

THE LESSONS OF JESUS

Understanding The Old Testament

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Jesus explains the scriptures he grew up on

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How to Use This Book

There is one chapter for every book of the Old Testament, thirty-nine in all, in the order your Bible prints them. You can read straight through. You can also keep this beside your Bible and open it to whatever book you are reading.

Your Bible does not print these books in the order things happened. So right after the opening essay comes **The Story of My People**: the whole history, from Abraham to the year I was born, told once and straight through, with every book in its place. If you read only one thing before you start, read that.

Here is how each chapter works.

It opens with a box called **At a Glance**. It tells you who wrote the book, when, where it fits in my people's story, where I quote it, and which chapters to read if you only have time for three.

Then comes **Words to Know**, so any unfamiliar word is defined before you meet it.

Then comes **The Book in Brief**: what actually happens in the book, or what it actually says, from beginning to end, in plain words. If you have never read the book, it is all you need to follow the rest.

Then the chapter itself, in short sentences and plain words. The big books get long chapters. The small ones get short ones. I will not pad a book that is one page long.

After it there is a box called **Check It Yourself.** It sends you to your own Bible so you can see whether I told you the truth.

At the end there is **The Short Version**, the few lines that hold the whole chapter.

Every chapter also has its own free page on **LessonsOfJesus.com**, at the name of its book, such as LessonsOfJesus.com/genesis. The pages add **Go deeper**

sections with the longer history, the archaeology and the arguments behind the chapter.

At the back of the book there is **a simple timeline**, a **Who's Who** of the people the book names, and the notes.

Two promises before we start.

One. You can check everything. Bible verses look like this: (Luke 4:18). That means the book of Luke, chapter 4, verse 18. History facts have a small number after them, and the notes at the back of the book tell you where each one comes from.

Two. I will not put words in my own mouth. These were the scriptures I grew up on, and when I tell you how I read one of them, I will stay with what the gospels actually remember me saying and doing. Where they remember nothing, I will tell you that plainly. Silence is part of the record too.

Which Bible this book quotes. Every Bible quotation here comes from the **World English Bible**, a modern translation that is in the public domain. No one owns it, and anyone may copy it. Where it prints God's name as *Yahweh*, this book prints *the LORD*, as most English Bibles do. If your Bible words a verse differently, that is normal. Translators make choices. Where a choice changes the meaning, I will tell you.

BEFORE WE START: MY BIBLE

The first thing you need to know about my Bible is that I never held one.

There was no book with a cover. There were scrolls, copied by hand on leather, rolled up and kept in a cupboard in the synagogue. A village like mine was lucky to own a few. When I stood up to read in the synagogue at Nazareth, the attendant handed me one scroll, the scroll of Isaiah. I unrolled it until I found the place, read it, rolled it back up and handed it back (Luke 4:16–20).

So when you picture me with the scriptures, do not picture a leather Bible with a ribbon in it. Picture a long roll of leather, one book at a time, and a room full of people who mostly knew the words by ear.

Three parts, not five

My people did not divide the scriptures the way your Bible does. We had three parts, and I named them myself once: *all things which are written in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms, concerning me* (Luke 24:44).

The Law, or *Torah*, was the five books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. This was the heart of it. Every Jew agreed on these.

The Prophets came next. That meant the history books, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, which we counted as prophecy because they tell what happened when the people listened to God and what happened when they did

not. Then came Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Then came **the Twelve**, the twelve short prophets, Hosea to Malachi, written on one scroll together.

The Writings were everything else: the Psalms, Proverbs, Job, the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah, and Chronicles. The Psalms were the biggest and best-loved book on that shelf, and many readers take *the psalms*, in my phrase, to stand for the whole of it, though some think I meant only the Psalms themselves.

Counted the Jewish way, with Samuel, Kings and Chronicles as one book each, Ezra and Nehemiah as one, and the Twelve as one, that comes to **twenty-four books**. Your Old Testament has thirty-nine. They are the same books, cut differently.[1]

My Bible ended with Chronicles

Here is something most Christians have never been told. In the Jewish order, the scriptures do not end with Malachi. They end with **Chronicles**. The oldest list of that order was written down a few centuries after me, but there is a good reason to think it was already that way in my time.[2]

You can hear it in something I said. I told the religious leaders that they would answer for all the righteous blood shed on earth, *from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zachariah* (Luke 11:51; Matthew 23:35). Abel is the first murder in Genesis. The Zechariah stoned in the Temple courtyard is in 2 Chronicles 24. If Chronicles is the last book, that is the first murder in the scriptures to the last.[3]

Your Bible was arranged differently, and on purpose. Christians took their grouping mostly from the Greek translation, which put history first, then poetry, then the prophets. Latin Bibles then moved the twelve short prophets to the very end, after Daniel. That way the Old Testament ends with Malachi promising that Elijah will come back before the great day of the LORD, and you turn the page into Matthew. It is a good arrangement for a Christian. It is not the one I knew.

Not every shelf was settled

You may think that in my lifetime everybody agreed exactly which books were scripture. They did not.

The Law was settled, and so were the Prophets. The Writings were still being argued over. Jewish teachers were still debating, long after I died, whether the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes belonged.[4] When the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, in caves near my own country, every book of your Old Testament turned up among them except one: **Esther**.[5] The earliest Christian list of Old Testament books that survives, from a bishop named Melito around the year 170, leaves Esther out too.[6]

Nobody in my time owned a list. Nobody needed one. You knew what was read in the synagogue, and the edges were still soft.

The Greek Bible

There was also a second Bible in my world.

Two or three centuries before I was born, Jews in Alexandria, in Egypt, began translating the scriptures into Greek, because many of them no longer read Hebrew. That translation is called the **Septuagint**. The Greek Bibles that have come down to you, copied by Christians from the 300s onward, also include several books that were never in the Hebrew collection, such as Tobit, Judith, the Wisdom of Solomon and the books of the Maccabees.[7]

Most of the New Testament writers quoted the Greek, not the Hebrew. Where the two differ, the gospels sometimes follow the Greek, and you will see that happen in these chapters.

I spoke Aramaic. The gospels show me reading from the scroll of Isaiah in Nazareth. It would normally have been Hebrew, though the words Luke gives follow the Greek. But much of what I said reached you through Greek, written down by men who quoted their scriptures in Greek.

The numbers in your Bible

One more thing, so it does not trip you up.

There were no chapter numbers on my scrolls, and no verse numbers. The chapters in your Bible were added around the year 1200 by an English churchman, **Stephen Langton**, who later became archbishop of Canterbury. The verse numbers came in the 1550s from a French printer working in Geneva, **Robert Estienne**.[8]

They are useful, and this book uses them. But they are not part of the scriptures. When a chapter break falls in the middle of a thought, it is because a man in the Middle Ages put it there.

How I will read these books with you

These were not old books to me. They were not an "Old Testament" at all. They were *the* scriptures. They were the only ones there were.

I quoted them constantly. I argued with people about them. Sometimes I set one verse against another. Sometimes I said, *You have heard that it was said*, and then said something else.

So in each chapter, I will tell you what the book is, who wrote it as far as anyone can tell, and what was going on when it was written. Then I will tell you what I did with it, using only what the gospels remember. Some books I quoted again and again. Some I never mentioned once, and I will say so.

You will notice that I keep coming back to the same few things: debt, land, the poor, the stranger, and the difference between a ruler who feeds on his people and one who feeds them. That is not me forcing those things into the books. They were in the books first. That is where I learned them.

THE STORY OF MY PEOPLE

You cannot understand the books of the Old Testament without the story they belong to, and your Bible does not tell that story in order.

It groups the books by kind. First comes the Law, then the history, then the poems, then the prophets. So the prophets come after the history books, even though they lived in the middle of that history. Amos is near the end of your Old Testament, but he preached in the years told in 2 Kings 14. Many people read the prophets for years without knowing which king was on the throne or which empire was at the gates.

So before we take the books one at a time, here is the whole story, from the beginning to the year I was born, told once and straight through. When a book of your Bible belongs to a part of the story, its name is in **bold**. At the end there is the same story again on a single page.

The stories before history

My people's story begins with the world itself. **Genesis** tells how God made the heavens and the earth, how the first man and woman were sent out of the garden, how the flood came, and how the nations were scattered at Babel.

Then the story narrows to one family. God calls Abraham to leave his home in Mesopotamia, in what is now Iraq and Turkey, for the land of Canaan. That is the narrow strip of land between the Mediterranean Sea and the desert that you

know as Israel and Palestine. Abraham's son is Isaac. Isaac's son is Jacob, whom God renames Israel. Jacob's twelve sons become the twelve tribes, and by the end of Genesis the whole family has gone down to Egypt to escape a famine.

No one can put dates on these stories. No record from their own time outside the Bible mentions Abraham, Isaac or Jacob. They are the stories my people told about where they came from, and they were written down many centuries later. But this is where the story starts, and every child in my village knew it by heart.

Slaves, and set free

Exodus begins with Jacob's descendants as slaves in Egypt, building storage cities for Pharaoh. God hears their cry and sends Moses. After ten plagues, Pharaoh lets them go, and they cross the sea on dry ground.

At Mount Sinai, God makes a covenant with them and gives them the Law. **Leviticus** sets out how the priests and the people are to worship and live, given while they camp at the mountain. **Numbers** follows them through forty years in the wilderness, because the generation that left Egypt was afraid to go into the land. **Deuteronomy** is Moses's farewell, a long speech on the edge of the land, before he dies on a mountain looking across the Jordan.

These five books are the Law. For my people, the exodus was the center of everything. Our God was the God who sets slaves free, and we retold the story every year at Passover.

Egypt kept careful records, and none of them mentions Moses or the escape of a nation of slaves. Many scholars think the story grew from the memory of a smaller group, and its date is argued over. The first time the name *Israel* appears anywhere outside the Bible is on a stone set up by the Egyptian king Merneptah around 1208 BC. By then, Israel is already a people living in Canaan.[1]

The land

Joshua tells how Moses's successor led the tribes across the Jordan, brought down the walls of Jericho, conquered the land and divided it among the tribes. **Judges** tells a messier story. The tribes live among the Canaanites, turn to other gods, are crushed by their neighbors, and are rescued again and again by leaders

called judges, such as Deborah, Gideon and Samson. **Ruth**, a short and gentle story about a foreign widow who becomes the great-grandmother of King David, is set in the same years.

Archaeology tells a quieter story than Joshua's. Around 1200 BC, hundreds of small new villages appear in the hill country, built by farmers. The excavators of Jericho found little sign of a walled city there at that time. Most archaeologists now think Israel took shape slowly, mostly from people already in the land, not in one swift conquest.[2]

Kings

The tribes asked for a king, so that they could be like the other nations. The prophet Samuel warned them what a king would cost. He would take their sons for his chariots, their daughters for his kitchens, and a tenth of their harvests and their flocks (1 Samuel 8:11–17). They wanted one anyway.

The first king was Saul. The second was David, a shepherd from Bethlehem, who took Jerusalem around 1000 BC and made it his capital. His son Solomon built the Temple there. **1 Samuel**, **2 Samuel** and the first chapters of **1 Kings** tell their story.

In my day, people remembered David's kingdom as the golden age, and waited for a son of David to bring it back. That is why people called out to me as *son of David*. The scriptures remember the dark side too: David's adultery and the murder he arranged to hide it, and Solomon's forced labor and his seven hundred wives.

Many of the **Psalms** carry David's name, and **Proverbs**, **Ecclesiastes** and the **Song of Songs** are linked to Solomon. Most of them were written or gathered later, as you will see in their chapters.

For a long time some scholars doubted that David had existed at all. Then, in 1993, pieces of a broken stone were found at Tel Dan, in the far north. On it, an enemy king of the 800s BC boasts of a victory over the *house of David*.[3]

Two kingdoms

When Solomon died, around 930 BC, the north refused to keep paying for his son's court and broke away. From then on there were two kingdoms. **Israel**, in the north, was the larger and richer, and its capital in the end was Samaria. **Judah**, in the south, kept Jerusalem, the Temple and the family of David. **1 Kings** and **2 Kings** tell their stories side by side, king by king.

Remember this, because the prophets make no sense without it. When a prophet speaks to *Israel* or *Ephraim*, he usually means the north. When he speaks to *Judah* or *Zion*, he means the south.

The north had powerful kings, such as Omri and his son Ahab, and both are named in records outside the Bible.[4] It also had prophets who stood up to them. Elijah confronted Ahab and his queen Jezebel. In the 700s BC, in good years for the rich and ruin for the poor, **Amos** and **Hosea** preached in the north. A prophet named Jonah is mentioned in the same years (2 Kings 14:25), though the book of **Jonah** was written much later.

Assyria

Then came the first of the great empires, **Assyria**, from what is now northern Iraq. Its armies were famous for terror.

In 722 BC, Assyria destroyed the northern kingdom and took Samaria. Its people were deported and scattered, and foreigners were settled in their place (2 Kings 17). The ten northern tribes never came back as tribes.[5]

In the south, **Isaiah** and **Micah** preached in Jerusalem through those years. In 701 BC the Assyrian king Sennacherib invaded Judah, destroyed its walled towns and shut King Hezekiah up in Jerusalem. Jerusalem survived. Sennacherib's own record boasts that he trapped Hezekiah in his city *like a bird in a cage*, but it never claims that he took the city (2 Kings 18–19).[6]

Assyria fell in its turn. Its capital, Nineveh, was destroyed in 612 BC, and the little book of **Nahum** is a poem of joy at its fall.[7]

The last kings of Judah

Judah outlasted the north by more than a century. In 622 BC, under King Josiah, a scroll of the law was found in the Temple (2 Kings 22), and Josiah used it to purge the land of other gods. Many scholars think that scroll was an early form of Deuteronomy. **Zephaniah** preached in Josiah's reign.

Josiah was killed in battle in 609 BC, trying to stop an Egyptian army. Soon after, **Babylon**, which had helped destroy Nineveh, became the new master of the whole region. **Habakkuk** asked God why he would use such a cruel nation. **Jeremiah** warned for forty years that Babylon would take the city, and was beaten and imprisoned for saying so.

In 597 BC the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar took Jerusalem and carried off the young king and thousands of its leading people. Among them was a priest named **Ezekiel**. Years later the king Babylon had put on the throne rebelled, and in 586 BC the Babylonians broke through the walls, burned the Temple and took most of those who were left to Babylon (2 Kings 25).[8]

Lamentations is five poems of grief for the ruined city. **Obadiah** condemns Edom, the neighboring people who joined in the looting.

