

Historical Journey through the Bible

Biblical history spans the entire course of time from the creation of the world to the era of the early Christian church in the late first century A.D. At its most basic level, it is the story of God, fashioning a people for Himself, and redemptively interacting with them throughout history. From the creation of the world and the first human beings, to the fall of humanity; to the calling of Abraham and the rise of Israel; to the return of Judah from exile in Babylon; to the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus; and finally to the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in all believers – God continually works to redeem a people for Himself, a people He can lovingly bless with good things as they seek Him and find their hope in Him, the source of all good things.

Beginnings: Creation – 2100 B.C.

The story begins with the very creation of the world, when God formed the heavens and earth and then all living things to inhabit them. All that He created was “good”, but God distinguished human beings from the rest of creation by creating them in His very own image. He abundantly provided for Adam and Eve, the first man and woman, by placing them in a specially prepared garden, and He enjoyed unbroken fellowship with them. But this perfect world was soon poisoned by sin when Adam and Eve sought to be their own masters and disobeyed God. Instead of trusting and obeying God, they swallowed the lie of the serpent, who told them they could be like God. Because of their sin, Adam and Eve were cast out of the garden and from then on suffered pain, sorrow, hardship, and even death. But thankfully, the story of God’s people did not end there. In fact, that was just the beginning.

Sadly, the curse of sin brought into the world by Adam and Eve was passed down to all their descendants as well. Every human being is “bent”, so to speak, just like their ancestors. This can be seen as early as their first child: Cain killed his brother out of jealousy. The curse of sin continued until the whole world was so wicked that God chose to wipe it all out and start over, in a sense, with a new people, a people descended from a righteous man named Noah.

God instructed Noah to build a giant boat to save his family and pairs of every kind of animal living on the earth. Then God made it rain for 40 days until the whole earth was covered with water, and every living thing that was not on the boat – including human beings – died. After the floodwaters subsided, Noah and his family left the boat to start a new humanity. God told them to multiply and fill the earth, and He promised never again to destroy the earth with a flood.

Noah’s descendants multiplied. Everyone spoke a single language, enabling them to easily work together. So they decided to build a great tower to the heavens, a testimony to their own greatness. But God chose to confuse them with different languages, making it virtually impossible for them to continue with their great project, since they could no longer understand each other. As a result, the people soon dispersed and spread out over all the earth, which is what God had commanded them to do in the first place.

God’s Chosen family: 2100 – 1800 B.C.

It appears that with each generation after Noah, people drifted further and further from God. God chose once again to create a new people for himself *within* the rest of humanity – this time through a man named Abram (eventually renamed Abraham). Through this chosen people, God would ultimately bless all of humanity. Interestingly, the Bible does not mention why God chose Abram. It simply says God told him to leave his family and his home country and go to a new land that God would show him. God promised to bless Abraham and make a great nation from his descendants. And Abraham obeyed God. Thus begins the rest of the story of the Old Testament – the story of God’s chosen people.

In obedience and faith, Abraham left his home and travelled to the land of Canaan. God told Abraham that this was the land He was going to give him, and He sealed his promise with a solemn covenant ceremony. God also reaffirmed his promise to give Abraham many descendants.

After an agonizing wait, God finally gave Abraham and his wife, Sarah, a son, Isaac. Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 91. Then God tested Abraham's faith by telling him to sacrifice Isaac. This was ultimate demonstration of Abraham's faithful trust in God since Isaac was the only son born to Abraham and Sarah, the only visible hope that God would fulfil his promise to bless Abraham with many descendants. Abraham obeyed, and God spared Isaac's life.

Isaac lived much like his father, sojourning in various places in Canaan. Isaac's wife, Rebekah, gave birth to twin boys, Esau and Jacob. Esau was older, but he sold his birth right to Jacob for a bowl of stew, and Jacob then tricked his father into granting him the blessings that belonged to Esau. So Esau became very angry with Jacob, and Jacob fled to the homeland of his ancestors, where He lived with his uncle Laban for many years. While working for Laban, Jacob married his daughters Leah and Rachel and began to raise a family. He eventually returned to Canaan and reconciled the Esau. God changed Jacob's name to Israel. His 12 sons became the ancestors of the 12 tribes of Israel. God also reaffirmed to Jacob the covenant He had made with his father, Isaac, and his grandfather Abraham.

One of Jacob's 12 sons was named Joseph, clearly Jacob's favourite. Though one of the youngest, Joseph had dreams (literally) of one day becoming master over his brothers. His brothers became very angry with him because of this and sold him to slave traders headed to Egypt. Yet God blessed Joseph even while a slave in Egypt. Through a complicated interplay of circumstances, Joseph was eventually brought before Pharaoh himself to interpret Pharaoh's dream. God gave Joseph wisdom to understand that the dream foretold of a coming worldwide famine. As a result, Pharaoh made him second in command of all of Egypt in order to prepare. During the famine, Joseph's brothers were forced to travel to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, though they did not know He was their long-lost brother. Eventually Joseph revealed his identity to them, and they were reconciled. Joseph convinced his entire family, including his father, Jacob, to move to Egypt. And there Jacob's descendants flourished and multiplied.

