jeremiah and prophesied sometime just before 600 B.C. , when the Chaldeans were coming to power.

**ZEPHANIAH.** Zephaniah is a voice of judgment. The book's opening statement threatened destruction on the entire earth. This judgment was applied first of all to Judah and Jerusalem, then to the surrounding nations. It

was a punishment, especially on Judah, for the sin of idolatry, which had resulted in corrupt officials and faithless people. But it was also punishment for an attitude of total indifference toward God.

In the midst of these predictions came an appeal to seek the Lord. Zephaniah did not feel that the judgment could be avoided, but some individuals might be saved. He spoke of the "day of the Lord" not only as a time of punishment, but also as a time when God would carry out good intentions for people. Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of King Josiah (640-609 B.C.), probably before the king's religious reforms.

**HAGGAI.** Haggai's aim was to arouse the people to rebuild the temple at Jerusalem. The incidents related in the book took place in 520 B.C. , after the Jews had returned to their homes from exile in Babylon. They had begun rebuilding the temple, but stopped after laying a foundation. For about 16 years nothing more

was done. Then Haggai and Zechariah began to urge leaders of the Judean community to finish the, job.

Haggai's messages deal with common excuses: the time isn't right; this isn't the way it used to be; we don't see enough results; there's too much opposition. He criticized the people for building luxurious homes for themselves while God's house lay in ruins. He said the famine was the result of their selfish neglect of God's cause. The people began building, but easily gave up and had to be urged on again. However, largely as a result of Haggai's message, the temple was completed in four years.

**ZECHARIAH.** The prophecies of Zechariah likely date from two periods in Israel's history. The first eight chapters date from 520 to 518 B.C. and parallel Haggai's concerns about a rebuilt temple and a call for the people to a pure faith in God. This message is revealed in a series of visions that were apparently meant to assure the people that God was protecting them.

The nations threatening Judah would be scattered, he said, and Jerusalem's future would be greater than its past.

The second major section of the book (Chaps. 9-14) is thought to contain prophetic material from a later period, probably Greek (9:13). The symbolism, imagery, and allusions in this section are hard to identify and seem to point to a period in the future when God's messiah will again rule. For this reason they are often called apocalyptic.

Certain passages are of special interest to Christians, especially that of the Good Shepherd (13:7-9) and the king who was to come to Jerusalem riding on an ass (9:9), both of which found their fulfillment in Jesus Christ in the New Testament (see Matt. 21:5; 26:31).

**MALACHI.** Although Malachi stands at the end of the Old Testament in our Bible, it was not the last book to be written. Its 11 short oracles fall between the completion of the second temple, 516 B.C., and Nehemiah's first visit to



Jerusalem, 445 B.C.

Judah had settled into a dull twilight of apathy. Its glories lay in the past, and there was no stirring of hope for the future. Yahweh seemed to have left the people to their own business.

Malachi picks up the complaints of his day. Does God love us? What use are religious ceremonies? What's so wrong about divorce? Does God really punish the wicked?

For Malachi, fidelity to the Lord's covenant and its teachings were of key importance. That's why he stressed pure worship, marrying only those within the Jewish community of faith, and the blessings of obedience.

Malachi prophesied a final, or eschatological, day of judgment when Yahweh would uphold those of his people who were faithful and destroy the wicked.

**MATTHEW.** Because it connects prophecies from the Old Testament with their fulfillment in the ministry of Jesus, Matthew appropriately comes first in the New Testament. Sixteen of the

more than 60 Old Testament references quoted in Matthew concern specific prophecies fulfilled by Jesus. The purpose of the book, which seems to be written mainly for Jewish readers, is to show that Jesus is the Messiah or Savior whom God had long before promised to send. Jewish readers would be interested not only in such Old Testament prophecies, but also in the legal descent of anyone who claimed to be the Christ. This genealogy is given in the opening chapter.

Although he presented Jesus as Messiah of the Jews, Matthew had a broader vision that is reflected in his second chapter, where he tells the story of the wise men of the East who pay homage to the child of Bethlehem. And he ends his book with the command, "Go therefore and make disciples of *all* nations . . ." (28:19).