Exile

This was the great disaster of my people's history. No king, no Temple, no land. Many thought God had abandoned them, or had been beaten by the gods of Babylon. *By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down. Yes, we wept, when we remembered Zion* (Psalm 137:1).

But the exile is also where much of the Old Testament took its shape. In Babylon the exiles copied and gathered their scrolls, edited the history of their kings, and asked why it had all happened. Ezekiel saw visions there of God's glory leaving the Temple and of a valley of dry bones coming back to life. An unnamed prophet whose words were added to Isaiah's scroll, in chapters 40 to 55, promised that the exile would end. The stories of **Daniel** are set in Babylon in these years, though the book was finished much later.

Babylon's own clay tablets list rations of oil for Jehoiachin, *king of Judah*, and his sons, held there as prisoners. The Bible remembers him there too. At the very end of 2 Kings, a later Babylonian king frees Jehoiachin and gives him a daily allowance for life (2 Kings 25:27–30).[9]

Coming home

In 539 BC, Cyrus the Persian took Babylon. The next year he allowed the exiles to go home and rebuild their Temple (Ezra 1). Isaiah's scroll even calls him the LORD's anointed, the LORD's messiah, a foreign king (Isaiah 45:1).[10]

Not everyone went back. Those who did found a ruined city in a poor little province of the Persian empire. **Haggai** and **Zechariah** urged them in 520 BC to finish the Temple, and it was completed in 515 BC. This was the Second Temple, the one I knew, though by my time Herod had rebuilt and enlarged it on a vast scale.

Ezra, a priest and scribe, came from Persia to teach the Law, most likely in the 400s BC, and **Nehemiah**, a Jew who served at the Persian court, came as governor in 445 BC and rebuilt Jerusalem's walls. **Malachi** scolded the priests of the rebuilt Temple. **Esther** is set among the Jews who stayed in Persia. Later, probably in the 300s BC, **1 Chronicles** and **2 Chronicles** retold the whole history, from Adam to Cyrus, for the people who had come back. Many scholars place **Joel**, **Job** and the book of Jonah somewhere in these Persian centuries too, and the Psalms were gathered into something close to the collection you have now.

It was in this Persian period, most scholars think, that the five books of the Law reached their final form.

The Greeks

In 332 BC, Alexander the Great swept through on his way to Egypt, and the land passed from the Persians to the Greeks. When Alexander died young, his generals divided his empire. For about a century the land belonged to the Greek kings of Egypt, the Ptolemies. Then, from about 200 BC, it belonged to the Greek kings of Syria, the Seleucids.

Greek became the language of the whole eastern world. In Alexandria, Jews translated the scriptures into Greek, the translation I told you about in the opening essay. Many scholars date **Ecclesiastes** to the end of the Persian age or the start of the Greek one.

The Maccabees

Then a Seleucid king, Antiochus IV, tried to force my people to give up their law. In 167 BC he banned circumcision and the Sabbath, and he had an altar to a Greek god set up in the Temple. A priest named Mattathias and his sons rose in revolt. The most famous son, Judah, was nicknamed *Maccabee*, which probably means the Hammer. In 164 BC they took back the Temple and dedicated it again, and my people still keep that feast as Hanukkah. John's gospel puts me in the Temple at that feast (John 10:22).[11]

Most scholars think the book of **Daniel** was finished during this crisis, about 165 BC, to give hope to people who were being tortured for their faith. That makes it the latest book of the Hebrew scriptures. The story of the revolt is told in the books of the Maccabees, which are in some Bibles and not in others.

The family of the Maccabees, called the Hasmoneans, made themselves kings and high priests. For about eighty years my people ruled themselves again. It was the last time.

Rome

In 63 BC, the Roman general Pompey took Jerusalem and walked into the Holy of Holies, the inner room of the Temple, where only the high priest went, once a year. From then on, my people lived under Rome.[12]

Rome ruled through kings it chose. The most famous was Herod, whom the Roman Senate named king of Judea in 40 BC. He ruled by fear, killed members of his own family, and rebuilt the Temple more splendidly than ever. He died in 4 BC.

I was born near the end of his reign. That is the world I was born into: a people who had been slaves and been freed, had kings and lost them, been carried off and come home, and then been ruled by one empire after another. They had the

scriptures. They had the memory of David. And they had a Temple run by priests who worked with Rome.

Every book in this volume was written somewhere inside this story. When I quoted them, I quoted them to people who knew it.

The story on one page

- **No dates possible** — Creation, the flood, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and Joseph in Egypt. (Genesis)
- **Unknown; often placed in the 1200s BC** — Slavery in Egypt, the exodus, the Law at Sinai, forty years in the wilderness. (Exodus to Deuteronomy)
- **About 1200–1000 BC** — Israel takes shape in the hill country. The judges. (Joshua, Judges, Ruth)
- **About 1000 BC** — David makes Jerusalem his capital. Solomon builds the Temple. (1 and 2 Samuel, 1 Kings)
- **About 930 BC** — The kingdom splits: Israel in the north, Judah in the south. (1 and 2 Kings)
- **700s BC** — Amos and Hosea preach in the north; Isaiah and Micah in Jerusalem.
- **722 BC** — Assyria destroys the northern kingdom. (2 Kings 17)
- **701 BC** — Assyria besieges Jerusalem, and the city survives. (2 Kings 18–19)
- **622 BC** — King Josiah's reform. Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk and Jeremiah preach in Judah's last years. (2 Kings 22–23)
- **597 and 586 BC** — Babylon takes Jerusalem, then destroys it and the Temple. Ezekiel, Lamentations and Obadiah. (2 Kings 24–25)
- **539–538 BC** — Persia takes Babylon, and Cyrus lets the exiles go home. (Ezra 1)
- **520–515 BC** — The Temple is rebuilt. Haggai and Zechariah. (Ezra 5–6)
- **500s–400s BC** — Malachi. Ezra and Nehemiah. Esther is set in these years. Chronicles follows later.
- **332 BC** — Alexander the Great. The Greek age begins.

- **167–164 BC** — The Maccabees revolt and win back the Temple. Daniel is finished.
- **63 BC** — Rome takes Jerusalem.
- **About 4 BC** — I am born, near the end of Herod's reign.

PART ONE — THE LAW

The first five books of your Bible are the Law of Moses, which my people called the Torah, the teaching. They tell one continuous story, from the creation of the world to the edge of the promised land, and the laws are set inside that story. Genesis tells how the family began. Exodus tells how they were freed from slavery in Egypt and given the Law at Mount Sinai. Leviticus is the priests' handbook, given while they camp at the mountain. Numbers follows them through forty years in the wilderness. Deuteronomy is Moses's farewell, spoken within sight of the land he would never enter. In my day these five scrolls were the heart of the scriptures, and every Jew accepted them.

1. Genesis: From the Beginning

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Tradition says Moses. The book never says so. Most scholars think it weaves together several older sources, shaped by later editors.

When: Its stories are very old. The book reached its final form during or after the exile in Babylon, in the 500s or 400s BC.

Where it fits: Before Israel was a people. It runs from the creation of the world to Jacob's family living in Egypt, and it sets up everything that follows.

Where I quote it: On marriage (Mark 10:6–8, quoting Genesis 1:27 and 2:24). I also point to Abel, Noah, Sodom and Lot's wife (Luke 11:51; Matthew 24:37–39; Matthew 10:15; Luke 17:32).

If you only read three chapters: Genesis 1, Genesis 2 and Genesis 45.

Words to Know

Torah — the Law, the first five books of the Bible. The word means *teaching* or *instruction*, not just rules.

Covenant — a binding agreement with promises on both sides. Genesis has several: with Noah, with Abraham, with Jacob.

Image of God — in the world around Israel, a title kings gave themselves. Genesis gives it to everyone.

Patriarchs — the founding fathers of the story: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The Book in Brief

Genesis has two halves.

The first eleven chapters are about the whole world. God makes the heavens and the earth in six days and rests on the seventh. Then, in a second telling, God shapes a man from the dust, plants a garden in Eden, and makes a woman from the man's side. They eat from the one tree God told them to leave alone, and they

are sent out of the garden. Their son Cain kills his brother Abel. People multiply and fill the earth with violence, and God sends a flood. Noah, his family and the animals survive it in a great boat, and God promises never to flood the earth again, with the rainbow as the sign. Later, people build a city with a tower meant to reach the sky, and God scatters them into many languages.

The second half, chapters 12 to 50, follows one family through four generations.

God calls Abraham to leave his family in Mesopotamia and go to the land of Canaan, and promises him land, children, and a blessing for every family on earth. Abraham and his wife Sarah wait years for a son. Isaac is born when they are old. Then God tests Abraham by telling him to sacrifice Isaac, and stops him at the last moment.

Isaac has twin sons, Esau and Jacob. Jacob buys Esau's rights as the firstborn for a bowl of stew, then tricks their blind father into giving him the blessing meant for Esau, and runs for his life to his uncle Laban. There he marries two sisters, Leah and Rachel. With them and their two maids he has twelve sons, though the youngest, Benjamin, is born later, on the way home. On the way home he wrestles all night with a stranger and is given a new name, Israel. His twelve sons become the twelve tribes of Israel.

Jacob's favorite son, Joseph, is sold by his jealous brothers to traders and taken to Egypt as a slave. He ends up in prison, explains Pharaoh's dreams, and rises to run the country. When famine comes, his brothers go to Egypt to buy grain. Joseph tests them, then tells them who he is. Jacob's whole family moves to Egypt. The book ends with Joseph's death there, and with his request that his bones be carried home one day.

When they asked me about the law, I went back to the beginning.

Some Pharisees came to test me with a question about divorce. Is a man allowed to send his wife away?

In my country a man could divorce his wife by handing her a certificate. She could not usually do the same to him. A woman sent away often had nothing.[1]

They expected me to argue about Deuteronomy, where Moses allows the certificate. I went past Moses, back to Genesis.

But from the beginning of the creation, God made them male and female. For this cause a man will leave his father and mother, and will join to his wife, and the two will become one flesh (Mark 10:6–8; Genesis 1:27; 2:24).

When they pushed back with Moses, I said, *Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it has not been so* (Matthew 19:8; compare Mark 10:5).

That is how I read Genesis. It shows you the way things were meant to be, before people bent them. The rest of the Law often shows you how to live with the bending.

Two beginnings

Open your Bible to the first page and read slowly, because there are two creation stories, one after the other.

In the first, **Genesis 1**, God speaks the world into being over six days and rests on the seventh. Plants come on the third day, animals on the fifth and sixth, and people last of all, male and female together. God is called *Elohim*, the ordinary Hebrew word for God.

In the second, starting halfway through **Genesis 2:4**, the order changes. The LORD God forms a man from the dust first, then plants a garden, then makes the animals, and finally builds a woman from the man's side. God has a different name here, *the LORD God*, written with the four letters of God's own name.

Two stories, two orders, two names. The people who put this scroll together did not see a problem. They set both side by side, because they were not writing a science lesson. They were telling you who made the world, and what you are.[2]

Everyone is the image

Here is the line I want you to notice.

God created man in his own image. In God's image he created him; male and female he created them (Genesis 1:27).

In the world my ancestors lived in, the **image of a god** was a title for a king. The name of the Egyptian king you know as Tutankhamun means *the living image*

of Amun. Assyrian courtiers wrote to their king that he was the image of the god.[3]

Genesis takes that title away from the king and gives it to every human being. The man ploughing the field is the image of God. So is his wife. So is his slave.

That is the first page of the scriptures I grew up on. Hold on to it. A great deal of what I did makes sense only if you believe it.

And on the seventh day God rested (Genesis 2:2–3). The rest comes before any law about it. That is why I told the Pharisees, *The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath* (Mark 2:27).

Brothers

The first death in the scriptures is a murder, and it is a brother.

Cain kills Abel in a field. God asks where his brother is, and Cain answers with the oldest excuse there is: *Am I my brother's keeper?* Then God says, *The voice of your brother's blood cries to me from the ground* (Genesis 4:9–10).

I named Abel when I spoke against the Pharisees and the experts in the law. All the innocent blood since Abel's, I said, would be charged to that generation (Luke 11:50–51).

A few verses after Abel, Cain's descendant Lamech boasts that if Cain is avenged seven times, he will be avenged *seventy-seven times* (Genesis 4:24). Remember that number. When Peter asked me how often he had to forgive, I told him *seventy times seven* (Matthew 18:22). The English differs, but in the Greek translation my followers used, Lamech's phrase is exactly the same as mine, and it can be read either way.[4] Lamech kept count of vengeance. I told Peter to keep the same count for forgiveness.

The flood

The flood story is older than Israel. Other peoples told it first. In a Babylonian version, the gods decide to wipe out mankind because people make too much noise and the gods cannot sleep. In another, a man survives in a boat, it comes to rest on a mountain, and he sends out birds to find dry land.[5]

Genesis tells the same kind of story with a different reason. *The earth was filled with violence* (Genesis 6:11). God is not annoyed by noise. God is grieved by what people do to each other.

When I spoke about the end, I used Noah, and the warning was not about wickedness at all. It was about ordinary life. *They were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ship, and they didn't know until the flood came* (Matthew 24:38–39). The danger was not that they were monsters. It was that they were busy.

The strangers at the tent

Abraham is the father of my people. God calls him to leave his country and promises, *All the families of the earth will be blessed through you* (Genesis 12:3). All the families, not one.

The most beautiful thing Abraham does is in **Genesis 18**. Three strangers appear near his tent in the heat of the day. He runs to meet them. He bows. He has bread baked and a calf killed, and he stands by them while they eat.

The very next story is **Sodom**. Two of those same strangers come to the city, and the men of the town surround the house and demand to rape them (Genesis 19:4–5).

You may have been taught what Sodom's sin was. Here is how one of my own prophets summed it up: *Behold, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: pride, fullness of bread, and prosperous ease was in her and in her daughters. She also didn't strengthen the hand of the poor and needy* (Ezekiel 16:49).[6]

When I sent my friends out to the villages with nothing, no money, no bag, I said that any town that refused to welcome them would be worse off on the day of judgment than Sodom (Matthew 10:14–15; Luke 10:10–12). In the way I used it, Sodom was a story about how a town treats a stranger at its door. Abraham ran to the strangers. Sodom surrounded them.

And when I warned people not to cling to what they were leaving behind, I said, *Remember Lot's wife* (Luke 17:32). She looked back.

The knife on the mountain

In **Genesis 22**, God tells Abraham to take his son Isaac up a mountain and sacrifice him. Abraham goes. At the last moment an angel stops his hand, and a ram is offered instead.