The Birth of Israel: 1800 – 1406 B.C.

Many years later, a new leader arose in Egypt who did not know of all that Joseph had done, and He began to oppress the Israelites for fear that they might rebel against him. The Israelites were made slaves, and eventually Pharaoh even ordered all Israelite baby boys to be thrown into the Nile River. One Israelite couple, however, hid their baby boy in a basket in the river to keep him from being killed. Pharaoh's daughter found the baby and adopted him, calling him Moses.

Moses grew up in the Egyptian royal court. One day, he witnessed an Egyptian beating an Israelite, so Moses killed the Egyptian and hid this body in the sand. When Pharaoh found out, Moses fled to the land of Midian. There God spoke to Moses from a burning bush, revealing his name – The Lord – and telling him to go back to Egypt and lead his people out of slavery to the land that God was giving them. Moses was reluctant to go, but the Lord assured him that He would be with him and would give him power to do amazing miracles before Pharaoh. God also sent Moses' brother, Aaron, along with him to Egypt.

When Moses arrived in Egypt, He spoke to Pharaoh, telling him God's command to let the Israelites go out into the wilderness to worship God. Pharaoh refused and then treated the Israelites even more harshly. This set in motion a series of 10 plagues that God inflicted on Egypt. Each plague cycle followed essentially the same pattern: Moses told Pharaoh to let God's people go; Pharaoh refused; the plague was unleashed; Pharaoh recanted and agreed to let the Israelites go; Moses prayed for the plague to be stopped; Pharaoh then changed his mind and refused to let the Israelites go. The final plague was a curse upon the firstborn of all people and animals in Egypt. All homes without the blood of the lamb smeared on the doorframe would be visited by the angel of death. The firstborn sons of Egypt were killed by the angel that night, including Pharaoh's own son. The annual feast of Passover commemorates this momentous event.

After this 10th plague, Pharaoh allowed the Israelites to leave Egypt; but once they had left, he again changed his mind and set out in pursuit of them. Just as Pharaoh's army was closing in on the Israelites, who were blocked by the Red Sea, the Lord miraculously parted the sea and allowed the Israelites to pass through on dry land. When the Egyptians tried to follow them, the sea closed over them and they drowned. This whole event, the Exodus, became a defining moment in the history of the nation of Israel when God decisively rescued and redeemed his people for himself. Repeatedly throughout the Old Testament, God would refer to Himself as the one who led the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt with strength and miraculous signs.

With the threat of the Egyptians behind them, the Israelites were now free to journey to the place where God wanted them to worship Him. They began to grumble for food so God provided quail for meat, and each morning manna, mysterious bread-like flakes, fell from heaven. At times, God also provided water from a rock.

Finally the Israelites came to Mount Sinai, and God met with Moses there. God gave him the Ten Commandments and other instructions to give to the people. These essentially defined what it meant to live as the people of God. While the Israelites were at Sinai, God also gave Moses instructions for building the Tabernacle, which would serve as a portable temple as the Israelites moved from place to place on their way to the land that God had promised to their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Even while Moses was receiving God's law, however, the people demonstrated their persistent unfaithfulness by constructing an idol and worshiping it! And Moses' brother Aaron, who had just been appointed high priest over the Israelites, was the one who built it.

After the Israelites had camped at the foot of Mount Sinai for a year, God directed them to begin making their way to the Promised Land. God told Moses to send 12 scouts into Canaan. All but Joshua and Caleb reported that the land was good but that the inhabitants were stronger than them. So the Israelites refused to take possession of the land. Because they failed to trust in God for victory, He condemned them to wander in the wilderness for 40 years until that entire generation had died, except for Joshua and Caleb. God continued to provide for his people during those forty years, despite their repeated instances of grumbling and unfaithfulness to Him. At the end of 40 years, the new generation of Israelites came to Kadesh-barnea, and then they began making their way to the Promised Land once again. They set up camp on the plains of Moab. The Promised Land lay just across the Jordan River to the west. Moses reviewed the history of God's dealings with them up to that point and exhorted them to be faithful to God after they conquered the land. Moses died just before the Israelites entered the land, leaving his assistant Joshua to lead the conquest.

Possessing the Land: 1406 – 1050 B.C.

The first city to be taken was the imposing city of Jericho, which stood just across the Jordan River in Canaan. But the Israelites did not even have to lay siege to the city or attack its gates to capture it, because God miraculously caused the walls of the city to fall down. Joshua then led the Israelites to capture towns throughout the Promised Land. The entire conquest of the land occurred over many years, but they never fully completed it. God had commanded the Israelites to completely drive out the Canaanites, but they were satisfied to simply live alongside the inhabitants. Several areas within the land continued to be controlled by Canaanites even after the conquest period was over, and their idolatry was a snare to the Israelites for centuries to come. After Joshua died, God repeatedly raised up leaders and called judges to deliver his people from oppression. This oppression was typically a direct result of the Israelites' sin. This cycle of sin, oppression, and deliverance occurred throughout the period of the judges. During this time the Israelites also experienced conflict among themselves as the tribe of Benjamin was almost completely wiped out by the other tribes in a bloody civil war. The period of the judges was a spiritually dark, chaotic time for Israel, all the people doing whatever seemed right in their own eyes.