The book of Matthew basically follows the chronological series of events as given in the Gospel of Mark. Major divisions of the book come at 4:17 and at 16:21. The first four and a half chapters tell of Christ's preparation for his ministry. The middle section deals especially

with his teachings, and from 16:21 to the end is concerned with his sufferings and death. The anonymous writer, writing between A.D. 80-90, probably used Mark and other written and oral sources to construct this gospel. The title bearing Matthew's name probably came at a later time.

Matthew presents Jesus as a great teacher and likes to quote him at length. Speeches mark the beginning and end of his ministry. Christ's sayings are grouped around reports of various events. In keeping with a prominent Old Testament theme, that the Messiah would be a king, Matthew constantly refers to the kingdom of heaven which was proclaimed and ushered in by Jesus. Jesus is often identified also as the Son of David, which to those of the Jewish faith would imply kingship.

**MARK.** The theme of this book is given in the very first verse: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." The claim that he is the Son of God is supported

throughout the book by constant references to the authority of Jesus. It is significant that Mark shows us a Roman centurion, a Gentile, confessing Jesus as "God's Son" at the end of the book (15:39). This may add to the argument that Mark was written primarily for a Gentile audience.

Rather than basing his case largely on Old Testament prophecies, as Matthew did, Mark directs our attention to what Jesus did. The book is filled with accounts of miracles that demonstrate Christ's authority. Other aspects of his ministry receive less attention.

Matthew portrayed Jesus as a king; Mark presents him as a servant—one who used his power to serve. A key verse says Jesus "came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life . . ." (10:45). Jesus also told his disciples that if they wanted to be great they had to be servants of all.

It is believed that Mark reports the events of Jesus' life approximately in the order in which they occurred. The climax of the book is the

confession of faith by Peter: "You are the Messiah" (8:29). Previous chapters are especially concerned with the question "Who is Jesus?" The final chapters give more emphasis to why Jesus came.

It is generally agreed that Mark is the first of the gospels, probably written just before A.D. 70. Much of what is included in Mark's gospel is also reported in Matthew and Luke, suggesting that they drew on Mark and added new material that fulfilled their theological purposes.

The book is believed to bear the name of John Mark, whose mother's home was a meeting place for the early Christians (Acts 12:12). Mark himself was a companion of both Peter and Paul. The gospel could well have been composed in Rome and summarized the memoirs and preaching of Peter.

**LUKE.** Luke was a Gentile convert who brought with him into the Christian movement an educated mind and cosmopolitan point of view. He told the story of Jesus and the

beginnings of the church by means of a two-part history. The first volume (the gospel) treated the career of Jesus, beginning with John the Baptist and ending with the disciples gathered after the resurrection at Jerusalem. The second volume (the book of Acts) traced the explosive spread of the gospel as it erupted from Jerusalem into lands far and near, and ultimately to Rome.

Throughout Luke-Acts the Holy Spirit is emphasized. The Spirit produces new outpourings of prophecy. The Spirit descends on Jesus at his baptism. Jesus' sermon at Nazareth was prefaced by the passage from Isaiah which begins, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me." Likewise, in Acts, the Spirit falls on the disciples in Jerusalem, quickening them and speaking through them to Jews from all over the world. From that point on, the Spirit supports and guides them as they go out preaching.

Other emphases of Luke are seen in the special place he gives to women, the compassionate attitude he shows toward the poor, his openness toward the hated Samaritans, the wonderful

hymns he includes (especially in the first two chapters), and the masterful way he has of telling a story.

Luke wrote this account especially for a fellow Greek named Theophilus (1:3), who apparently wanted more information to satisfy himself as to the truth of the Christian message. Luke probably relied on other existing written accounts such as Mark and the document known as Q. This would place the date of the writing of Luke some time after A.D. 70. Since Luke was a companion of Paul, his book may reflect some of Paul's views, in much the same way that Mark reflects Peter.

**JOHN.** John has been called the spiritual gospel. One reason is that in this gospel Christ's heavenly glory constantly can be seen, both through his signs (John's word for miracles), as well as through the extended speeches in which he refers to himself as the way, the truth, the life, the light, the good shepherd, and the vine. Another reason for calling John the spiritual

gospel is the prominence in it of the Holy Spirit, who comes to believers as their counselor, their strengthener, their comforter, their guide. He recalls to them what Jesus had said and reveals to them new things that they had not been able to understand in the days before the cross.