It is a terrifying story, and it is meant to be. But notice where it ends. Other peoples around Israel did sacrifice children to their gods, and some kings of Judah later did it too, in the valley outside Jerusalem (2 Kings 16:3; 21:6). This story ends with the knife put down. The God of Abraham does not want the boy.

Jacob and the ladder

Abraham's grandson **Jacob** is a liar and a cheat. He tricks his brother out of his birthright and his father out of a blessing. And God chooses him anyway.

Running for his life, Jacob sleeps on a stone and dreams of a ladder between earth and heaven, with angels going up and down on it (Genesis 28:12). Later he wrestles all night with a stranger and comes away limping, with a new name: **Israel**, the one who struggles with God (Genesis 32:28).

My people are named after a man who wrestled with God and limped. I always liked that.

John remembers me telling a new follower that he would see heaven opened and the angels of God going up and down on the Son of Man (John 1:51). That is Jacob's ladder.

Joseph and the land

The last part of Genesis is the story of **Joseph**, sold into slavery by his brothers, who rises to run Egypt for Pharaoh.

Most people remember the forgiveness, and they should. When Joseph finally tells his brothers who he is, he weeps so loud the whole house hears it (Genesis 45:1–3). At the very end he tells them, *As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good* (Genesis 50:20).

But read **Genesis 47**, which almost nobody preaches. During the famine, Joseph sells grain to the starving Egyptians. When their money runs out, he takes their livestock. When the livestock is gone, they offer him their land and themselves together: *Buy us and our land for bread, and we and our land will be servants to Pharaoh* (Genesis 47:19).[7]

Genesis tells you this without comment. Then you turn the page into Exodus, and a new king arises who does not know Joseph, and the whole system Joseph built is turned on Joseph's own people.

The scriptures I grew up on noticed how debt becomes slavery. They noticed it on the last pages of the very first book.

Who wrote it

Tradition says Moses wrote the five books of the Law. Genesis never says that, and Moses is not even born until the next book.

In the 1700s, scholars began to argue that Genesis was woven from several older sources, each with its own name for God and its own style. In the 1800s that idea grew into a full theory. Many details of that theory are disputed now. But most scholars still agree that the book combines older traditions and was edited into its final form late, likely during or after the exile in Babylon.[2]

That does not make it less true to what it is trying to tell you. It means a people kept these stories for centuries, through slavery, kingdoms and exile, because they needed to remember who they were.

They were the image of God. They were their brother's keeper. They were supposed to run to the stranger.

From the beginning, that is what it was supposed to be.

Check It Yourself

Look up: Genesis 1:1–2:3, then Genesis 2:4–25.

You will find: two creation stories with different orders and different names for God.

Then read Genesis 47:13–26. Watch what happens to the people of Egypt, step by step, as they run out of money.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/genesis**.

The Short Version

- Genesis contains **two creation stories**, set side by side by the people who put the book together.
- It gives the title **image of God**, a royal title, to **every human being**.
- I went back to Genesis on marriage, because it shows **how things were meant to be** before people bent them.
- In the way I used it, **Sodom** was a story about refusing the stranger. Abraham, a chapter earlier, runs to welcome three.
- Genesis ends with **Joseph turning hungry people into Pharaoh's slaves**, which sets up Exodus.

2. Exodus: The God Who Hears Slaves

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Tradition says Moses. Like Genesis, it appears to combine older sources, edited into its final form much later.

When: The story is set in Egypt. Those who take it as history usually place it in the 1200s BC, though a literal reading of 1 Kings 6:1 puts it in the mid-1400s BC. The book reached its final form in the 500s or 400s BC.

Where it fits: Right after Genesis. Jacob's descendants are slaves in Egypt, and the book follows them out to Mount Sinai, where they receive the Law. The story runs straight on into Leviticus and Numbers.

Where I quote it: The burning bush (Mark 12:26, quoting Exodus 3:6). The commandments (Mark 10:19; Mark 7:10). "An eye for an eye" (Matthew 5:38, quoting Exodus 21:24). The blood of the covenant (Mark 14:24, echoing Exodus 24:8). The manna (John 6:31–32).

If you only read three chapters: Exodus 3, Exodus 20 and Exodus 22.

Words to Know

Pharaoh — the title of the king of Egypt. Exodus never tells you his name.

Passover — the spring festival that remembers the night of the escape from Egypt, when death "passed over" the houses marked with a lamb's blood.

The LORD — when your Bible prints LORD in capital letters, it stands for God's own name, four Hebrew letters that my people stopped saying aloud out of reverence.

Manna — the bread-like food that appeared on the ground each morning in the desert.

Pledge — something a poor borrower handed over as security for a loan, often his only cloak.

The Book in Brief

Exodus begins long after Genesis ends. Jacob's descendants have grown into a great people in Egypt, and a new Pharaoh, afraid of them, makes them slaves. Then he orders every Hebrew baby boy thrown into the river. One mother hides her son in a basket among the reeds. Pharaoh's own daughter finds him, raises him as her son, and names him Moses.

Grown up, Moses kills an Egyptian who is beating a Hebrew, and flees to the land of Midian, where he marries and keeps sheep. There God speaks to him from a bush that burns but is not burned up, tells him God's own name, and sends him back to Egypt with his brother Aaron.

Pharaoh refuses, so in chapters 7 to 12 God strikes Egypt with plagues: water turned to blood, frogs, lice, flies, sick livestock, boils, hail, locusts and darkness. Each time, Pharaoh's heart is hardened. The tenth plague is the death of the firstborn. The Israelites eat lamb and flat bread, with the lamb's blood on their doorposts, and death passes over their houses. That night Pharaoh lets them go. Then he changes his mind and chases them to the sea with his chariots. The waters part, Israel crosses on dry ground, and the sea closes over the Egyptian army. Moses and the people sing a song of victory, and Miriam, Aaron's sister, leads the women in dancing.

In the desert the people complain about water and food. God sends quail, water from a rock, and manna, a bread-like food that appears on the ground every morning except the Sabbath. Israel fights off the Amalekites, and Moses' father-in-law Jethro advises him to share the work of judging.

In chapter 19 they reach Mount Sinai. God comes down on the mountain in fire, smoke and thunder, and in chapter 20 speaks the Ten Commandments. Chapters 21 to 23 add laws about slaves, injuries, property, loans, festivals and fair treatment of the poor. In chapter 24 the people promise to obey, Moses seals the covenant with blood, and he climbs the mountain for forty days.

Chapters 25 to 31 are God's instructions for a great tent where God will live among the people, and for its priests. But in chapter 32, while Moses is still on the mountain, the people demand that Aaron make them gods, and he makes a golden calf. Moses comes down, smashes the stone tablets and destroys the calf. He pleads with God not to abandon the people, and in chapter 34 the covenant is renewed on new tablets.

> In the last six chapters the people build the tent exactly as commanded. A cloud covers it, and God's glory fills it.

The law begins with a jailbreak.

On the last night of my life, I ate with my friends during Passover week. The gospels do not agree on whether it was the Passover meal itself or the night before.[1] They agree on the festival.

Passover is the story of this book. My people told it at that table every year: *we were slaves in Egypt, and God brought us out*.

That night I took a cup and said, *This is my blood of the new covenant* (Mark 14:24). Every man at that table had heard *the blood of the covenant* before. When Moses sealed the covenant at Sinai, he threw blood on the people and said, *Look, this is the blood of the covenant, which the LORD has made with you* (Exodus 24:8).

I was not inventing a new religion that night. I was standing inside the oldest story my people had.

The midwives

Exodus opens with a population problem. A new king in Egypt sees that the Hebrews are many, and he is afraid of them. So he works them as forced labor, building his supply cities (Exodus 1:8–11). When that does not work, he orders the Hebrew midwives to kill every boy at birth.

Two of the midwives refuse. Their names are **Shiphrah** and **Puah** (Exodus 1:15–17).

Look at what the book does there. The most powerful man in the world is never named. He is just "Pharaoh." The two women who disobeyed him are named, and their names have been read aloud for well over two thousand years.

Matthew tells my birth with this story in mind. In his telling, King Herod orders the boys of Bethlehem killed, and my family escapes to Egypt and comes back out of it (Matthew 2:13–18). Matthew wanted you to see Moses behind me. No

writer of the time mentions that massacre, not even Josephus, so you should know that historians argue about it.[2]

God hears

Then comes the line that holds the whole book together.

I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. I have come down to deliver them (Exodus 3:7–8).

The God of Exodus is not the god of Pharaoh. Pharaoh's gods sat on his side. This God hears slaves, and comes down on their side.

That is the God I grew up with. When you wonder why I spent my time with the people I did, start here.

The name

At the burning bush, Moses asks God's name. The answer is *I AM WHO I AM* (Exodus 3:14). The Hebrew can also mean *I will be what I will be*. Then God gives the name itself, the four letters YHWH (Exodus 3:15).

By my time, my people no longer said that name aloud, except for the priests in the Temple. When they came to it in the reading, they said *Adonai*, "my Lord." That is why your Bible prints LORD. The form "Jehovah" is a mix of the four letters with the vowels of *Adonai*. It was spread in English by William Tyndale in the 1500s, and nobody in my world ever said it.[3]

John remembers me saying, *Before Abraham came into existence, I AM* (John 8:58). Anyone who knew Exodus would have heard the bush in it.

The God of the living

I quoted the burning bush once, to win an argument about the dead.

The **Sadducees**, the priestly party, did not believe in the resurrection. They may have given the five books of Moses a higher place than the rest of the scriptures.[4] So when they came to mock me with a riddle about a woman married seven times, I answered them from Moses.

Haven't you read in the book of Moses, about the Bush, how God spoke to him, saying, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living (Mark 12:26–27).

God did not say he *had been* their God. He spoke as their God now, and Matthew spells it out: *I am* (Matthew 22:32).

Did it happen?

You deserve an honest answer, so here it is.

No Egyptian record mentions Hebrew slaves leaving Egypt, the plagues, or an army lost in the sea. The book says about six hundred thousand men left on foot, besides children (Exodus 12:37). That would mean two million people or more crossing the desert for forty years, and the desert has kept no trace of them.

The first time the name **Israel** appears outside the Bible is on an Egyptian stone set up around 1208 BC. A pharaoh boasts that he wiped out a people called Israel in Canaan.[5]

So most historians think the exodus story grew from something much smaller, perhaps the memory of a group that escaped from Egypt, which became the story of the whole people. Some scholars defend more of it. Nobody can prove the numbers.

What is certain is what the story did. It taught a whole nation to remember itself as former slaves. And the law in this book is built on that memory.

The law starts with freedom

When God gives the Ten Commandments, the first words are not a rule.

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage (Exodus 20:2).

Every commandment after that is addressed to people who used to be slaves. Do not go back to it. Do not do it to anyone else.

When a rich man asked me how to inherit eternal life, I gave him the commandments: do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not

bear false witness, honor your father and mother. And among them I put one more: *Do not defraud* (Mark 10:19). That is not one of the ten. It most likely recalls the law against cheating a worker out of his wages.[6] I said it to a rich man.

The laws about the poor

After the Ten Commandments comes a long block of laws, chapters 21 to 23. Most people skip it. Read it.

Some of it will shock you. It regulates slavery instead of ending it. It says that if an owner beats his slave and the slave survives a day or two, the owner is not punished, *for the servant is his property* (Exodus 21:20–21). I am not going to hide that from you. It is there.

But in the same block:

You shall not wrong an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt (Exodus 22:21).

You shall not take advantage of any widow or fatherless child. If you take advantage of them at all, and they cry at all to me, I will surely hear their cry (Exodus 22:22–23).

If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be to him as a creditor. You shall not charge him interest (Exodus 22:25).

And then this:

If you take your neighbor's garment as collateral, you shall restore it to him before the sun goes down, for that is his only covering, it is his garment for his skin. What would he sleep in? It will happen, when he cries to me, that I will hear, for I am gracious (Exodus 22:26–27).

That was real. Archaeologists found a broken piece of pottery from about six hundred years before me, with a letter on it from a field worker. His supervisor had taken his cloak, and he was begging an official to make the man give it back.[7]

When I said, *If anyone sues you to take away your coat, let him have your cloak also* (Matthew 5:40), the people listening knew exactly which law was being used against them.

An eye for an eye

The same chapters contain *eye for eye, tooth for tooth* (Exodus 21:24). It was older than Moses. The laws of the Babylonian king Hammurabi have it too.[8]

It was meant as a limit. It meant *only* an eye for an eye, no more. It stopped a feud from turning into a massacre.

I took it one step further. *You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." But I tell you, don't resist him who is evil* (Matthew 5:38–39). The law limited revenge. I asked you to give it up.

Bread for one day

In the desert, the people are hungry, and God sends **manna**. Every morning it is on the ground. Everyone gathers what they need. *He who gathered much had nothing over, and he who gathered little had no lack* (Exodus 16:18). Anyone who tried to store it overnight found it full of worms in the morning (Exodus 16:20).

That is an economy where nobody can hoard.

When I taught my friends to pray *Give us today our daily bread*, every one of them knew the manna story. John remembers a crowd bringing it up to me directly, and my answer that the true bread from heaven was more than food (John 6:31–35).

The golden calf

While Moses is on the mountain, the people get tired of waiting. They melt down their gold and make a calf, and they say, *These are your gods, Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt* (Exodus 32:4).

Notice that. They did not think they were leaving God. They thought they were giving God a shape they could see and hold, a shape made of their own gold.

Centuries later, a king of the northern kingdom set up two golden calves and used almost the same words (1 Kings 12:28). Every age makes its calf, and it is usually made of money.

What God says God is

After the calf, God passes in front of Moses and says who God is:

The LORD! The LORD, a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger, and abundant in loving kindness and truth (Exodus 34:6).

My people repeated that line more than any other sentence about God. It turns up again in the Psalms, in Joel, in Nehemiah, and in Jonah, where the prophet throws it back at God in anger, because God forgave his enemies (Jonah 4:2).[9]

Merciful. Gracious. Slow to anger. That is the God of the book of Exodus describing himself. Hold it up against anyone who tells you otherwise.

Check It Yourself

Look up: Exodus 22:21–27.

You will find: laws protecting the stranger, the widow, the orphan and the poor borrower, each with a reason attached.

Then read Exodus 1:15–22. Find the names of the midwives. Then try to find Pharaoh's.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/exodus**.