The United Monarchy: 1050 – 930 B.C.

The Israelites asked Samuel, the last of the judges, for a king to rule over them like the kings of the nations around them. God told Samuel to agree to their request but to warn them of the hardships a king would bring upon them. God had been their king, but they had rejected His leadership in favour of being more like the other nations.

God led Samuel to anoint Saul from the tribe of Benjamin as the first king (1050 B.C.). Saul was tall and handsome. He also proved to be an able military leader in many ways. But his spiritual character was lacking. On various occasions, he sacrificed God's ways to ensure military success or personal gain. For these reasons, God rejected Saul as king and chose a man after his own heart to replace him: David.

David was an unlikely choice. The youngest of eight brothers, He was not even considered at first. But soon after Samuel anointed David to be the next king, David demonstrated that He was indeed specially chosen by God; for He slew the Philistine giant Goliath when all Israel's soldiers, including his brothers, were too afraid to face the giant in battle.

David joined Saul's warriors at his palace and became close friends with Saul's son Jonathan. David quickly proved himself to be a very able military leader and gained the favour of the Israelite people. This incited Saul's bitter jealousy, and Saul began trying to kill David. David fled, moving from place to place, at times narrowly escaping Saul and his men. When David heard that Saul and his sons had been killed in a battle with the Philistines, He moved to Hebron and was proclaimed king over Judah. But the commander of Saul's army proclaimed Ishbosheth, one of Saul's sons, king over Israel. Eventually Ishbosheth was assassinated by his own men, and David was proclaimed king over all the Israel tribes.

After becoming king over all Israel around 1000 B.C., David captured the fortified city of Jerusalem from the Jebusites and moved his capital there. David was extremely successful in battle against virtually all the surrounding nations. He established a treaty with the powerful and wealthy city-state of Tyre. The king of Tyre supplied David with stonemasons and coveted cedar, and David built himself a palace and stockpiled materials for building the Temple.

The high point of David's reign was when God chose to establish a permanent covenant with David and his descendants. David wanted to build a permanent Temple for the Lord in Jerusalem but the Lord had a different plan: God was going to build David a "house," that is, He was going to establish David's family line as the ruling dynasty over Israel forever.

Unfortunately, David's reign as king was not without trouble. David himself committed adultery with the wife of Uriah, one of his most valiant warriors, and she became pregnant. Then David sought to cover up his sin by arranging Uriah's death on the battlefield. Later in his reign, David brought a plague upon all Israel because He ordered a census to be taken of all men of military age. Several of David's children brought heartache to him as well. David's son Amnon raped his own half-sister Tamar, and then her full brother Absalom killed Amnon in revenge. Absalom then fled into exile. Years later Absalom returned, but he mounted a rebellion against his father and proclaimed himself king. David was forced to flee Jerusalem for a time and set up his capital in Mahanaim. David's men fought against Absalom's men, and Absalom was killed, so David returned to Jerusalem.

Just before David died in 970 B.C., He appointed his son Solomon as king over Israel. Having received an extensive and powerful kingdom, Solomon was able to focus on tasks such as building a beautiful royal palace and the Temple for the Lord in Jerusalem. At the same time, Solomon capitalized on Israel's strategic position as a land bridge between Egypt and the other major powers of the ancient Near East. Solomon exacted lucrative tolls from those travelling through Israel, and He even engaged in buying horses and chariots from various nations and selling them to others. Solomon expanded his kingdom until it reached as far as the Euphrates River. Solomon's wisdom and riches were renowned throughout the ancient Near East.

However, Solomon's reign was not entirely a success story. He married literally hundreds of wives, primarily to seal political alliances with the other nations, and this led to the spread of idolatry in Israel, as these wives brought their idolatrous ways with them. Solomon even funded the building of pagan shrines for his wives on the hill across from the Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem. Solomon's extravagant royal court also placed a huge tax burden on the people of Israel, a burden that became difficult to bear.

Splintered Nation: 930 – 586 B.C.

These cracks in Solomon's kingdom eventually led to outright rebellion. When his son Rehoboam became king in 930 B.C., the people of Israel demanded that he grant some reprieve from the heavy tax burden placed on them by his father. Rehoboam foolishly vowed instead to tax the people even more. So 10 of the 12 tribes of Israel refused to submit to Rehoboam, and they set up their own king instead. Only the tribes of Judah and Benjamin remained loyal. From then on, the kingdom established by the 10 northern tribes was called Israel, and the kingdom in the south that continued to be ruled by Davidic kings was called Judah. The division between these two kingdoms was very real, and they often fought wars against each other.

The northern tribes installed a man named Jeroboam as their king, and He immediately set a wicked precedent of idolatry for Israel. In order to keep his people from travelling to Jerusalem (in Judah) to worship at the Temple, Jeroboam set up calf idols at the northern and southern extremes of his kingdom and encouraged the people to worship there instead. He also appointed priests who were not Levites. His wickedness was so renowned that later wicked kings were said to follow the example of Jeroboam, who led Israel into sin.