John's gospel includes no parables and only a few miracles. It consists mostly of speeches, conversations, and what John calls "signs"—miracles that indicated Christ's character and mission in a symbolic way. John emphasizes Christ's activity in Judea; this part of his life is almost overlooked in the other accounts. As a result, we are made aware of the violent opposition to Jesus from the very beginning of his ministry. A struggle between faith and unbelief goes on throughout the book. John's intense desire to have faith win out among his readers is indicated by the fact that he uses some form of the word "believe" over 100 times.

Matthew stressed Christ's task as the Jewish Messiah; Mark, his work; Luke, his characteristics as the Savior. John considered



especially the person or nature of Jesus. The outstanding fact which he proclaims is that Jesus is the Word become flesh (1:14)—God who became a man.

There is still debate over who is the actual author of John. That his name was John was generally acknowledged, but which John it was who wrote the gospel and the three Johannine letters has been a matter of argument.

The book was probably written some time after the other gospel accounts were prepared. Perhaps the author assumed that his readers would know the facts of Jesus' life from other writings. At any rate he seems less concerned with what Jesus said and did than with the significance of these events for our faith.

## **THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES.**

Acts is clearly intended as a follow-up to the Gospel According to Luke. The first verse refers to a previous book which dealt with what Jesus did until his ascension to heaven. By implication, Acts tells what Jesus continued to

do.

The book might be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is mentioned more often in Acts than anywhere else in the Bible. Because of the Spirit's working through the disciples, "the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed" (19:20). This might be considered the theme of the book. Acts tells us how the church grew from a small, frightened, underground group in Jerusalem (Acts 1:12ff.) to a force that turned "the world upside down" (17:6) and established a foothold even in the political capital of the world, Rome. Acts gives only a fragmentary report of the history of the early church. Yet it is valuable, for without it we would have almost no record of those years.

Apparently one of Luke's greatest concerns was to show how from the beginning the church included both Jews and Gentiles, on an equal basis. This is revealed in a number of passages, such as the Holy Spirit's coming at Pentecost (Chap. 2) when Jews and Gentiles alike heard the gospel preached in a variety of languages;

the conversion of the Gentile Cornelius and his family (Chap. 10); and the Council of Apostles held in Jerusalem (Chap. 15), where the door was "officially" opened for Gentiles to become Christians without first becoming Jews.

The work of the apostles followed the pattern of the assignment given to them by Jesus: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (1:8). The action in the first seven chapters takes place in Jerusalem. The activities of the believers extend through Samaria and Judea in Chapters 8 through 12. Up to this point Peter is the main character. Chapter 12 to the end tells of Paul's work to bring the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

It is likely that Luke wrote Acts, though an anonymous writer could have incorporated sections of Luke's memoirs in the final form. The use of "we" by the author, especially beginning at 16:10 to the end, indicates events of which the author was an eyewitness. This would have made him Paul's travel companion.

**ROMANS.** Luther called Romans "the chief book of the New Testament, the purest Gospel." This may have been because he found in it the answer to a question that had long tormented him: How can I meet God's standards of righteousness? The answer given in Romans is that we are made righteous by faith. We cannot accomplish it by doing good; righteousness can be ours only as the free gift of God. This is the central theme of Christian belief. Because Romans develops this teaching so thoroughly, the book is of great importance.

The theme is stated in the first chapter. Taking his cue from Habakkuk 2:4, Paul states that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who has faith ( 1:16-17). The major part of the book is a systematic development of this theme. Few books in the Bible speak as strongly of the extent of sin. On the other hand, few books counter sin as completely, by stressing the finality of God's forgiveness. The first major section closes with one of the Bible's most stirring affirmations of faith (8:37-39).

The one who is justified by grace through faith is enabled to discover a new dimension of living, which Paul speaks of as life in Christ (6:23) or life in the Spirit (Chap. 8). Some of the practical ways in which this new life in Christ expresses itself are spelled out by Paul in Chapters 12-15.