The Short Version

- Exodus is the **Passover story**, and I died during Passover week.
- Its God is the one who **hears the cry of slaves** and comes down on their side.
- **No outside record confirms the exodus as told**, and the numbers cannot be literal. The memory it created shaped a whole people.
- The law begins with **"I brought you out of the house of bondage,"** and it protects **the stranger, the widow, the orphan and the poor borrower**.
- The book also **regulates slavery instead of ending it**, and it does not hide that.

3. Leviticus: The Book Nobody Finishes

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Priests. Scholars see two main priestly layers: the instructions on sacrifice and purity, and a section called the Holiness Code (chapters 17 to 26).

When: Some of its practices are old. The book took its final form during or after the exile, in the 500s or 400s BC. In my day the Temple in Jerusalem still ran by it.

Where it fits: The story stands still. Every word is spoken at Mount Sinai, in the one month between the setting up of the sacred tent (Exodus 40:17) and the first census in Numbers (Numbers 1:1).

Where I quote it: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31, quoting Leviticus 19:18). I sent a healed man to the priest, as this book required (Mark 1:44; Leviticus 14).

If you only read three chapters: Leviticus 16, Leviticus 19 and Leviticus 25.

Words to Know

Clean and unclean — whether a person could enter the holy places. Being unclean was not the same as sinning. Childbirth, touching a dead body or a bodily discharge all made you unclean for a time.

Atonement — making things right between people and God. The Day of Atonement, *Yom Kippur*, is described in chapter 16.

Scapegoat — the goat sent into the desert on the Day of Atonement, carrying the people's sins.

Jubilee — every fiftieth year, when land went back to its original families and debt-slaves went free.

Holy — set apart for God. In chapter 19 it turns out to mean something very practical.

The Book in Brief

Leviticus has almost no story. It is a book of instructions that God gives Moses from the newly built tent, and it never leaves Mount Sinai.

Chapters 1 to 7 describe the offerings: animals burned whole on the altar, gifts of grain, shared meals, where the fat is burned for God and the meat is eaten by the priests and the worshiper, and offerings to set right sins and wrongs. Several come with cheaper choices for people who cannot afford an animal from the herd or the flock.

Chapters 8 to 10 hold the book's main story. Moses ordains Aaron and his sons as priests, and fire from God burns up the first offering. Then two of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, offer a fire God had not commanded, and fire comes out from God and kills them.

Chapters 11 to 15 cover being clean and unclean: which animals may be eaten, how long a mother is unclean after childbirth, skin diseases and mold, and discharges from the body. Chapter 16 describes the Day of Atonement, when the high priest purifies the sanctuary and sends a goat into the wilderness carrying the people's sins.

Chapters 17 to 26 are often called the Holiness Code, because their refrain is that the people must be holy, as God is holy. They cover blood, forbidden sexual relations, the laws of chapter 19 on caring for the poor and the stranger, rules for priests, and the calendar of holy days. In chapter 24 a man who curses God's name is stoned. Chapter 25 sets a year of rest for the land every seventh year, and the Jubilee every fiftieth. Chapter 26 promises blessings if the people obey and disasters, ending in exile, if they do not, but says that God will still remember the covenant.

Chapter 27, a kind of appendix, deals with vows and gifts to the sanctuary.

The second greatest commandment is in the middle of this book.

People joke about Leviticus. It is the book where good intentions to read the whole Bible go to die. Page after page of offerings, skin diseases, mildew and priests' clothing.

But when a scribe asked me which commandment was first of all, I gave him two. The first was from Deuteronomy: love God with everything you have. The

second was this:

You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:31; Leviticus 19:18).

That line is in Leviticus. It sits between a law about grudges and a law about mixing two kinds of seed. I did not invent it. Other teachers in my time saw it the same way.[1]

A handbook for priests

Leviticus is a manual. It tells the priests how to run the sacrifices, which animals may be eaten, how to tell when a person may come back to the holy place, and which days are holy.

You may picture sacrifice as an angry god demanding blood. Most of it was not like that. Many offerings were meals, shared between God, the priests and the family who brought them. There were offerings of thanks, offerings of grain and oil, and offerings to purify the sanctuary itself.

And the book makes room for the poor. If you could not afford a lamb, you could bring two birds. If you could not afford birds, a little flour (Leviticus 5:7, 11).

After I was born, my mother came to the Temple to make the offering for a new mother. Luke records what she brought: *A pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons* (Luke 2:24). That is the offering Leviticus allows when *she cannot afford a lamb* (Leviticus 12:8).[2] I was born into the cheaper line of this book.

Clean and unclean

The rules about **clean and unclean** confuse people, so let me be clear.

Being unclean was not a sin. A mother after childbirth was unclean for a time. So was anyone who touched a dead body, which means anyone who buried their own parent. It was a normal part of life. It meant you waited, washed, and then came back to the holy places.

The hardest case was the skin disease your Bible may call *leprosy*. It was not what you call leprosy today. The Hebrew word covered a range of skin conditions, and even mold on cloth and walls (Leviticus 13–14). A person with it had to live

outside the camp, with torn clothes, calling out *Unclean! Unclean!* (Leviticus 13:45–46). It was a life of being shunned.

A man like that came to me and knelt. I touched him, and he was clean. Then I told him, *Go show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing the things which Moses commanded* (Mark 1:40–44).[3]

I did not tear up Leviticus there. I sent him back into it, because the priest's word was the only thing that would let him go home to his village.

And when a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years touched my clothes in a crowd, which some readers think made me unclean by this book, I did not scold her. I called her *daughter* (Mark 5:25–34; Leviticus 15:25).

The food laws

Leviticus 11 lists which animals may be eaten. No pig, no shellfish. Of the land animals, only those that both chew the cud and have split hooves.

I said, *There is nothing from outside of the man, that going into him can defile him* (Mark 7:15). Food, I said, goes *into his stomach, then into the latrine, making all foods clean* (Mark 7:19).

Be careful with those last words. In the oldest copies of Mark, they are Mark's comment, not something he reports me saying, and many translations print them that way, as a note that I declared all foods clean. Matthew tells the same story and leaves them out (Matthew 15:17). And for decades after I died, my followers fought bitterly over whether they still had to keep the food laws. Peter needed a vision on a rooftop to change his mind (Acts 10:9–16).[4] If I had settled it in one sentence, they would not have needed to fight.

The Day of Atonement

Leviticus 16 is the most solemn day of the year. The high priest enters the innermost room of the sanctuary, once a year, and purifies it.

Two goats are chosen. One is sacrificed to the LORD. Over the other, the high priest lays his hands and confesses all the people's sins, and then the goat is led

out into the wilderness *as the scapegoat*, carrying the sins away (Leviticus 16:8–10, 21–22).

The Hebrew word behind *scapegoat* is *Azazel*, and nobody knows for certain what it means. It may be a place, a desert demon, or simply "the goat that goes away." When William Tyndale translated it into English in 1530, he called it the *scape goat*.[5] That is where your word comes from.

What holy means

Leviticus 19 opens with a command: *You shall be holy; for I, the LORD your God, am holy* (Leviticus 19:2).

Then it tells you what that looks like.

When you harvest, leave the edges of your field and the fallen grapes *for the poor and for the foreigner* (Leviticus 19:9–10).

Do not keep a laborer's wages overnight (Leviticus 19:13).

Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind (Leviticus 19:14).

Do not take the side of the poor in court, and do not bow to the great. Judge fairly (Leviticus 19:15).

Do not hate your brother in your heart (Leviticus 19:17).

Love your neighbor as yourself (Leviticus 19:18).

And then, near the end of the chapter: *The stranger who lives as a foreigner with you shall be to you as the native-born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you lived as foreigners in the land of Egypt* (Leviticus 19:34).

That is holiness in Leviticus. Not looking pious. Paying the worker on time. Leaving food in the field for the hungry. Loving the foreigner as yourself.

Matthew remembers me saying, *Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect* (Matthew 5:48). Luke remembers the same saying differently: *Therefore be merciful, even as your Father is also merciful* (Luke 6:36). Read Leviticus 19 and you will see why both of them were right.

Who is my neighbor?

A lawyer once quoted Leviticus 19:18 back to me and then asked, *Who is my neighbor?* (Luke 10:29).

In Leviticus, the neighbor in verse 18 is one of *your people*. The stranger is added in verse 34. The lawyer wanted to know where the line was drawn.

So I told him about a man beaten and left half dead on the road. A priest came by and passed on the other side. So did a Levite, a Temple assistant. Some readers think they were afraid of touching a corpse, which Leviticus forbids priests to do except for close family (Leviticus 21:1–3). The story does not say.[6] Then a **Samaritan** came, a man from the people the lawyer had been raised to despise, and he stopped.

Then I turned the question around. Which one of the three *seemed to be a neighbor* to the man? I did not let the lawyer decide who counted as his neighbor. I asked him to be one.

The verses people quote

Two verses in this book are quoted in arguments today more than almost any others: Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, on a man lying with a man.

The gospels never record me saying anything about them.

You should also know what sits beside them. The same code forbids planting two kinds of seed in one field and wearing a garment made of two kinds of material (Leviticus 19:19). It forbids a man to lie with his wife during her period (Leviticus 18:19). It says that anyone who curses his father or mother shall be put to death (Leviticus 20:9).

Christians have long sorted the laws of this book into kinds. Since the Middle Ages, many have divided them into moral laws, which still bind, and ceremonial and civil laws, which do not.[7] Where each verse falls is exactly what people argue about. I left no ruling on these two. So when someone uses Leviticus as a weapon, it is fair to ask how much of the rest of it he keeps.

The Jubilee

Leviticus 25 may be the most radical chapter in the scriptures.

Every seventh year, the land rests. Every fiftieth year is the **Jubilee**. In that year, land that was sold goes back to the family that originally held it, and Israelites who sold themselves into slavery for debt go free.

The reason is in one sentence: *The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and live as foreigners with me* (Leviticus 25:23).

The trumpet that announced the Jubilee was blown on the Day of Atonement. And the command was to *proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants* (Leviticus 25:10). Pennsylvania's colonial assembly had that line cast onto a bell for its State House in 1752, and two Philadelphia founders recast it the next year. You call it the Liberty Bell.[8]

Nobody can show that the Jubilee was ever fully carried out. But the idea never died. When I stood up in the synagogue at Nazareth, I read from Isaiah: *to proclaim release to the captives … to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord* (Luke 4:18–19). The word for *release* in that passage of Isaiah is the same word Leviticus uses for the Jubilee's *liberty*.[8]

Everyone in that room knew what year I was talking about.

> Check It Yourself
>
> **Look up:** Leviticus 19:9–18, then Leviticus 19:33–34.
>
> **You will find:** that "love your neighbor as yourself" comes in a list about leaving food for the poor, paying workers on time and loving the foreigner.
>
> **Then read Luke 2:22–24 and Leviticus 12:8.** See which offering my family could afford.
>
> **Go deeper:** the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/leviticus**.

The Short Version

- Leviticus is a **priests' handbook**, but the command to **love your neighbor as yourself** is in the middle of it.
- **Unclean was not the same as sinful.** I touched the unclean and sent the healed back to the priest so they could go home.
- In chapter 19, **holiness** means leaving food for the poor, paying workers on time and **loving the foreigner as yourself**.
- The line about **all foods clean** is, in the oldest copies, **Mark's comment**, and my followers argued about food for decades after me.
- The **Jubilee** returned land and freed debt-slaves every fifty years. I read its language aloud at Nazareth.

4. Numbers: Forty Years in the Desert

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Tradition says Moses. Like the other books of the Law, it combines priestly material with older stories.

When: It reached its final form in the 500s or 400s BC. Some pieces are much older.

Where it fits: It picks up at Mount Sinai in the second year after Egypt and follows the people through forty years in the desert, to the plains of Moab across the Jordan from Jericho.

Where I quote it: The bronze serpent lifted up (John 3:14; Numbers 21:8–9). I also point to its laws on Sabbath offerings and on keeping vows (Matthew 12:5; Matthew 5:33).

If you only read three chapters: Numbers 6, Numbers 21 and Numbers 27.

Words to Know

Census — a count of the people. The book is named for its two counts.

Nazirite — a man or woman who took a vow to drink no wine, cut no hair and touch no dead body for a set time.

Tassels — fringes on the corners of a garment, with a blue cord, to remind the wearer of the commandments.

Balaam — a foreign prophet hired to curse Israel, who could only bless it.

The Book in Brief

Numbers carries the story from Mount Sinai to the edge of the promised land, mixing stories and laws all the way.

Chapters 1 to 10 are set at Sinai. Moses counts the men able to fight, tribe by tribe, and arranges the camp around the sacred tent. Laws follow, including the Nazirite vow and the priestly blessing. The leaders of the tribes bring gifts for the

tent, and the people keep the Passover. Then the cloud over the tent lifts, and they set out.

Chapters 11 to 21 are the hard years. The people complain about the food, and God sends quail, then a plague. Miriam and Aaron challenge Moses, and Miriam is struck with a skin disease for a week. Twelve scouts explore Canaan, and ten report that it cannot be taken. The people refuse to go in, so God condemns that whole generation to die in the desert over forty years, all except Joshua and Caleb. A Levite named Korah leads a revolt against Moses and Aaron, and the earth swallows the rebels. Aaron's staff sprouts and blossoms as a sign that God has chosen him. Miriam dies. Moses strikes a rock for water when God told him to speak to it, and God tells him he will not lead the people into the land. Aaron dies. When snakes bite the people, Moses lifts up a bronze serpent, and those who look at it live. Israel defeats Sihon and Og, two kings east of the Jordan.

Chapters 22 to 36 are set on the plains of Moab, across the Jordan from Jericho. The king of Moab hires the seer Balaam to curse Israel, but Balaam can only bless. Israelite men join in the worship of the god Baal of Peor, and Phinehas kills an Israelite man and a Midianite woman with a spear. A second census counts the new generation. The daughters of Zelophehad win the right to inherit, and Joshua is chosen to succeed Moses. Then come laws on offerings and vows, a war against Midian, land for two and a half tribes east of the Jordan, a list of every camp on the journey, the borders of the land, and the cities of refuge. The book ends with one more ruling about Zelophehad's daughters.

A book about getting from slavery to the promised land, and how long it takes.

Your Bible calls this book *Numbers* because of its two counts of the people, one at the start (chapter 1) and one near the end (chapter 26). My people called it by the fifth word of its first verse: *Bemidbar*, which means *in the wilderness*. That is the better name. This is the book of the forty years in the desert.

The count is huge. It says 603,550 fighting men (Numbers 1:46). As with Exodus, nobody can make numbers like that work in the desert. What the book is really counting is a generation, and how it failed.