The people of Judah continued to worship at the Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, and their priests were descended from Aaron, as the Law of Moses stipulated. Not that idolatry was never a problem in Judah, but for most of Judah's existence, idolatry did not typically receive the same degree of royal backing and widespread acceptance as it did in the northern kingdom.

Another distinction between the two kingdoms was the frequency with which royal dynasties changed. The northern kingdom experienced numerous assassinations and coups, which led to new dynasties taking power. But the southern kingdom always remained loyal to the Davidic dynasty.

Perhaps one of the most significant kings of Israel was Ahab, who took the throne in 874 B.C. Ahab was a skilled military leader. Spiritually, however, Ahab was very wicked, leading the Israelites into idolatry and other sins. Much of his wickedness was due to the influence of his wife Jezebel, the daughter of a pagan king. Jezebel promoted idolatry throughout the land, and she and Ahab were often condemned by the prophet Elijah.

Around this time a number of prophets gained prominence in Israel and Judah, and they spoke out against many sins that had grown rampant in society, including social injustice, idolatry, and general unfaithfulness to the Lord. They also foretold of a day when God would send His deliverer to Israel, a divine ruler who would set all things right once again. This deliverer is sometimes referred to as the Messiah ("anointed one"). The writings of several of these prophets became part of the Old Testament.

Over time, Assyria regained strength and absorbed nation after nation into its vast empire. Israel's territory was repeatedly reduced by Assyrian attacks until it was less than half its original size. Finally in 722 B.C., Israel's capital city of Samaria fell to the Assyrians, and the northern kingdom came to an end. Many Israelites were exiled to faraway lands, and other foreign peoples were brought in to diffuse the possibility of unified revolt. The Bible makes it clear that this exile was a direct result of the wickedness and idolatry of the people of Israel. Long ago when God gave His laws to Moses, He had forewarned the people that they, too, would be cast out of the Promised Land if they became like the wicked Canaanites. Now the day of reckoning had finally come for Israel's many sins of idolatry and injustice.

Several kings of Judah stand out. Jehoshaphat was regarded as a righteous king by the writers of Scripture, and he earnestly sought the Lord when foreign armies threatened Judah. However, he formed an alliance with wicked King Ahab of Israel, which had consequences later.

King Ahaz of Judah was deemed a wicked king by the writers of Scripture. When the northern kingdom of Israel teamed up with the Arameans to attack Judah (733 B.C.), Ahaz made the fateful decision to appeal to Assyria for help, essentially making Judah a vassal (subservient) kingdom to Assyria. He also replaced the altar of the Lord with a replica of a pagan one he saw in Damascus, and he got rid of many other sacred Temple items. Eventually he closed up the Temple entirely and allowed idolatry to flourish in Judah.

Ironically, Ahaz's son Hezekiah was one of the most righteous kings of Israel, and he was also a successful military leader. Hezekiah knew that the Assyrians would soon attempt to conquer Judah. Hezekiah prepared the city for this attack, which kept it from falling for a long time. Finally God sent a plague throughout the Assyrian camp, and the few who survived broke off the siege and returned to Assyria. Hezekiah also restored and purified the Temple and the worship of the Lord, purged idolatry from the land, and reinstituted the festival of Passover.

Just as quickly as Hezekiah had restored proper worship of the Lord, his wicked son Manasseh corrupted it all once again. Manasseh promoted idolatry throughout Judah like no one else before him. He placed a pagan idol in the Temple of the Lord and even sacrificed his own sons by fire just outside the walls of Jerusalem. Near the end of his life, Manasseh was taken away into exile in Babylon, and He repented of all that he had done. After he was allowed to return to Judah, he strove to undo all the evil that he had done, tearing down pagan altars and restoring worship of the Lord.

By the time Manasseh's grandson Josiah became king of Judah (640 B.C.), Assyria was in decline, and the Babylonians were on the rise in the ancient Near East. Josiah capitalized on the situation, expanding the borders of Judah to include nearly all of the northern kingdom of Israel, whose people had by this time been carried away into exile. Josiah then strove to purge the land of idolatry and restore proper worship of the Lord. He also arranged for extensive repairs to be made to the Temple. Josiah died in 609 B.C. while trying to stop the Egyptians from passing through Judah and Israel to help the Assyrians, who were on the run from the Babylonians and the Medes in the far north. After Josiah died, the Babylonians essentially took over Judah, installing and quickly deposing several of Josiah's sons as kings of Judah. They also exiled the upper echelon of society to Babylon in several waves (605 B.C., and 586 B.C.) until finally in 586 B.C. the Babylonians attacked the city of Jerusalem and completely destroyed the Temple, leaving the once-proud nation in ruins.

Exile: 586 – 538 B.C.

Unlike the experience of the northern kingdom of Israel, the Judeans were, for the most part, allowed to maintain their cultural and religious distinctiveness even in exile, and no large-scale effort was made to repopulate the land of Judah with foreigners. It was during the Exile that the people of Judah first came to be referred to as Jews (from the term *Judeans*).