Numerous theories are offered concerning why Paul wrote to the Roman congregation (sometime between A.D. 54 and 58). He had not founded the church there but had heard of their faith, and perhaps of an apparent dispute that had arisen between the "strong" and the "weak" (14:1—15:13) in the Roman church. Or, Paul may simply have written the letter to prepare the way for a later visit.

**1, 2 CORINTHIANS.** Paul spent a year and a half in the Greek city of Corinth, earning his living as a tentmaker while carrying out his main purpose of evangelizing.

Later on he learned of troubles there, and while at Ephesus during his third trip wrote them a letter which has been lost. He received a reply, and in

answer to that letter he wrote the epistle known as 1 Corinthians. Paul also wrote other letters to the Corinthians. Many of these have been gathered together in 2 Corinthians.

In 1 Corinthians Paul focused on the problems of quarreling and religious factionalism, incest, and lawsuits between Christians (Chaps. 1-6). Then he turned to questions contained in a letter the Corinthians had sent to him earlier: What about marriage and divorce? May we eat meat dedicated to pagan gods? How do we deal with disorder in worship? What are the highest spiritual gifts? Is the physical body raised from the dead? These are treated in 1 Corinthians 7-15. It is in the context of his discussion of spiritual gifts that Paul, in Chapter 13, pens his great hymn to love.

In 2 Corinthians Paul mainly deals with a challenge to his authority and teaching, which has come from outsiders. Their teachings have caused a serious split among members of the congregation. Paul devotes much of this epistle to a defense of his apostleship, answering the various charges that had been made against him.

In defending himself, he tells of his activity on behalf of the gospel, listing some experiences not mentioned elsewhere, and describing the suffering he had endured for the cause of Christ. He called attention to the results of his ministry as proof that he represented God. Yet at all times he gave the credit to God, and said that he—like other believers—was an ambassador for Christ.

Chapters 8-9 focus on a collection for the saints in Jerusalem to be organized by Titus. They provide an excellent treatment of Christian stewardship.

**GALATIANS.** Galatians is a battle cry for freedom, written by Paul (perhaps about A.D. 55) to protect his Galatian converts' simple faith in Christ and joy inspired by the Holy Spirit from being turned into a religion of law, of burdensome do's and don't's.

Most of the Galatians, who lived in an area that is now part of Turkey, were Gentiles. Paul had left Galatia, following the establishment of the

congregation there. In his absence, Jewish Christians came with disturbing teaching. They said that Paul was not a qualified apostle of Christ and that he had misled them by neglecting to insist that God required them to obey the law of Moses. They must undergo circumcision, the seal of the covenant. They must observe the Sabbath and the ancient festivals. They must keep the laws of clean and unclean food.

When Paul heard about this he was unable to go to them in person. So he wrote this ringing appeal, accented with pungent language.

Paul laid claim to a direct revelation of Christ for his apostolic authority. His life and his message had been inspired by the risen Lord: "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (2:20). His call was from heaven, not Jerusalem. Thus his converts need not bow to directives from Jewish Christians.

Turning to his fundamental doctrine, Paul reminded the Galatians that God accepts people by grace through faith, as the Old Testament



itself promised. Likewise, through faith they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. All this is apart from the law.

Paul also recalled their own experience. Had not the Galatians received the Holy Spirit without the law of Moses? Did not this refute the claims of the legalists?

Paul earnestly desired that the Galatians should walk, not by the law, but in the Spirit, for "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace..." (5:22). The Spirit frees believers from the works demanded by the law and from the equal danger of becoming lawless.

**EPHESIANS.** In contrast with writings such as Galatians and the letters to Corinth, Ephesians deals with no urgent problems and addresses no specific groups. For this reason, and because the earliest manuscripts omit "Ephesus" from the address in 1:1, it seems to have been originally intended for general circulation. Because of unique language patterns and theology not generally present in Paul's

other letters, scholars are divided on the question of whether Paul or a follower wrote it. This letter describes the church in three ways: the body of Christ, the temple of Christ, and the bride of Christ. Through the church Christ is present on earth to continue his work. Christ is the center of the discussion throughout the epistle. In the first verses, the entire history of salvation, beginning and ending in eternity, is summarized. Paul brings out the importance of Christ by calling attention to what we would be without him. A major theme of the book is unity: the unity of Jew and Gentile, of believers with other believers, and of believers with Christ and the Father. This unity too is possible and meaningful only in Christ.