The oldest verses ever found

In **Numbers 6** there is a blessing the priests spoke over the people:

The LORD bless you, and keep you. The LORD make his face to shine on you, and be gracious to you. The LORD lift up his face toward you, and give you peace (Numbers 6:24–26).

In 1979, archaeologists digging in tombs just outside Jerusalem found two tiny silver scrolls, rolled up like charms to be worn around the neck. When they were finally unrolled and read, they held this blessing. They date from around 600 BC. They are the oldest known texts that match a passage of the Bible, centuries older than the Dead Sea Scrolls.[1]

Someone was buried with the words of this book against his skin, before Jerusalem fell to Babylon.

The vow and the fringes

Numbers 6 also describes the **Nazirite**, a person under a vow to drink no wine, cut no hair and stay away from the dead.

The angel in Luke says my kinsman John *will drink no wine nor strong drink* (Luke 1:15). That sounds like a Nazirite, though Luke never uses the word.[2] I was the opposite. People called me *a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners* (Matthew 11:19).

Numbers 15 tells every Israelite to wear tassels on the corners of his clothes, with a blue cord, so *that you may see it, and remember all the LORD's commandments* (Numbers 15:38–39).

I wore them. The gospels say that the sick reached out to touch *the fringe* of my cloak (Mark 6:56; Matthew 9:20). And I criticized men who made their fringes long so that people would notice them (Matthew 23:5).[3] The tassels were meant to remind you of the commandments, not of yourself.

Remembering slavery as free food

This book is full of complaining.

The people are tired of manna. They want meat. And then they say the most human thing in the whole story: *We remember the fish, which we ate in Egypt for nothing; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlic* (Numbers 11:5).

For nothing. They had been slaves. Their baby boys had been drowned. And a little over a year into freedom, they remembered Egypt as free food.

People do this. Freedom is hard and the desert is long, and the old chains start to look like security.

Spies and giants

In **Numbers 13 and 14**, Moses sends twelve men to scout the land. Ten of them come back terrified. The people there are giants, they say. *We were in our own sight as grasshoppers* (Numbers 13:33).

The people believe the ten and refuse to go in. So the whole generation that left Egypt dies in the desert, except for the two scouts who trusted God, Joshua and Caleb. It takes forty years.

Joshua, in Hebrew, is *Yehoshua*. In the form people used in my time, it is *Yeshua*. That is my name.

The serpent on the pole

In **Numbers 21**, poisonous snakes come among the people, and many die. God tells Moses to make a bronze serpent and set it on a pole, and anyone who is bitten can look at it and live (Numbers 21:8–9).

John remembers me using this. *As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life* (John 3:14–15). The thing that was killing them, lifted up on a pole, became the thing that healed them.

Now read what happened to that serpent later. The people kept it. They burned incense to it, and it was called *Nehushtan*. Hundreds of years later, King Hezekiah broke it into pieces (2 Kings 18:4).[4]

That is a warning for anyone who keeps holy objects. Something God once used to heal can become something people worship in God's place.

The prophet who could not curse

The strangest story in Numbers is about **Balaam**, a famous seer from the east. The king of Moab pays him to curse Israel. On the way, his donkey sees an angel blocking the road, and Balaam does not. The donkey stops, Balaam beats her, and the donkey speaks (Numbers 22:21–35).

Three times Balaam opens his mouth to curse, and three times only blessing comes out. In his fourth oracle he says, *A star will come out of Jacob. A scepter will rise out of Israel* (Numbers 24:17).

That verse had a long life. A hundred years after me, a rebel named Simon led a war against Rome, and the great teacher Akiva hailed him with this verse. His followers called him *Bar Kokhba*, "son of the star."[5]

And Matthew tells of wise men coming from the east, following a star to my cradle (Matthew 2:1–2). Balaam also came from the east. Early Christian writers saw the connection, and so may you.

The daughters who argued

Here is a story I love.

A man named Zelophehad died with no sons, only five daughters: **Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah**. Under the law, land passed to sons. So the daughters walked up to Moses, the priests and the whole assembly, and argued. *Why should the name of our father be taken away from among his family, because he had no son?* (Numbers 27:4).

Moses did not know the answer. He took their case to God. And God said, *The daughters of Zelophehad speak right* (Numbers 27:7). The law was changed because five women argued with it and won.[6]

The law in this book was not frozen. When it was unfair, people were allowed to say so.

Zeal

In **Numbers 25**, an Israelite man brings a Midianite woman into his tent in front of everyone. A priest named **Phinehas** follows them in with a spear and kills them both. God praises his zeal (Numbers 25:6–13).

Phinehas became the model for every man who thought that killing for God was holy. Two centuries before me, the rebel priest who started the Maccabean revolt was praised for burning with zeal *as Phinehas did* (1 Maccabees 2:26).[7]

One of my twelve was called **Simon the Zealot** (Luke 6:15). I do not know exactly what that name meant before he met me. I know that on the night I was arrested, when one of my friends drew a sword, I told him to put it away (Matthew 26:52).

The man with the sticks

One more story, because it shows how hard the Sabbath could be.

In **Numbers 15**, a man is found gathering sticks on the Sabbath. The community brings him to Moses, and he is stoned to death (Numbers 15:32–36).

My own arguments about the Sabbath were never about whether to keep it. They were about what it was for. When the Pharisees complained that my friends had picked grain on the Sabbath, I reminded them that the priests in the Temple do more work on the Sabbath than on an ordinary day, because Numbers itself orders extra offerings that day, and nobody calls them guilty (Matthew 12:5; Numbers 28:9–10).

The Sabbath was a gift to people who had been slaves. It was never meant to be another master.

Check It Yourself

Look up: Numbers 27:1–11.

You will find: five sisters who argued that the law was unfair to them, and a ruling from God that they were right.

Then read Numbers 21:4–9 and 2 Kings 18:4. Follow the bronze serpent from healing to idol.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/numbers**.

The Short Version

- Numbers is the book of the **forty years in the wilderness**, and of a generation that could not let go of Egypt.
- Its priestly blessing is written on **two silver scrolls from about 600 BC**, the oldest known text matching a passage of the Bible.
- I compared my death to **the bronze serpent lifted up**, which later became an idol and had to be smashed.
- **Five daughters argued with the law and won.** The law could be changed when it was unjust.
- **Phinehas** made killing for God look holy. On the night I was arrested, I told my friend to put his sword away.

5. Deuteronomy: The Book I Answered the Devil With

At a Glance

Who wrote it: It is presented as Moses' farewell speeches. Most scholars connect its core with the scroll found in the Temple under King Josiah around 622 BC, which was expanded later.

When: Its core dates from the 600s BC. It reached its final form during or after the exile.

Where it fits: Forty years after Egypt, on the plains of Moab across the Jordan from Jericho. Moses speaks to the people before they cross into the land, and then he dies. In the next book, Joshua leads them over.

Where I quote it: The great commandment (Mark 12:29–30). All three answers to the devil (Matthew 4:4, 7, 10). The certificate of divorce (Matthew 5:31; 19:8). Two or three witnesses (Matthew 18:16). "You always have the poor with you" (Mark 14:7, echoing Deuteronomy 15:11).

If you only read three chapters: Deuteronomy 6, Deuteronomy 15 and Deuteronomy 24.

Words to Know

Deuteronomy — Greek for "second law." It retells the Law to a new generation.

Shema — "Hear," the first word of Deuteronomy 6:4. It is the prayer my people said every morning and evening.

Year of release — every seventh year, when debts between Israelites were to be cancelled.

Prosbul — a legal device from shortly before my time that let lenders get around the year of release.

The ban — the command to destroy a conquered town completely. The Hebrew word is *herem*.

The Book in Brief

Deuteronomy is almost all speeches. Moses gives them on the plains of Moab, in the fortieth year after Egypt, to the new generation that is about to cross the Jordan without him.

In the first speech, chapters 1 to 4, Moses looks back over the journey from Mount Sinai, which this book calls Horeb: the scouts and the people's refusal to enter the land, the long years in the desert, and the victories east of the Jordan. He warns them never to make an image of God.

The second speech is the heart of the book. Chapters 5 to 11 repeat the Ten Commandments and give the Shema. They urge the people to love God, to remember the desert when they grow rich, and not to think they earned the land. Moses retells the golden calf to remind them how close they came to being destroyed.

Chapters 12 to 26 are the law code. Sacrifice is allowed only at the one place God will choose. Then come laws on false prophets, food, tithes, the cancelling of debts every seventh year, the freeing of slaves, the three pilgrim festivals, judges, kings, priests and prophets, cities of refuge, war, family life, and fair treatment of workers, widows, orphans and foreigners.

Chapters 27 and 28 set out a ceremony of blessings and curses to be held once the people are in the land, then long lists of blessings for obeying and curses for disobeying. In chapters 29 and 30 Moses makes a covenant with them in Moab, promises that God will bring them back even if they are scattered, and calls on them to choose life.

In the last chapters Moses appoints Joshua to lead, writes down the law and gives it to the priests, and recites a long song and blesses the tribes one by one. Then he climbs Mount Nebo, sees the whole land from far off, and dies. He is buried in Moab, and no one knows where his grave is.

When I was hungry and alone in the desert, this was the book in my mouth.

After my baptism, I went into the desert and fasted for forty days. The gospels say the devil came to me there, three times.[1]

The first time, he told me to turn stones into bread. I answered, *Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of God's mouth* (Matthew 4:4; Deuteronomy 8:3).

The second time, he told me to throw myself off the Temple and let the angels catch me. I answered, *You shall not test the Lord, your God* (Matthew 4:7; Deuteronomy 6:16).

The third time, he offered me every kingdom of the world if I would bow to him. I answered, *You shall worship the Lord your God, and you shall serve him only* (Matthew 4:10; Deuteronomy 6:13).

All three answers came from Deuteronomy. And the first one comes from a passage about the forty years in the desert, when God let the people go hungry and fed them with manna, *that he might humble you, to test you* (Deuteronomy 8:2–3). I was in the desert for forty days. I answered from the book about the forty years.

Of all the books of the Law, this is the one I quoted most.

Hear, Israel

Every morning and every evening of my life, I said the same words my people still say:

Hear, Israel: the LORD is our God. The LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might (Deuteronomy 6:4–5).[2]

When a scribe asked me which commandment was first, that was my answer (Mark 12:29–30). Then I added the second, from Leviticus: love your neighbor as yourself. I would not give him one without the other.

The scroll found in the Temple

Deuteronomy presents itself as Moses' last speeches, given on the plains of Moab before the people cross the Jordan. The name *Deuteronomy* comes from the Greek translation of a phrase in chapter 17, *a copy of this law*, which the translators read as *second law*.[3]

The book of Kings tells a story about a scroll. Around 622 BC, while workmen were repairing the Temple in Jerusalem, the high priest Hilkiah found *the book of the law* (2 Kings 22:8). When it was read to King Josiah, he tore his clothes in grief. Then he tore down every shrine outside Jerusalem and made the Temple the only place to offer sacrifice (2 Kings 22–23).

That is exactly what Deuteronomy demands: one place of worship, *the place which the LORD your God shall choose* (Deuteronomy 12:5). Since the early 1800s, most scholars have concluded that the scroll Josiah heard was an early form of Deuteronomy.[4]

And the last chapter tells of Moses' own death and burial, adding that *no man knows where his tomb is to this day* (Deuteronomy 34:6). Even the old rabbis noticed that Moses could not have written that. One tradition says Joshua wrote the last eight verses.[5]

Why the Sabbath

Deuteronomy gives the Ten Commandments a second time, with several small differences. The biggest is in one commandment.

In Exodus, you rest on the seventh day because God rested after creation (Exodus 20:11). In Deuteronomy, you rest so *that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. You shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt* (Deuteronomy 5:14–15).

Same commandment. A different reason. One looks back to creation. The other looks back to slavery, and makes sure the servant gets the day off too.

Open your hand

Deuteronomy 15 is the chapter I want every Christian to read.

At the end of every seven years, you shall cancel debts (Deuteronomy 15:1). Every debt between Israelites, cancelled.

Then comes a promise: *However there will be no poor with you* (Deuteronomy 15:4), if the people keep this law.

Then a warning, because Moses knew people. Do not refuse to lend to a poor man because the seventh year is close and you know you will not get your money back (Deuteronomy 15:9).

Then this:

For the poor will never cease out of the land. Therefore I command you to surely open your hand to your brother, to your needy, and to your poor, in your land (Deuteronomy 15:11).

When a woman poured expensive ointment on my head and my friends complained that the money could have gone to the poor, I said, *You always have the poor with you, and whenever you want to, you can do them good* (Mark 14:7).

People quote my line to say that poverty cannot be helped, so there is no point trying. I was echoing this verse. In Deuteronomy, the reason the poor are always with you is the reason you must open your hand.

The loophole

The warning in verse 9 came true.

By my time, people had stopped lending as the seventh year came near, just as Moses feared. So a famous teacher, **Hillel**, approved a legal device called the **prosbul**. A lender could sign his debt over to a court before the seventh year, and then the release did not apply to it.[6]

It was done to keep credit flowing to the poor, and maybe it did. But it meant that in the country I grew up in, the law that cancelled debts every seven years had a way around it.

And I taught my friends to pray, *Forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors* (Matthew 6:12).

Laws for workers and runaways

Deuteronomy keeps coming back to the people at the bottom.

You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy ... In his day you shall give him his wages, neither shall the sun go down on it; for he is poor and sets his

heart on it (Deuteronomy 24:14–15). In my story of the workers in the vineyard, the owner pays everyone at evening (Matthew 20:8).

When you reap your harvest in your field, and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go again to get it. It shall be for the foreigner, for the fatherless, and for the widow (Deuteronomy 24:19).

And this law, which was unusual in the ancient world: *You shall not deliver to his master a servant who has escaped from his master to you. He shall dwell with you, among you, in the place which he shall choose within one of your gates, where it pleases him best* (Deuteronomy 23:15–16). The laws of Hammurabi put a man to death for hiding a runaway slave.[7] Deuteronomy says to let him live wherever he wants.

What a king is not allowed to do

Deuteronomy 17 says that if Israel ever has a king, he must not get many horses, must not get many wives, and must not pile up silver and gold. Instead, he must write out his own copy of the law and read it every day, *that his heart not be lifted up above his brothers* (Deuteronomy 17:16–20).

Now read about King Solomon. He collected horses from Egypt. He had seven hundred wives. He took in 666 talents of gold in a single year (1 Kings 10:14, 28; 11:3).