This time of exile had a massive impact on virtually every aspect of Israelite life. Only the poor were left in Judah, and the ritual sacrificial system had essentially ceased. At the same time, many of those taken into exile became somewhat prosperous and even occupied positions of significant political power in the governments of their captors. Daniel and his friends were groomed to be part of the royal court, and Daniel was a close adviser to several Babylonian and Persian rulers.

The Babylonian empire were the ones who conquered Judah and took them off into exile, but the Babylonians soon faced a military threat themselves.

The mighty Persian empire from the north was growing, and they eventually conquered Babylon and nearly everything else in the known world at the time. Persia had a different stance towards conquered peoples than Babylon had, which led to the end of this period of exile for the Jews.

Return and Diaspora: 538 – 6 B.C.

King Cyrus of Persia captured Babylon in 539 B.C. and absorbed the Babylonian empire into his vast domain. In order to foster gratitude and loyalty among his subjects, Cyrus quickly decreed that those held captive in Babylon were free to return to their native lands. So around 538 B.C., a small contingent of Jews returned home to the land of Israel and re-established a semiautonomous state under the dominion of Persia. They repaired the altar, reinstituted the daily sacrifices, and rebuilt the Temple as well. As the memoirs of Ezra and Nehemiah attest, Israel continued to enjoy relative religious freedom under the Persians throughout the remainder of the Old Testament period, despite occasional periods of oppression.

Not all of the Jews returned to the Promised Land, however. Over the decades in exile, many had largely integrated with the societies in which they were living and had built lives for themselves there. Over time the Hebrew language came to be replaced by Aramaic (the dominant language of the land of their exile) as the primary spoken language among Jews, and many Jews began to intermarry with the local foreign peoples and to regard their place of exile as their permanent home. This large population of Jews living permanently outside of the Promised Land while maintaining some degree of religious and cultural distinctiveness is often referred to as the Diaspora (“scattering”). Some, like Daniel, Mordecai, and Esther, continued to serve God faithfully even in prominent positions while far from the land of Israel. Over time, more and more of the Jews chose to return home, even leaving important positions to do so, such as Nehemiah, who was cup-bearer to the king.

The Intertestamental Period

The time between the last recorded events of the Old Testament and the first recorded events of the New Testament are sometimes referred to as the intertestamental period. Christians often think of this period as shrouded in mystery and darkness. In reality, quite a bit is known about this very formative period of biblical history, and understanding these events can help us better understand the New Testament. In a real way, the intertestamental period set the scene for the life and ministry of Jesus and his followers. For example, the Pharisees and Sadducees didn’t even exist during Old Testament times; but by the time of Jesus, these two groups were key players in the political and religious life of Israel – so much so that Jesus spent considerable time and energy condemning them and instructing his disciples not to follow their example.

A brief review of a few events from the Old Testament will help us better understand the events that came after them. When the Assyrians exiled the northern kingdom *out* of the land, they brought foreign peoples from other lands *into* Israel in order to diffuse the possibility of unified revolt. Intermarriage among these foreigners and Israelites in Palestine gave rise to a group of people known as Samaritans, who were characterized by their syncretistic blend of Judaism and pagan religious practices. When Babylon conquered and exiled the southern kingdom of Judah, they destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem, bringing a halt to the ritual sacrificial system of Israel. This crisis led to a shift in focus away from the Temple and its rituals to the written word of Scripture, which was still accessible even in exile. Thus, it is likely during this time that synagogues and scribes became more widespread in Israelite society.

It is roughly at this point that we quietly exit the period of the Old Testament and enter the time known as the intertestamental period. Perhaps the single most significant event that occurred during this period was the rise of Alexander the Great.

After ascending to the throne at the age of 20 (336 B.C.) and securing his grip over Macedonia and the Greek peninsula, young Alexander launched a series of stunning victories over the Persians that eventually culminated in his complete dominion over virtually all former Persian territory. Just as quickly as he rose to power, however, Alexander succumbed to illness and died in 323 B.C. at the age of 32.

One major effect of Alexander's conquest relates to his promotion of the Greek language and culture throughout his conquered lands. Greek soon came to function as a near universal means of communication and understanding throughout the ancient Near East. The pervasiveness and lasting influence of the Greek language can be seen most clearly in the fact that every single book of the New Testament, over 300 years after Alexander's death, was written in Greek.

Upon Alexander's death, his kingdom was broken up among his generals and other successors. A series of wars followed, with each successor vying for territory controlled by another. In time (around 220 B.C.), the Near East came to be dominated by the three primary Greek powers: the Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt; the Seleucid dynasty in much of Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and Persia; and the Antigonid dynasty in Macedonia. The land of Israel was initially part of the Ptolemaic realm, and Jews typically enjoyed a great deal of religious freedom and even favour at times. During this time a large number of Jews moved to Alexandria in northern Egypt, where they became relatively prosperous and influential. It was in Alexandria that a group of Jewish biblical scholars translated the Old Testament into Greek to make it more accessible to the increasing number of Jews who no longer spoke Hebrew. The translation, known as the Septuagint, would later become the Bible of the early Christian church, and most Old Testament quotations found in the New Testament are drawn from it.