The letter divides neatly in the middle. The first three chapters are a discussion of the centrality of Christ in Christianity, and of our relationship of faith to him. The last three chapters are the result of the first three: they apply faith in Christ to daily living. '

**PHILIPPIANS.** Paul's affectionate letter was

written to the congregation at Philippi in Macedonia, the site of the first congregation he had established on the European continent. This congregation was a joy to Paul, and the feeling was apparently mutual.

Paul probably wrote this letter while a prisoner in Rome (A.D. 61-63). He had few friends and many troubles. Even some Christians suspected him. Yet the theme of his letter is, "I am rejoicing; you rejoice too!" Paul was happy because of Christian fellowship and the spread of the gospel message. He was confidently happy about the future, and even looked forward to death because it would bring him to Christ.

Philippians is one of the most informal of all the epistles. Paul's friend Epaphroditus was returning to his home at Philippi after recovering from a serious illness. Paul sent a letter along with him to the congregation, perhaps partly to thank them for a gift they had sent.

**COLOSSIANS.** This letter was written to a congregation which Paul probably never visited and

knew only indirectly through the missionary named Epaphras. It was likely written about the same time as Ephesians, and as with Ephesians, Paul's authorship has been a source of debate.

The letter was written to counteract the effect of false teachers in the congregation at Colossae. These teachers were saying that Christ was not enough for salvation, and apparently they considered Jesus something less than true God. They also insisted that a Christian had to observe circumcision.

The writer countered the false teaching by talking about Jesus. Nothing can be added to what God has done in Christ, he said. More clearly than any other epistle, Colossians proclaims the divinity of Jesus. After warning against the false teachings, the letter points out to various groups of people how their Christian faith should influence their daily living.

Tychicus returned to Colossae with this letter and two others. One, for the church at Laodicea, has been lost (4:16). The second is almost certainly the letter to Philemon.

**1, 2 THESSALONIANS.** The early Christians expected Jesus to return during their lifetime. It is not strange that some of the new converts at Thessalonica were worried about Christian friends who had already died. Would they miss the opportunity of sharing in Christ's kingdom? Paul assured them in his first letter that believers who had died would enter the kingdom first. He also reminded them that no one can predict when the second coming of Christ will be, but Christians are to be ready for it at any time.

This first letter apparently did not clear up all the questions. By this time some people had given up their jobs and were just sitting around waiting for Jesus to show up—and in their idleness were a problem to the church. Paul's advice was that the best way to be ready for Christ's coming was to be doing the work the Lord wants us to do.

First Thessalonians was the first New Testament epistle written by Paul and thus is the oldest book in the New Testament. The congregation in Thessalonica was the second one to be established in Europe. Paul probably wrote

this letter while he was at Corinth, about A.D. 50 or 51, shortly after opposition forced him to leave Thessalonica. It is possible that persecution was continuing when he wrote. He had delegated Timothy to carry on the work there. After hearing reports from Timothy, he wrote the first letter, and a short time later wrote 2 Thessalonians.

**1, 2 TIMOTHY.** These two letters and the letter to Titus are known as the Pastoral Epistles because so much of their content deals with pastoral duties in the church.

While they have been traditionally assigned to Paul, modern scholarship has advanced strong reasons for believing that they were written at a later period than that of Paul's letters, by someone who may have used authentic material derived from the apostle, updated and applied to a new set of concerns in the generations following Paul's death.

The Pastorals give advice as from one toughened and tutored by long experience to a

younger Christian who will carry on in God's service. They exhort him to maintain good order, uphold sound teaching, and promote right living.

The early church developed, rather than inherited, a structure of leadership. The Pastorals reflect a time (about A.D. 100) when leadership was becoming fixed in certain positions or offices within congregations, and when it was thought important to spell out qualifications for, and duties of, leaders such as bishops, deacons, and elders. The writer's major concern was that these leaders be persons of proven character who could lead by example.