Deuteronomy is a law written by people who had seen what kings do.

The rebellious son

Deuteronomy 21 says that if a son is stubborn and rebellious, a glutton and a drunkard, who will not obey his parents, they may bring him to the elders, and the town shall stone him (Deuteronomy 21:18–21).

The rabbis after me were so troubled by this law that they hedged it with conditions until it could never be used. One of them said there never was such a son and never would be.[8]

Now think about the story I told of a son who demands his inheritance, wastes it on wild living, and comes home with nothing. By this law, he was the son you

bring to the elders. In my story, the father sees him far off, runs to him, and throws his arms around him (Luke 15:11–24). I will let you decide whether I had this law in mind.

Divorce and witnesses

Deuteronomy allows a man to divorce his wife if he finds *some unseemly thing* in her, by writing her a certificate (Deuteronomy 24:1). The great teachers of my time argued over what *unseemly* meant. One school said only unfaithfulness. The other said anything at all, even burning his dinner.[9]

I went back past Deuteronomy to Genesis. Moses allowed it, I said, *for your hardness of heart* (Mark 10:5; compare Matthew 19:8).

But I did use Deuteronomy's rule that a charge must be confirmed by two or three witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15). I gave it to my friends for settling quarrels among themselves (Matthew 18:16).

The commands I never quoted

I will not skip the hardest part of this book.

Deuteronomy commands that when Israel takes the land, the towns of the Canaanites must be destroyed completely. *You shall save alive nothing that breathes* (Deuteronomy 20:16; see 7:1–2).

I never quoted those verses. I said, *Love your enemies* (Matthew 5:44).

You should also know two things about them. First, the book was written down centuries after the time it describes, in a kingdom where those peoples no longer existed as separate nations. Many scholars read the commands as a fierce way of saying *do not worship their gods*, written for Josiah's generation, not as a record of what happened. Second, the archaeology of the conquest, which I will come to in Joshua, does not match a sweeping destruction.[10]

That does not make the verses easy. It means you should know what kind of writing you are reading before you use it.

A prophet like Moses

Moses tells the people, *The LORD your God will raise up to you a prophet from among you, of your brothers, like me. You shall listen to him* (Deuteronomy 18:15).

My people were waiting for that prophet in my time. Among the Dead Sea Scrolls, this promise, in the words of Deuteronomy 18:18–19, is copied out on a single sheet with Balaam's star prophecy, as a list of the ones to come.[11] John remembers people in the crowds saying that I was *the prophet* (John 6:14; 7:40), and Peter applies this verse to me after my death (Acts 3:22).

Do not forget

Deuteronomy is a sermon to people who are about to get rich.

When you have eaten and are full, and have built fine houses and lived in them; and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold is multiplied ... then your heart might be lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage (Deuteronomy 8:12–14).

Beware, Moses says, *lest you say in your heart, "My power and the might of my hand has gotten me this wealth." But you shall remember the LORD your God* (Deuteronomy 8:17–18).

And at the end, Moses sets the choice in front of them: *I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Therefore choose life* (Deuteronomy 30:19).

He also tells them this law is not too hard, and not far off. It is not in heaven, and not across the sea. *But the word is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it* (Deuteronomy 30:14).

Check It Yourself

Look up: Deuteronomy 15:7–11, then Mark 14:7.

You will find: that "you always have the poor with you" comes from a law commanding you to open your hand to them.

Then read Matthew 4:1–11 and find each of my answers in Deuteronomy 6 and 8.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/deuteronomy**.

The Short Version

- Deuteronomy is **Moses' farewell sermon**. Its core is most likely the **scroll found under King Josiah around 622 BC**.
- I answered **all three temptations** from this book, and said its **Shema** every day.
- It cancels **debts every seventh year** and commands you to **open your hand to the poor**. My line about the poor always being with you **echoes it**.
- It protects **workers' wages**, the **gleaner** and the **runaway slave**, and it limits what a **king** may take.
- It also commands **the destruction of whole towns**. I never quoted those verses.

PART TWO — THE HISTORY

The next twelve books tell my people's story in the land, from the settlement around 1200 BC to the return from exile in the 500s and 400s BC. Joshua and Judges tell how the tribes settled. Ruth is a short story set in the days of the judges. 1 and 2 Samuel tell of the first kings, Saul and David, and 1 and 2 Kings carry the story from Solomon to the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. 1 and 2 Chronicles then tell the story of the kings a second time, written much later, from the Temple's point of view. Ezra and Nehemiah tell of the return and the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and Esther is set among the Jews who stayed in Persia. In the Hebrew Bible, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings make up the first half of the Prophets. The other books of this part belong to the Writings, the third part of the scriptures, which was still taking shape in my day.

6. Joshua: The Man Who Had My Name

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Unknown. It is the first part of a long history running from Joshua to Kings, which scholars call the Deuteronomistic History. It was written by people steeped in Deuteronomy.

When: It is set around 1200 BC. It was written and edited in the 600s and 500s BC, from older traditions.

Where it fits: Israel's entry into Canaan, right after the death of Moses (Deuteronomy 34; Joshua 1:1–2). The tribes cross the Jordan, fight for the land and divide it, long before Israel has a king.

Where I quote it: Never. The gospels do not have me mention Joshua once. Matthew lists Rahab of Jericho among my ancestors (Matthew 1:5).

If you only read three chapters: Joshua 2, Joshua 6 and Joshua 24.

Words to Know

Canaanites — the peoples who lived in the land before Israel, and among whom Israel emerged.

The ban — the command to destroy a conquered town and everything in it as an offering to God. The Hebrew word is *herem*.

Deuteronomistic History — the name scholars give to Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, read as one long history written in the spirit of Deuteronomy.

Book of Jashar — a lost book of old poems that Joshua quotes.

The Book in Brief

Joshua has three parts.

Chapters 1 to 12 tell how Israel took the land. Moses is dead, and God tells Joshua to lead the people across the Jordan. Joshua sends two spies to Jericho, where a woman named Rahab hides them. The priests carry the ark of the

covenant into the river, the water stops flowing, and the people cross on dry ground. At Jericho the army marches around the city once a day for six days and seven times on the seventh. The priests blow their trumpets, the people shout, and the walls fall. Everyone in the city is killed except Rahab and her family.

The first attack on Ai fails, because a man named Achan has kept some of the plunder from Jericho. He is found out and stoned, and Ai is taken. The people of Gibeon trick Joshua into a peace treaty by pretending to come from far away. When five kings attack Gibeon, Joshua defeats them, and the sun stands still. Campaigns follow in the south and the north, and this part ends with a list of thirty-one defeated kings.

Chapters 13 to 21 divide the land. God tells Joshua that much land is still to be taken. Each tribe receives its territory, set out in long lists of borders and towns. Caleb is given Hebron. Six towns are set aside as places of refuge for anyone who kills a person by accident, and the Levites, the priestly tribe, are given towns to live in instead of a territory.

Chapters 22 to 24 close the book. The tribes who settled east of the Jordan build an altar that nearly starts a civil war, until they explain that it is only a witness. Joshua, now old, warns Israel's leaders not to turn to the gods of the land. Then he gathers the tribes at Shechem, retells their history and makes a covenant with them, and they promise to serve the LORD. Joshua dies at a hundred and ten, and the bones of Joseph, carried up from Egypt, are buried at Shechem.

He had my name, and he led an army. I did not.

The hero of this book is called *Yehoshua*, which means *the LORD saves*. In the shorter form people used in my day, it was *Yeshua*. That was my name too. Translate it into Greek and it becomes *Iēsous*, which became *Jesus*.[1]

In the Greek Bible my followers read, this book is simply called *Jesus*. In two places in the King James Version of the New Testament, where Joshua is meant, the English actually says *Jesus* (Acts 7:45; Hebrews 4:8).

So I grew up with a famous name. It belonged to the man who conquered Canaan.

And the gospels never have me mention him once.

Rahab

The first person you meet in Jericho is a prostitute named **Rahab**. She hides two Israelite spies on her roof, lies to the king's men to protect them, and lets them down the city wall on a rope. In return, they promise to spare her family when the city falls. She hangs a red cord from her window as a sign (Joshua 2).

When the city falls, Rahab and her family are the only ones saved (Joshua 6:25).

Matthew begins his gospel with my family tree, and he includes only four women before my mother. One of them is Rahab (Matthew 1:5). Another is Ruth, a Moabite. Another is Tamar, who disguised herself as a prostitute. Another is the one Matthew calls *her who had been Uriah's wife*, a woman the king took.[2]

Matthew wanted you to know that my family tree had a Canaanite prostitute in it. I was not ashamed of her. Neither should you be.

The walls of Jericho

Everyone knows the story. The Israelites march around Jericho for seven days, the priests blow their trumpets, the people shout, and the walls fall down flat (Joshua 6:20).

Then comes the part the children's songs leave out. *They utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, both young and old, and ox, sheep, and donkey, with the edge of the sword* (Joshua 6:21).

That is the ban, the *herem*. Deuteronomy commanded it, and Joshua describes it carried out, town after town. *He left no one remaining, but he utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the LORD, the God of Israel, commanded* (Joshua 10:40).

What the ground says

You should know what archaeologists have found, because it changes how this book should be read.

Jericho was excavated in the 1950s. Its great walls had been destroyed around 1550 BC, centuries before Joshua is usually placed, and in the time Joshua is set, the city was little more than a ruin. The town of Ai, which Joshua also destroys,

had been abandoned for more than a thousand years. Its name in Hebrew means *the ruin*.[3]

Most archaeologists now think that Israel did not arrive from outside in one sweeping invasion. Around 1200 BC, hundreds of small new villages appear in the hill country, built by people whose pottery and houses look a great deal like their Canaanite neighbors'. Many scholars think Israel largely grew up inside Canaan.

Some scholars still defend a real conquest at an earlier date. But the evidence for a total destruction of the land is not there.

The book argues with itself

You do not even need archaeology. Read the book closely.

In one place, Joshua *took the whole land* (Joshua 11:23). Two chapters later, God tells Joshua that *there remains yet very much land to be possessed* (Joshua 13:1). As for the people of Jerusalem, the people of Judah *couldn't drive them out* (Joshua 15:63). The book of Judges, which comes next, opens with a long list of towns that were never taken at all (Judges 1:19–36).[4]

The people who put these scrolls together kept both pictures side by side. One is a sweeping victory written to give a small, frightened kingdom courage. The other is the slower, messier truth.

How this book has been used

Books like Joshua have been used for terrible things.

In 1637, English colonists in New England burned a Pequot village at Mystic, with its women and children inside. One of their captains defended it in print, pointing to the wars of David. *Sometimes the Scripture declareth women and children must perish with their parents,* he wrote.[5] Settlers in other lands have called the people they were taking land from Canaanites, and called their own wars Joshua's.

That is what happens when a story written to give a small people courage is picked up by a powerful people to justify taking what they want.

When I spoke about enemies, I did not reach for Joshua. I said, *Love your enemies ... and pray for those who mistreat you and persecute you* (Matthew 5:44).

The sun stood still

In Joshua 10, during a battle, Joshua says, *Sun, stand still on Gibeon!* and the sun stops in the sky for about a day. The book adds, *Isn't this written in the book of Jashar?* (Joshua 10:12–13).

So the writer was quoting an older book of war poems, now lost. It was a victory song, and the writer said so.

Two thousand years later, people used this verse to argue that the sun goes around the earth. Martin Luther is reported to have mocked Copernicus at his dinner table with it. Galileo had to write a long letter explaining how to read it.[6] A poem had been turned into astronomy.

Choose today

Joshua ends with a speech. Joshua gathers the tribes at Shechem and tells them their own history honestly: *Your fathers lived of old time beyond the River, even Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nahor. They served other gods* (Joshua 24:2).

Then he gives them a choice. *Choose today whom you will serve ... but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD* (Joshua 24:15).

You have probably seen that last line painted over a doorway. It is a good line. Notice that it comes right after an admission that the founders of the nation once worshiped other gods. The book does not pretend that Israel was always pure. Faith was something each generation had to choose.

The two who had the name

The first Yeshua crossed the Jordan with an army.

I was baptized in that same river, and I went out into the desert alone. When a crowd wanted to take me by force and make me king, I went up the mountain by myself (John 6:15). When one of my friends drew a sword to defend me, I told him to put it away (Matthew 26:52).

Same name. Same river. A different kind of leader.

Check It Yourself

Look up: Joshua 11:23, then Joshua 13:1 and Joshua 15:63.

You will find: that the book itself says both that the whole land was taken and that much of it was not.

Then read Matthew 1:1–6. Find Rahab in my family tree.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/joshua**.

The Short Version

- Joshua shares **my name**. In Greek, this book is simply called *Jesus*. I **never quote it**.
- **Rahab**, a Canaanite prostitute who saved the spies, is in **my family tree** in Matthew.
- The book describes **total destruction** of towns, but **archaeology does not support a sweeping conquest**, and the book itself admits much of the land was never taken.
- Its stories have been used to **justify taking other people's land**.
- It ends with **"choose today whom you will serve,"** right after admitting Israel's ancestors served other gods.

7. Judges: Everyone Did What Was Right in Their Own Eyes

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Unknown. It is part of the long history from Joshua to Kings, built from older hero stories.

When: Some of it is very old. The Song of Deborah in chapter 5 may be among the oldest Hebrew poetry there is. The book was edited in the 600s and 500s BC.

Where it fits: Between Joshua and the first king. It opens after Joshua's death (Judges 1:1) and covers the generations, set roughly in the 1100s BC, before Samuel anointed Saul (1 Samuel 10:1).

Where I quote it: Never.

If you only read three chapters: Judges 5, Judges 9 and Judges 19.

Words to Know

Judge — not a courtroom judge. The Hebrew *shophet* means a leader raised up to rescue the people in a crisis.

The cycle — the pattern the book repeats: the people turn from God, an enemy oppresses them, they cry out, God sends a rescuer, there is peace, and it starts again.

Nazirite — someone under a vow not to drink wine, cut their hair or touch the dead. Samson was one from birth.

Concubine — a secondary wife, with fewer rights than a full wife.

The Book in Brief

Judges opens where Joshua left off. Chapter 1 lists the towns the tribes did not conquer. Chapter 2 explains what will happen next: a new generation forgets the LORD, serves the gods of Canaan and falls to its enemies. Each time the people cry out, God raises up a leader, a judge, to rescue them.