In 198 B.C., the Seleucid ruler Antiochus III seized the land of Israel from the Ptolemies. When his son Antiochus IV Epiphanes took the throne in 175 B.C., everything changed for the Jews. Antiochus held ambitions of conquering the Ptolemaic kingdom in Egypt. In order to shore up his defences and to prepare for his Egyptian campaign, Antiochus imposed a strict policy of Hellenization upon his subjects, most notably the Jews in Palestine. Compliance was regarded as loyalty, and refusal was interpreted as rebellion. Jews were required to adopt the beliefs and practices of the Greeks (often abhorrent to pious Jews), and they were forbidden to practice many distinctly Jewish rituals and customs, such as circumcision, observance of the Sabbath, and ritual food laws. Copies of the Law of Moses were burned. A pagan idol of Zeus was even placed in the Temple in Jerusalem. Antiochus sold the office of high priest in Israel, restricted to the line of Aaron by Mosaic Law, to the highest bidder who would promote Antiochus's policies. Unsurprisingly, these policies caused a crisis of conscience for many Jews. The crisis became even more pronounced in 167 B.C. after Antiochus was forced by the Romans to turn back from certain defeat. He vented his anger mercilessly upon many Jews who refused to give up their religious beliefs, and He banned Judaism altogether. The situation was growing ripe of revolt.

Open revolt by the Jews finally broke out under the leadership of a priest named Mattathias and his five sons, who are often referred to as the Maccabees (meaning "hammers"). By 164 B.C. they had recaptured the Temple and ritually purified and restored it (the event commemorated by Hannukah, the Feast of Dedication). The next several decades were characterized by armed resistance against the Seleucid rulers, and several of Mattathias's sons lost their lives. Over time, they established their dynasty as the permanent political leaders of Israel. They were also granted the office of the high priesthood. This concentration of political and religious power in a single family led to various abuses. Ironically, each succeeding Maccabean ruler also became increasingly enamoured with the Hellenistic way of life. All this led to dissension among the Jews, and various sects and parties arose with different views on these issues. The Pharisees largely opposed Hellenization and the singular power of the ruler. The Sadducees favoured both. Still others, such as the Qumran community, wholly rejected the Maccabean dynasty and the Temple system as completely corrupt and withdrew into their own communities.

Maccabean rule over Israel continued until 63 B.C., when the rising Roman Empire finally engulfed Israel and Jewish independence came to an end. Around 39 B.C., a young Idumean named Herod was named king of Judea by the Roman Senate. Herod the Great proved to be an extremely shrewd leader, an able builder (including completely refurbishing the Temple in Jerusalem), but fiercely brutal against those who opposed him.

By the end of the intertestamental period, distinct Jewish communities could be found throughout the known world, and each one would have been forced to reconcile how God's people were to continue to live in faithful obedience to God's laws in the midst of their unique cultural setting. In all of this, there also continued to be an ever evolving hope in a Messiah, the anointed one, God's chosen instrument of deliverance and restoration for his people. Various Old Testament passages laid the foundation for this hope, but exactly who the Messiah would be and what He would do were open to about as many interpretations as there were communities of God's people.

Jesus Christ: 6 B.C.-A.D. 30

In the midst of this incredibly complex interplay of religion, political struggle, and social change, God did indeed send the Messiah, the long-awaited hope of His people. But God's Messiah would not be quite like any conceived by human minds. The story of the New Testament opens with the shockingly humble birth of the King of kings. The birth of the Messiah (called the Christ in Greek) took place in the final years of Herod the Great, probably around 6 or 5 B.C. (The odd phenomenon of Jesus being born "B.C" is due to a miscalculation by church scholars about 500 years after Jesus' death & resurrection.) The angel Gabriel appeared to a virgin named Mary and foretold that she would conceive and bear a son by the power of the Holy Spirit and that He would be the Son of God and was to be called Jesus. Her fiancé, Joseph, was also told by an angel that Mary would give birth to the Messiah. Caesar Augustus ordered a census of the entire Roman world, so Joseph travelled with Mary to Bethlehem, the town of his ancestors. There Mary gave birth to Jesus, fulfilling prophecies that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Shepherds came to worship Him, as did wise men (royal astrologers) from the East, perhaps as much as two years later.

Herod the Great attempted to eliminate this newborn threat to his reign by killing all baby boys in Bethlehem. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus escaped to Egypt and then returned after an angel informed them of Herod's death. They resettled in Nazareth, and Joseph took up work as a carpenter or perhaps a stonemason. The Bible tells nothing more of Jesus' childhood until He was 12, when He amazed the scribes and teachers of the law with His understanding. As Jesus grew into adulthood, it is likely that He took up Joseph's trade.