Many nonbelievers had been attracted by the proclamation of God's acceptance in Christ. Unfortunately, they tended to ignore the need for discipline in the Christian life, using grace as a license for sin. The admonition to Timothy is, "As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest also may stand in fear" (1 Tim. 5:20).

While 1 Timothy deals with the general subject

of church order, 2 Timothy can be described as advice and counsel regarding the ideal character of a Christian minister.

**TITUS.** Titus is another of the so-called Pastoral Epistles (see above). Titus was a Greek convert who assisted Paul as an associate in his work (2 Cor. 7:5-15; Gal. 2:1-3). Evidently he was a younger man who could profit from wise counsel. Titus, and the Pastorals generally, address the problem of keeping the glow of the spirit in the church while at the same time defining norms. They stress the fundamental role of Scripture, apostolic doctrine, structured leadership, and ethical conduct.

**PHILEMON.** Written while Paul was under house arrest in Rome (A.D. 61-63), this letter may have saved the life of a runaway slave, Onesimus. He had fled to Rome, probably using money stolen from his master, Philemon, a Christian in Colossae. There, converted to Christianity, Onesimus told the imprisoned Paul



his story.

Paul felt obliged to send Onesimus back, much as it pained him to do so. The law permitted masters to treat runaways cruelly, even kill them.

The fact that the young man had proved himself very useful to Paul made it doubly hard to part with him. Nevertheless Paul found in the situation an opportunity for the mutual exercise of Christian love.

With Onesimus he sent a letter appealing to Philemon to show how a Christian would treat an offending slave. Paul hoped Philemon would accept Onesimus as a fellow Christian.

**HEBREWS.** This letter to the Hebrews is not really like any other in the New Testament, except that it contains a greeting (13:22-25). It actually functions as a sermon or a "homiletic midrash" (a Jewish form of sermonic interpretation), which both proclaims a message and develops an argument.

The subject of this sermon is the superiority of

Christ who is greater than the prophets, angels, and Moses. Christ's sacrifice of himself is also said to be superior to that of the priests of Israel. Jesus is declared the great High Priest and the Lamb of God. The book also encourages Christians facing suffering to hold firm to their faith.

The writer of Hebrews is an anonymous Jewish Christian. He was probably writing to other Jewish Christians who were well-acquainted with the Old Testament and who may have been considering going back to the beliefs and practices of the Hebrew religion. With its imagery and allusion to the sacrificial system, Hebrews likely was written after the destruction of the Temple (A.D. 70) as an explanation of the Temple's demise. It is certain that it was written before A.D. 96, because Clement, bishop of Rome, quotes from it in a letter dated that year.

**JAMES.** Written with sermon-like qualities, this letter is concerned that Christians should live their faith: "Be doers of the word,

and not merely hearers" (1:22). Its ethical teaching is similar to that found in Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7), and also seems to draw from 1 Peter.

On the surface, James seems to speak out against Paul's basic teaching of justification by grace through faith. Because of this, Martin Luther once referred to James as "a right strawy epistle in comparison [to the other main texts of the New Testament]." However, their disagreement may be based more on language than actual doctrine.

James was concerned because some Christians felt that all God wanted was a confession of faith. Actions or life-style meant nothing. Paul was also opposed to belief that was without actions. He spoke of Christian living as "faith working through love" (Gal. 5:6).

The tradition has been to identify the writer with James, the brother of Jesus. Most scholars, however, point to the high quality of the Greek and the letter's knowledge of 1 Peter and Paul's letters as indicators that the author was a

hellenized Christian who wrote near the end of the first century A.D.

**1 PETER.** Christians as pilgrims ("aliens and exiles") and Christianity as a living hope are dominant themes in this letter. The letter is quite general and may originally have been a catechism for pre-baptism instruction or a sermon for confirmands at their baptism.

Silvanus, as 5:12 indicates, is responsible for the excellent Greek style of the original text. "Babylon" (5:13) was a Christian code name for Rome. If Peter authored the letter, it would date from around A.D. 64, the time of emperor Nero's persecution of Christians.

By welcoming sinners into its ranks, the church's public image had suffered. Suspicions that Christians were some kind of revolutionaries seem to have been aroused.