Chapters 3 to 16 tell the judges' stories, one after another. Othniel defeats a king from Mesopotamia. Ehud, a left-handed man, stabs the fat king of Moab in his upper room. Deborah, a prophet, sends Barak against the Canaanite general Sisera, and a woman named Jael kills Sisera in her tent. Chapter 5 is the song of that victory. Gideon tears down his father's altar to Baal, tests God with a fleece, defeats the Midianites with three hundred men, and refuses to be king. His son Abimelech murders his brothers and makes himself king, until a woman drops a millstone on his head. Jephthah, an outcast, beats the Ammonites and sacrifices his daughter to keep a vow. Samson, strong as long as his hair is uncut, fights the Philistines on his own. He is betrayed by Delilah, blinded, and dies pulling down the temple of their god Dagon. Several lesser judges get only a line or two.

Chapters 17 to 21 have no judges at all. A man named Micah makes an idol and hires a Levite as his private priest. The tribe of Dan steals both and burns a peaceful town to take its land. Then a Levite's concubine is raped and killed in Gibeah, and the other tribes go to war against the tribe of Benjamin and almost wipe it out. To keep Benjamin alive, they find wives for its survivors by force.

The book ends by saying that there was no king in Israel, and everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

A book that argues for kings, in a Bible that then shows you what kings do.

I grew up in the hills of Galilee, about six miles from **Mount Tabor**. It is the rounded mountain you can see from the ridge above Nazareth. In this book, that is where Deborah's army gathered before the battle (Judges 4:6, 14).

So these were local stories to me. But I never quoted this book, and once you read it, you may understand why. It is one of the most violent books in the scriptures, and it does not tell you who to cheer for.

The cycle

The book tells you its own pattern at the start (Judges 2:11–19). The people forget God. An enemy crushes them. They cry out. God raises up a *judge* to rescue them. There is peace while the judge lives. Then they forget again.

Each time the circle comes around, it gets worse. The judges get more violent and less admirable as the book goes on.

Deborah and Jael

The first great story is about two women.

Deborah is a prophet and the leader of Israel. She sits under a palm tree and settles the people's disputes (Judges 4:4–5). She summons a general, Barak, to fight the Canaanite commander Sisera. Barak will not go unless she goes with him. She goes, and tells him the glory will go to a woman.

The enemy army is routed. Sisera runs and hides in the tent of a woman named **Jael**. She gives him milk, covers him with a rug, and when he is asleep, she drives a tent peg through his head (Judges 4:21).

Then **Judges 5** tells the story again, as a song. Many scholars think it is one of the oldest pieces of Hebrew in the Bible.[1] At the end, the song does something strange. It goes to the enemy's house. Sisera's mother is at her window, wondering why her son is so late. Her ladies reassure her that the men must be dividing the plunder: *A lady, two ladies to every man* (Judges 5:28–30).

The poet makes you look at the enemy's mother, waiting for a son who will never come home, telling herself that he is late because he is busy capturing other people's daughters. It is victory and grief and horror in one picture.

The man who would not be king

Gideon defeats an invading army with three hundred men. Afterward, the people beg him to be their king and start a dynasty.

He refuses. *I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you. The LORD shall rule over you* (Judges 8:23).

That was the old faith of my people: God is the king, and no man should be.

The bramble

Gideon's son **Abimelech** did not share his father's view. He hired thugs, murdered seventy of his brothers on one stone, and made himself king (Judges

9:5–6).

One brother escaped, the youngest, **Jotham**. He climbed a mountain above the town and shouted down a story. It is the first parable in the scriptures, and it is about kings (Judges 9:7–15).

The trees went out to choose a king. They asked the olive tree. The olive tree said, *Should I stop producing my oil, with which they honor God and man by me, and go to wave back and forth over the trees?* They asked the fig tree, and the fig tree said the same about its fruit. They asked the vine, and the vine said the same about its wine.

Then they asked the **bramble**, the thornbush. And the bramble said yes. *Come and take refuge in my shade* (Judges 9:15).

A thornbush has no shade. All it can give you is thorns and fire.

The useful trees were too busy doing good work to rule. The useless one wanted the throne. That is a parable my people told about power long before I told mine. When James and John asked me for the seats of honor and the others were angry with them, I said, *You know that they who are recognized as rulers over the nations lord it over them ... But it shall not be so among you, but whoever wants to become great among you shall be your servant* (Mark 10:42–43).

The daughter

Jephthah was a bandit leader called back to fight for Israel. Before the battle, he made a vow: if God gave him victory, he would sacrifice *whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me* (Judges 11:31).

He won. And his only daughter came out of the house, dancing, to meet him.

He did it. He kept the vow. She is never named. The book says that every year afterward, the young women of Israel went out for four days to mourn her (Judges 11:34–40).

That is a vow that should have been broken. I told my followers not to swear oaths at all. *Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No' be 'No'* (Matthew 5:37). There are promises that are wicked to keep.

Samson

Samson was dedicated as a Nazirite before he was born, and God's spirit made him impossibly strong (Judges 13:5, 25; 14:6).

He is also a brawler who sleeps with whom he likes, kills thirty men to pay off a bet, and burns his enemies' fields by tying torches to foxes' tails. He is captured because he tells Delilah his secret. He dies pulling a temple down on himself and the Philistines inside it, with about three thousand more watching from the roof (Judges 16:27–30).

Children learn him as a hero. Read the actual chapters, and he is a warning about strength with no wisdom in it.

The worst story in the Bible

The last chapters of Judges are almost unreadable.

In **Judges 19**, a Levite and his concubine stop for the night in the town of **Gibeah**, in Israel. The men of the town surround the house and demand the man, just as the men of Sodom did. To save himself, the Levite pushes his concubine out the door. The men abuse her all night. In the morning she is lying at the door with her hands on the threshold. He tells her to get up. She does not answer.

He takes her body home and cuts it into twelve pieces, and sends a piece to each tribe of Israel.

What follows is a civil war that nearly wipes out one tribe. Then, to find wives for the survivors, the other tribes massacre a town and seize its young women. When that is not enough, they tell the remaining men to hide in the vineyards at a festival and snatch girls who come out to dance (Judges 21:19–23).

A scholar once called stories like these *texts of terror*, and asked that the women in them at least be remembered.[2] The woman in Judges 19 is never named either.

No king in Israel

Four times, as the book falls apart, the writer reminds you that there was no king in Israel. The last time, it is the last sentence of the book. In the World English Bible, it reads:

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did that which was right in his own eyes (Judges 21:25; see 17:6; 18:1; 19:1).

The book is making an argument. Without a king, this is what happens. The people need order.

And then you turn the page into Samuel and Kings, and you get the kings. Saul goes mad. David takes another man's wife and has him killed. Solomon works his people like slaves. The kingdom splits, and both halves fall.

The scriptures I grew up on did not settle the question. One book argues that the people need a king. The next books show what the kings did. And Gideon's words are still there in the middle: *The LORD shall rule over you.*

That is the kingdom I talked about.

> Check It Yourself
>
> **Look up:** Judges 9:7–15.
>
> **You will find:** a parable in which the useful trees refuse to rule and the thornbush accepts.
>
> **Then read Judges 8:22–23** and compare it with Judges 21:25.
>
> **Go deeper:** the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/judges**.

The Short Version

- Judges is the story of the time **before the kings**, told as a **repeating cycle** that gets worse each turn.
- Its first great story is about **Deborah**, a woman who led Israel, and the old **Song of Deborah**.
- **Gideon refused to be king**, and his son's brother told the first parable against kings, **the bramble**.
- **Jephthah** sacrificed his daughter to keep a vow, and the book ends with **horrors against women**.
- It argues that Israel needed a king, and the **books that follow show what the kings did**.

8. Ruth: The Foreigner in My Family Tree

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Unknown. In the Hebrew Bible it is one of the Writings, though some early lists attached it to Judges.

When: It is set in the time of the judges, before the kings. When it was written is disputed. Many scholars place it after the exile, in the Persian period. Others place it earlier, under the kings.

Where it fits: Set in the days of the judges (Ruth 1:1), three generations before King David (Ruth 4:17). Written much later, perhaps after the exile. Christian Bibles print it between Judges and 1 Samuel.

Where I quote it: Never. Matthew names Ruth in my family tree (Matthew 1:5).

If you only read three chapters: It has only four. Read all of it.

Words to Know

Moabite — from Moab, the country across the Dead Sea from Judah. The Law said no Moabite could ever join the assembly of the LORD.

Gleaning — gathering the grain the harvesters leave behind. The Law required farmers to leave some for the poor.

Redeemer — in Hebrew *go'el*, the relative whose duty was to buy back family land, or a family member, that had been lost to debt.

Kindness — in Hebrew *hesed*, loyal kindness that goes beyond what is owed. It is the key word of this book.

The Book in Brief

Ruth is a short story in four chapters.

In chapter 1, a famine drives a man from Bethlehem, his wife Naomi and their two sons to Moab. The man dies. The sons marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth, and then the sons die too. Naomi decides to go home and urges her

daughters-in-law to stay. Orpah goes back. Ruth refuses to leave her, and the two women reach Bethlehem as the barley harvest begins.

In chapter 2, Ruth gleans in the fields of Boaz, a wealthy relative of Naomi's dead husband. He is kind to her and makes sure she gathers plenty.

In chapter 3, Naomi sends Ruth at night to the threshing floor where Boaz sleeps. Ruth lies down at his feet and asks him to spread his cloak over her as her near kinsman. He agrees, but a closer relative has the first right.

In chapter 4, Boaz meets that relative at the town gate. The man gives up his right, and Boaz buys the family land and marries Ruth. They have a son, Obed. The book ends with a family list running from Perez, a son of Judah, to Obed's grandson, David.

The Law said she could never belong. She was David's great-grandmother.

There was a famine in **Bethlehem**, the town where Matthew and Luke both say I was born. Its name means *house of bread*, and there was no bread.

So a man named Elimelech took his wife **Naomi** and their two sons across the Jordan to **Moab**. Then Elimelech died. The sons married Moabite women, and about ten years later both sons died too.

Naomi was left with nothing. A widow with no sons, in a foreign country, had no land, no income and no one to protect her. She told her daughters-in-law to go home to their own mothers.

One of them, Orpah, went. The other, **Ruth**, would not.

Where you go

What Ruth says to Naomi is one of the most famous promises ever written:

Where you go, I will go; and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die (Ruth 1:16–17).

You may have heard it read at a wedding. It was not said to a husband. It was said by a young widow to her mother-in-law, an old woman with nothing to

offer her. Ruth was choosing poverty and exile in a strange country, out of loyalty.

When they reach Bethlehem, the women of the town recognize Naomi, and she says, *Don't call me Naomi*, which means *pleasant*. *Call me Mara*, which means *bitter* (Ruth 1:20).

Gleaning

To eat, Ruth goes into the fields to glean, picking up the stalks the reapers drop.

That was the Law at work. *When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field, neither shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest … You shall leave them for the poor and for the foreigner* (Leviticus 19:9–10).

Ruth was both. She was poor, and she was a foreigner.

The field belongs to a relative of Naomi's named **Boaz**. He notices her. He tells his young men not to touch her, and then tells them to pull some stalks out of the bundles on purpose and leave them for her to find (Ruth 2:9, 16).

That is a man who keeps the law of gleaning and then goes past it. The book's word for that is **hesed**, loyal kindness beyond what is required.

The threshing floor

In chapter 3, Naomi sends Ruth to the threshing floor at night, where Boaz is sleeping after the harvest. Ruth lies down at his feet. When he wakes, she asks him to spread his cloak over her, which means *marry me*, and she calls him *a near kinsman* (Ruth 3:9). The Hebrew word is *go'el*, a redeemer.

A **redeemer**, a *go'el*, was the relative who had the duty to buy back family land that had been sold for debt (Leviticus 25:25). Boaz does it. He redeems Elimelech's land, and he marries Ruth, at the town gate, in front of the elders (Ruth 4:9–10).

That word, *redeemer*, began as a word about land and debt. It meant the family member who got you back what you had lost.

The women name the child

Ruth and Boaz have a son. And then the book does something that happens nowhere else in the scriptures. The women of the town give the child his name. They call him **Obed** (Ruth 4:17).

Then the story's last line tells you who he was. *He is the father of Jesse, the father of David* (Ruth 4:17).

The foreign widow who gleaned in the fields was the great-grandmother of Israel's greatest king.

The law that kept her out

Now here is why this little book matters so much.

Deuteronomy says: *An Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter into the LORD's assembly; even to the tenth generation shall no one belonging to them enter into the LORD's assembly forever* (Deuteronomy 23:3).

And after the exile, the leaders who rebuilt Jerusalem enforced that law hard. Ezra made the men of Judah send away their foreign wives, and their children with them (Ezra 10). In Nehemiah's day the law against Moabites was read aloud, and Nehemiah cursed the men who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab, and pulled out their hair (Nehemiah 13:1–3, 23–27).

If Ruth was written in that period, as many scholars think, then it is a quiet answer to those men.[1] It does not argue. It tells you a story about a Moabite woman whose loyalty puts the Israelites around her to shame, and then it tells you that King David came from her.

The scriptures I grew up on held both. The law that kept the Moabite out, and the story of the Moabite who could not be kept out.

My family tree

Matthew names Ruth in my family tree (Matthew 1:5). She is one of four women he includes before my mother, and every one of them is an outsider or a scandal: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah the Hittite.

You should also know that Luke gives me a different family tree, and the two do not agree on most of the names between David and my father. Matthew traces my line through Solomon and Luke traces it through another son of David, Nathan. Even my grandfather has a different name in each.[2] People have tried for centuries to reconcile them. They have never fully succeeded.

But Matthew wanted Ruth in it, and he was right to want her there.

When I said, *Many will come from the east and the west, and will sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven* (Matthew 8:11), I was speaking about a Gentile army officer. I could have been speaking about Ruth.

Check It Yourself

Look up: Deuteronomy 23:3, then Ruth 4:13–17.

You will find: a law that no Moabite may join the assembly, and a Moabite woman who became David's great-grandmother.

Then read Leviticus 19:9–10 and Ruth 2:15–16. Watch Boaz go past what the law required.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/ruth**.

The Short Version

- Ruth is the story of a **Moabite widow** who would not abandon her mother-in-law.
- It shows the **law of gleaning** working, and a man who goes **beyond what the law required**.
- **Redeemer** began as a word about **buying back land lost to debt**.
- The Law said **no Moabite could ever belong**. Ruth became **King David's great-grandmother**.
- Matthew put her in **my family tree**, which does not match the one in Luke.

9. 1 Samuel: The People Ask for a King

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Unknown. It is named after the prophet Samuel, who dies partway through it. It is part of the long history from Joshua to Kings, built from older stories about Saul and David.