At about the age of 30, Jesus began His public ministry. John the Baptist had been drawing great crowds throughout Israel with his declaration that "the Kingdom of Heaven is near" and his baptism of repentance. Jesus was baptized by John, after which God the Father verbally affirmed Jesus' Sonship and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him. Soon after this, Jesus also began to preach that "The Kingdom of Heaven is near" a key theme in his teaching and parables. Some of John's own followers began to follow Jesus, apparently with the blessing of John himself, who saw his role as preparing the way of the coming of the Messiah, who had now arrived in the person of Jesus.

Early in his ministry, Jesus based his work in Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee. Using figurative and even somewhat cryptic stories called parables; Jesus captured people's interest and taught them about the Kingdom of Heaven. He also healed many sick people, cast out demons, and performed other miracles that demonstrated His divine power and provided a foretaste of life in the Kingdom of Heaven. He began to draw large crowds of followers. Jesus selected a special group of 12 disciples to follow Him everywhere He went. Several of these men were previously fishermen, including Peter, Andrew, James, and John. These men would remain with Jesus throughout His ministry and became privy to His most intimate teaching and deeds.

Jesus' ministry likely lasted at least three years, the initial years marked by increasing popularity, the final year marked by increasing dissent and even animosity.

Throughout His ministry, Jesus consistently condemned two particular groups of religious leaders: the Pharisees and the Sadducees. These two groups had very differing views from each other on both religion and politics. Jesus repeatedly castigated the Pharisees for their legalistic adherence to the law of Moses that lacked real love for God and people. Jesus exposed the Sadducees' faulty understanding of Scripture and of God's power. Sometimes He lumped the two groups together in His condemnations. At the same time, Jesus often praised prostitutes, tax collectors, and other "sinners" who repented of their sins and followed Him. Over time, the combination of Jesus' growing popularity, His condemnation of the religious leaders, and His claims to be the Son of God proved more than the leaders could stomach, and a plot was hatched to end His life.

By the end of His ministry, Jesus began another journey from Galilee in northern Israel to Jerusalem in the south to celebrate the Passover with His disciples. By now Jesus was extremely well known throughout Israel, and many believed Him to be – or at least wondered if He might be – the Messiah, as He claimed. No doubt many were hoping for the overthrow of the hated Roman rule. News of Jesus' impending arrival in Jerusalem went ahead of Him, and people laid palm branches and cloaks on the road to receive Him as King. Jesus, in turn, chose to enter the city on a donkey just as the Old Testament prophet Zechariah had foretold, apparently in recognition of His role as the Messiah. Thus, the city was ripe with expectation for the upcoming week of Passover, when Jews celebrated their deliverance from slavery in Egypt many centuries before.

Immediately upon entering the city in triumph, Jesus went up to the Temple and threw out the money changers and merchants, declaring that His Father's house was to be a house of prayer. His actions angered many of the religious leaders, some of whom received a cut of the profits from the Temple sales.

Jesus spent much of the week of Passover teaching in the Temple area and debating with the Pharisees and Sadducees. He also foretold of events to come, including the destruction of the Temple and His eventual return to earth to gather His people. At some point in the week, Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus' 12 closest disciples, agreed to betray Jesus to the religious leaders for 30 pieces of silver.

On Thursday of that week, Jesus shared the Passover meal with His 12 disciples. Judas Iscariot left during the meal to carry out his act of betrayal. Afterward, Jesus and His disciples went just outside the city to Gethsemane, an olive garden where they often relaxed from the busy events of the day in Jerusalem. There Judas carried out his betrayal. The guards arrested Jesus, and most of His disciples fled.

Jesus was interrogated throughout the night in order to find Him guilty of a crime worthy of death. Various accusations were made, but none held up to close scrutiny. By morning, they settled on Jesus' own claim to be the Messiah in order to accuse Him of treason against Rome. They led Him to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, who held ultimate power to sentence someone to death, and they accused Jesus of treason. Pilate knew the leaders' true motives had nothing to do with loyalty to Rome, but in the end He consented and condemned Jesus to death by crucifixion.

After Jesus was subjected to various abuses, beating, and ridicule by Roman soldiers, He was nailed to a cross and put on public display as a deterrent to all who might consider committing the same crime of treason against Rome. Jesus' charge was posted: THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS. Jesus continued to suffer on the cross until about 3 o'clock in the afternoon, when He cried with a loud voice, "It is finished," and He died.

Pilate granted permission to a rich man named Joseph of Arimathea to bury Jesus' body in his own nearby tomb. Because the Sabbath was fast approaching, Jesus' body was quickly placed in the tomb without being treated with burial spices.

On Sunday, some woman who had followed Jesus and cared for His needs went to Jesus' tomb to finish preparing His body for burial. When they reached the tomb, however, they discovered that Jesus' body was gone. Angels at the tomb then told them that Jesus had risen from the dead. The woman ran back to tell the other disciples the news. Jesus is alive!

During the 40 days following His resurrection, Jesus appeared to various disciples on different occasions, confirming that He had been raised from the dead, giving them further instructions and teaching, and commanding them to go out and be His witnesses, telling people everywhere about Him. He told His disciples to remain in Jerusalem (not their home area of Galilee) until the Holy Spirit came and filled them with power. He then ascended to heaven as His disciples watched where He remains until He returns in glory for His people.