The writer of 1 Peter urges his readers to bear witness to the gospel by the quality of their lives. They are called to show themselves obedient, loving followers of Christ, even under severe

provocation or undeserved persecution.

The creative suffering that the writer of this epistle describes is not easy to do. Unjust punishment must be patiently endured. Curses are to be answered with "bless you!" False accusers are to be silenced by good conduct. Remember, says the writer, all this is only doing what Christ did first.

**2 PETER.** The second century saw a depression of morale among many Christians similar to that in the Jewish community after the return from the Babylonian exile. The Lord had not returned, God's judgment seemed inoperative, so why not just enjoy life like everyone else?

Recalling Peter's name and authority, an unknown Christian sought to revive hope in the coming Day of the Lord and to warn against the teaching that gave license to loose living.

The author used the epistle of Jude as a main source and made reference to the collected letters of Paul. He probably composed the letter

during the first two or three decades of the second century A.D.

The letter's authenticity was questioned by the early church. It was not officially accepted into the canon until the fourth century A.D.

**1, 2, 3 JOHN.** The author of 1 John was concerned that his readers know the love of God and that God's love might influence their love for one another. Another purpose of the letter was to assure believers that they have eternal life through Christ. This seems to be aimed particularly at a group who claimed special knowledge of religious matters and taught that Jesus was sort of an in-between creature, neither God nor man.

The concerns of 2 John are similar to those of the first epistle. It urges living in love and warns against the same false teachings as 1 John does. Its key word is "truth." Whether the "elect lady" to whom the letter is addressed was an individual known to the writer or whether this term stood for a congregation has never been

determined.

The third letter is addressed to an unknown man named Gaius—a very common Roman name. The writer commends Gaius for being hospitable to traveling missionaries. At the same time he condemns Diotrephes, a self-seeking member of the congregation who refused to welcome such ministers.

It is likely that the writer of these epistles is the same person who wrote the Gospel of John, probably sometime during the last decade of the first century A.D.

**JUDE.** Most of this very short letter appears, with some editing, in the second chapter of 2 Peter. The sender calls himself "a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James," and addresses "those who are called, who are beloved in God the Father and kept safe for Jesus Christ." No additional evidence is available to help us ascertain the letter's sender and its recipients, though tradition identifies Jude as the brother of Jesus.

Jude summons his readers to "contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (verse 3). With angry denunciation he describes those who have wormed their way into the church and are undermining it by their rebellious attitudes and immoral conduct.

## **THE REVELATION TO JOHN.**

This book was meant to be hard to understand. Christians were being persecuted; the writer wanted to encourage them to stand firm in their faith, even against government opposition. But to write—or read—anything that seemed to oppose the Roman government would have been dangerous. So the book was written in language that would seem harmless to any official who saw it; yet it would have meaning to those who understood the symbols. Many books of this kind (known as apocalyptic writings) were written in the first centuries after Christ— filled with symbols intended to tell what would happen at the end of the world.

Some of the symbols are explained in the book.



For example, the dragon is Satan (12:9). Others, such as the creatures in heaven (see Ezek. 1) or the Lamb (see John 1:29) can be identified from other parts of the Bible. The woman (12:1) probably represents the church; the beast from the sea (13:1), evil government; and the beast from the earth (13:11), false religion.

We get into difficulty when we try to match every detail of the symbolism with current history, or use it to predict exactly the schedule of events at the end of the world. Though it has a bearing on the end of the world, Revelation first speaks to the situation at the time when it was written.

The book offers a picture of a series of cataclysmic events. These include wars, floods, famines, and persecutions. These events are discussed in terms of a struggle between God and Satan. They will occur repeatedly, but will finally result in victory for Christ. This is the primary message of the book: though Christians can expect many troubles, these hardships will eventually serve God's purpose, and God will

bring victory to all who are faithful.

The seven churches to whom letters are addressed at the beginning of the book were actual congregations. They are also representative of all types of congregations.

The traditional view, which many question, is that the Apostle John wrote this book. He was reportedly exiled on the island of Patmos at the time. The political situation described by the book seems to fit the reign of emperor Domitian (about A.D. 96)