The Church: A.D. 30 – present

During the festival of Pentecost, 50 days after Passover, the promised Holy Spirit finally came upon Jesus' disciples, and they began proclaiming the great works of God in languages they did not even know. Peter spoke to the crowd about Jesus and His resurrection and implored his listeners to repent and follow Him. About 3,000 people became believers in Jesus that day, launching the Christian church.

The depth of Jesus' impact upon these new believers became immediately visible by their commitment to love and care for each other. Many believers voluntarily gave their possessions to help provide for the needs of others in the church, and the church made specific arrangements to care for the needs of widows. God also worked many miracles through Peter and the other leaders, confirming their authority and encouraging the believers.

Persecution soon came, however. A believer named Stephen and James, the brother of John, were killed for their faith in Jesus. Many believers fled Jerusalem, but God used even this to spread the Good News across the known world. Eventually new churches were established as far away as Damascus and Antioch in Syria. Some of the leaders in the Jerusalem church moved to Antioch, including a man named Barnabas. James, the brother of Jesus, became a leader in the church in Jerusalem.

One of the persecutors was a zealous young Pharisee named Saul. As Saul was travelling to Damascus from Jerusalem to pursue Christians there, the Lord Jesus appeared to Saul, temporarily blinding him, and asked why he was persecuting Him. After this, Saul completed his journey to Damascus, but as a new man: a zealous servant of Jesus Christ. God would eventually use Saul, who became known as Paul, to reach countless others with the message of the gospel.

In the meantime, the church continued to grow, as did the bounds of the gospel itself. What had originally started out essentially as a Jewish sect had expanded to include Samaritans (despised by many Jews as half-breeds), proselytized Jews (Gentiles who had become Jews), and even God-fearing Gentiles. The church received these changes with joy, but they also introduced some questions that would not be fully resolved until several years later at the Jerusalem council.

Over time Barnabas convinced Paul to join him at Antioch, and later they travelled through Cyprus and Galatia preaching the gospel to Jews and Gentiles alike. During this journey, Paul was repeatedly persecuted by Jews, and He eventually decided to begin preaching primarily to Gentiles. This raised a key question: Did these Gentiles need to adhere to the laws of Moses in order to be followers of Jesus? That is, did these Gentiles need to become converts of Judaism (including being circumcised and following strict food laws) before they could become Christians? Soon after Paul and Barnabas returned from their journey, the leaders of the Jerusalem church held a council to decide the issue. After some discussion, the leaders agreed that Gentile believers did not need to be circumcised and become Jewish converts in order to become Christians. They were full-fledged Christians just as they were.

Soon after this Paul embarked on two more missionary journeys. The great distances travelled were made possible in part by Rome's excellent road system and the relative peace ("Pax Romana") due to Rome's unrivalled power in the region. Along the way Paul established churches throughout Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia, and several of his letters to these churches have become part of the canon of the New Testament.

At the end of his third missionary journey, Paul's work among the Gentiles fostered rumour and anger among many Jews who were zealous for the law of Moses. They accused Paul of teaching Gentiles to defy the laws of Moses, and they mistakenly thought He had brought a Gentile into the Jewish section of the Temple courts. A riot erupted, and the Roman commander took Paul into custody for his safety. Paul was then transferred to Caesarea on the coast. He remained in custody for nearly two years until finally He invoked his right as a Roman citizen to appeal his case to Caesar himself. So Paul was sent under guard to Rome.

Paul's journey to Rome proved difficult, as Paul suffered shipwreck off the island of Malta near Sicily. Eventually Paul made it safely to Rome, however, and as He awaited trial in Rome under house arrest, He continued to minister to believers there and probably wrote several other letters of the New Testament. It is not certain exactly what happened to Paul after this, but it appears that He was soon released and embarked on at least one other journey before He was arrested again. Church tradition holds that Paul was finally executed under the emperor Nero.

During these years, other changes were taking place in the church as well. Apparently the apostle Peter moved to Rome, where He too, suffered martyrdom under Nero. According to tradition, Barnabas's relative John Mark recorded Peter's stories and teachings from Jesus' life and ministry (the Gospel of Mark). Likewise, the apostle John moved to Ephesus (probably along with Mary, the mother of Jesus), where He served as a prominent leader for several churches that had been established in western Asia Minor. John also recorded many stories and teachings of Jesus in the Gospel of John. Eventually John was exiled to the island of Patmos (not far from Ephesus), where he recorded the Revelation from Jesus concerning the end of the world. According to church tradition, John died on Patmos. The Gospels of Matthew (another apostle) and Luke (a Gentile companion of Paul's) were also compiled from the testimonies of those who had been eyewitnesses to Jesus' life and ministry.

This historical journey through the Bible gives the reader a quick, basic overview of the Bible and understanding of the relationship & history between God and the nation of Israel, as well as the new covenant ushered in by Christ Jesus our Lord. We trust that it will inspire you to read the Word of God diligently each day, and to be sanctified (*to be made holy / set apart*) as we read in John 17 v 17 - by the God Breathed Word of God – The Bible.