When: It is set in the 1000s BC. It was edited into its present form in the 600s and 500s BC. In my day 1 and 2 Samuel were one scroll.

Where it fits: The turn from judges to kings. It begins with Samuel, the last of the judges (1 Samuel 7:15), and ends with the death of Saul, Israel's first king. David's reign follows in 2 Samuel.

Where I quote it: David eating the holy bread (Mark 2:25–26, retelling 1 Samuel 21:1–6). Luke gives my mother a song built on Hannah's (Luke 1:46–55; 1 Samuel 2:1–10).

If you only read three chapters: 1 Samuel 2, 1 Samuel 8 and 1 Samuel 17.

Words to Know

Anointed — in Hebrew *mashiach*, which gives you the word *Messiah*. In Greek it is *christos*, which gives you *Christ*. In this book it means a king, crowned by having oil poured on his head.

Ark of the covenant — the sacred chest that held the tablets of the Law.

Philistines — a people on the southern coast, Israel's great enemy in this book.

Show bread — twelve loaves set out before God in the sanctuary each week, to be eaten only by the priests.

The Book in Brief

1 Samuel tells how Israel got its first king, and how David, the man who would replace him, rose to fame.

Chapters 1 to 7 belong to Samuel. His mother Hannah cannot have children. She prays at the sanctuary at Shiloh and promises the child to God. When Samuel is born, she brings him to serve the old priest Eli, whose own sons are corrupt. As a boy, Samuel hears God calling him in the night. Then the Philistines defeat Israel, capture the ark of the covenant and kill Eli's sons, and Eli dies at the news. The ark brings plagues on the Philistine towns, so they send it back. Samuel leads Israel as prophet and judge.

Chapters 8 to 15 belong to Saul. When Samuel is old, the people demand a king. Samuel warns them what a king will take, then anoints Saul, a tall young man from the tribe of Benjamin. Saul rescues the town of Jabesh from the Ammonites and fights the Philistines, helped by his brave son Jonathan. But he disobeys Samuel twice, and Samuel tells him that God has rejected him as king.

Chapters 16 to 31 belong to David. Samuel anoints the shepherd boy David in Bethlehem. David comes to court to play the harp for Saul, kills the Philistine giant Goliath, becomes Jonathan's closest friend and marries Saul's daughter Michal. Saul grows jealous and tries to kill him, and David runs. He lives as an outlaw with a band of men in the hills and the wilderness, and twice he spares Saul's life. Samuel dies. In the end David takes refuge with the Philistine king of Gath.

On the eve of a great battle, Saul goes to a woman at Endor who calls up the dead, and Samuel rises to tell him he will lose. The Philistine lords send David away before the fighting, and he goes back to rescue his men's families from an Amalekite raid. On Mount Gilboa the Philistines defeat Israel. Jonathan is killed, and Saul falls on his own sword.

The word "Christ" becomes a king's title here, and it means a man with oil on his head.

My followers called me *the Christ*. The word is Greek, and it translates the Hebrew *mashiach*, *anointed*. In this book you learn what it meant.

When Samuel makes Saul king, he takes a flask of oil and pours it on Saul's head (1 Samuel 10:1). When he chooses David, he does the same (1 Samuel 16:13). An anointed one was a king. When David refuses to kill Saul, even though Saul is trying to kill him, it is because Saul is *the LORD's anointed* (1 Samuel 24:6).

So when people called me Christ, they were calling me a king. The Romans understood that perfectly. That is what they wrote over my cross.

Hannah's song

The book opens with a woman who cannot have children. **Hannah** prays in the sanctuary so hard that the priest thinks she is drunk. She gives birth to Samuel and gives him to God's service.

Then she sings. Listen to what she sings about:

The LORD makes poor and makes rich. He brings low, he also lifts up. He raises up the poor out of the dust. He lifts up the needy from the dunghill to make them sit with princes (1 Samuel 2:7–8).

Now listen to the song Luke gives my mother when she is carrying me:

He has put down princes from their thrones, and has exalted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things. He has sent the rich away empty (Luke 1:52–53).

Luke built my mother's song on Hannah's. Two women, a thousand years apart, singing that God turns the world upside down. I was raised in that song before I could speak.

Give us a king

When Samuel grows old, the people come to him and say, *Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations* (1 Samuel 8:5).

God tells Samuel that the people are not rejecting him. *They have rejected me as the king over them* (1 Samuel 8:7). And God tells Samuel to warn them what a king will do.

So Samuel tells them. A king will take your sons for his chariots and his army. He will take your daughters to be his perfumers, cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and give them to his officials. He will take a tenth of your grain and your flocks. He will take your servants and your donkeys. *And you will be his servants* (1 Samuel 8:11–17).

You will cry out in that day because of your king whom you will have chosen for yourselves; and the LORD will not answer you in that day (1 Samuel 8:18).

The people said they wanted a king anyway. They got one.

Obedience and sacrifice

Saul starts well and falls apart. He is jealous, impatient and afraid.

When Saul disobeys a command and then tries to make up for it by offering sacrifices, Samuel tells him, *Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice* (1 Samuel 15:22).

Hosea says something close, centuries later: *I desire mercy, and not sacrifice* (Hosea 6:6). I quoted Hosea's line twice to the Pharisees (Matthew 9:13; 12:7). The idea that God wants your life, not your offerings, is old in my scriptures.

You should also know what Saul disobeyed. In 1 Samuel 15, God commands the destruction of the Amalekites, *man and woman, infant and nursing baby* (1 Samuel 15:3). Saul spares their king and the best livestock, and for this he loses his kingdom. It is one of the hardest chapters in the scriptures, and I will not explain it away.

The heart

God sends Samuel to Bethlehem to anoint a son of Jesse. Jesse's sons pass in front of Samuel one by one, tall and handsome, and each time God says no.

God tells Samuel, *I don't see as man sees. For man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart* (1 Samuel 16:7).

The one God chooses is the youngest, who is not even there. He is out in the fields with the sheep. They have to send for him. His name is **David**.

Goliath

Then comes the most famous fight in the world. The Philistine giant **Goliath** challenges Israel, and David, a boy with a sling, kills him with one stone (1 Samuel 17).

Two honest things about that story.

First, his height. In the Hebrew text your Bible usually follows, Goliath is *six cubits and a span*, about nine feet nine inches. In the oldest copy we have, among the Dead Sea Scrolls, and in the Greek translation, he is *four cubits and a span*, about six feet nine inches.[1] Still a giant to a farm boy. Not a monster.

Second, look at 2 Samuel 21:19. There the Hebrew text says a man named **Elhanan**, also from Bethlehem, killed Goliath the Gittite. Chronicles later smooths this over by saying Elhanan killed *the brother of* Goliath (1 Chronicles 20:5).[2] Two stories about who killed the giant both survived in my scriptures, and nobody threw either one out.

The man in debt

When Saul turns on David, David runs. He becomes an outlaw in the hills.

Look at who joins him. *Everyone who was in distress, everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was discontented, gathered themselves to him; and he became captain over them* (1 Samuel 22:2).

Israel's greatest king started out as the leader of a band of debtors. My people never forgot that about him.

The holy bread

On the run, David comes alone to the priest at Nob and asks for bread, saying his young men are waiting nearby. The only bread there is the **show bread**, the holy loaves only priests may eat. The priest gives it to him (1 Samuel 21:1–6).

When the Pharisees attacked my friends for picking grain on the Sabbath because they were hungry, I pointed to this story. *Did you never read what David did, when he had need, and was hungry—he, and those who were with him? How he entered into God's house at the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the show bread* (Mark 2:25–26).

And here I have to be honest with you. In 1 Samuel, the priest is not Abiathar. It is his father, **Ahimelech**. Either I misspoke, or Mark did. When Matthew and Luke retell the story, they quietly leave the name out (Matthew 12:3–4; Luke 6:3–4).[3]

The point stands either way. When people were hungry, the holy bread fed them. *The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath* (Mark 2:27).

Two chances to kill a king

Twice David has Saul at his mercy, once in a cave and once asleep in his camp, and twice he refuses to kill him (1 Samuel 24 and 26). He cuts off a corner of Saul's robe to prove he could have, and even that troubles his conscience.

The book ends with Saul dead on Mount Gilboa, fallen on his own sword after a lost battle (1 Samuel 31:4). The people got the king they asked for, and he died the way kings usually die.

> #### Check It Yourself
>
> **Look up:** 1 Samuel 8:10–18.
>
> **You will find:** a list of everything a king will take from you, delivered before Israel ever had one.
>
> **Then compare 1 Samuel 21:1–6 with Mark 2:25–26.** Find the priest's name in each.
>
> **Go deeper:** the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/1-samuel**.

> #### The Short Version
>
> - **Anointed** means **Messiah** in Hebrew and **Christ** in Greek. In this book it means **a king with oil on his head**.
> - **Hannah's song** about God lifting the poor is the model for **my mother's song** in Luke.
> - Samuel warned that a king would **take your children, your fields and your harvest**, and the people chose one anyway.
> - **Two different men kill Goliath** in my scriptures, and the giant's **height differs** between manuscripts.
> - I used **David eating the holy bread** to defend the hungry, and in Mark **the priest's name is wrong**.

10. 2 Samuel: The King Who Took What He Wanted

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Unknown. Chapters 9 to 20, which continue into 1 Kings 1 and 2, are often called the Court History of David. It is some of the finest storytelling in the ancient world.

When: It is set in the 1000s BC and was edited into its present form in the 600s and 500s BC. In my day it was the second half of the scroll of Samuel.

Where it fits: David's forty years as king, around 1000 BC (2 Samuel 5:4). It begins with the news of Saul's death and ends late in David's reign. His death and Solomon's rise follow in 1 Kings 1 and 2.

Where I quote it: Not directly. But the title **Son of David** comes from the promise in 2 Samuel 7, and I was called by it (Mark 10:47) and argued about it (Mark 12:35–37).

If you only read three chapters: 2 Samuel 7, 2 Samuel 11 and 2 Samuel 12.

Words to Know

House — in this book, both a building and a dynasty. David wants to build God a house. God promises to build David a house.

Son of David — the title for the king my people hoped would come from David's line.

Nathan — the prophet who told David the truth to his face.

Hittite — a foreigner. Uriah, the man David had killed, was one.

The Book in Brief

2 Samuel is the story of David as king.

In chapter 1, a messenger brings David the news that Saul and Jonathan are dead, and David sings a lament for them. In chapters 2 to 4, David is made king of Judah at Hebron, while Saul's son Ishbosheth rules the other tribes. War drags on between the two royal houses until Saul's general Abner is murdered, and then Ishbosheth.

In chapter 5, all the tribes make David king. He captures Jerusalem and makes it his capital. In chapter 6 he brings the ark of the covenant there, dancing before it. In chapter 7 he wants to build God a temple, and God, through the prophet Nathan, promises David a dynasty instead. Chapters 8 to 10 tell of his wars and victories, and of his kindness to Jonathan's lame son, Mephibosheth.

Chapters 11 and 12 are the turning point. David takes Bathsheba, another man's wife, and has her husband Uriah killed. Nathan confronts him with a parable, and David confesses. The child of that union dies. Bathsheba later bears Solomon.

From then on, trouble fills David's house. In chapters 13 to 19, his son Amnon rapes his half-sister Tamar, and her brother Absalom kills Amnon and flees. Absalom comes back, wins the people's hearts and seizes the throne, and David flees Jerusalem. In the battle that follows Absalom is killed, and David weeps for him. In chapter 20, a man named Sheba leads another revolt. It ends when a wise woman of the town where he is trapped has his head thrown over the wall.

Chapters 21 to 24 gather further stories, a list of David's warriors and two of his poems. The book ends with David counting his fighting men, a plague striking the people, and David buying a threshing floor and building an altar where the plague stopped.

The scriptures I grew up on did not cover for the king.

Here is something remarkable about my people's history. Their greatest king was David. And the book that tells his story tells you that he committed adultery, arranged a murder to cover it up, and lost control of his own family. Then it tells you that one of his sons raped his daughter, and another son killed him for it.

Kings in other countries had their histories carved in stone, and every word was praise. My people kept a history of their king that reads like a confession.

God promises a house

When David is settled in Jerusalem, he looks around his palace and feels ashamed. He lives in a house of cedar, and God lives in a tent. He wants to build God a temple.

God sends the prophet **Nathan** with an answer that turns the offer upside down. David will not build God a house. God will build David a *house*, a dynasty. *I will set up your offspring after you ... I will be his father, and he will be my son ... Your house and your kingdom will be made sure forever before you* (2 Samuel 7:12–16).

That promise is where the hope for a **Son of David** comes from. In my day, when David's line had not ruled for centuries, people still prayed for God to raise up a son of David to drive out the foreigners and rule from Jerusalem.[1]

When the blind beggar Bartimaeus shouted at me on the road out of Jericho, that was what he called me: *Jesus, you son of David, have mercy on me!* (Mark 10:47).

But I also asked a question about that title in the Temple. If the Messiah is David's son, why does David, in the Psalms, call him *my Lord*? (Mark 12:35–37). I was asking people what kind of king they were expecting. Another David, with an army? Or something David himself would bow to?

The roof

2 Samuel 11 begins with a verse that tells you everything. *At the return of the year, at the time when kings go out ... But David stayed at Jerusalem.*

The king was supposed to be with his army. He stayed home. One evening he walks on his roof and sees a woman bathing. He asks who she is. He is told she is **Bathsheba**, the wife of **Uriah the Hittite**, one of his soldiers, who is away at the war. David sends for her and takes her. She becomes pregnant.

The king of Israel could have any woman he wanted. That is what Samuel had warned about.

The soldier who would not go home

David calls Uriah back from the front and tells him to go home and rest, so that the baby will seem to be his.

Uriah will not go. *The ark, Israel, and Judah, are staying in tents; and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord, are encamped in the open field. Shall I then go into my house to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife?* (2 Samuel 11:11).

He sleeps at the palace door. David gets him drunk, and he still will not go home.

So David writes a letter to his general, telling him to put Uriah in the front of the hardest fighting and pull back, so that Uriah will be killed. Then David gives the letter to Uriah to carry (2 Samuel 11:14–15).

Uriah carried his own death sentence to the front, and he never opened it. The most faithful man in this chapter is the foreigner. The king is the criminal.

When Matthew lists my ancestors, he does not use Bathsheba's name. He writes that David became the father of Solomon *by her who had been Uriah's wife* (Matthew 1:6). He made sure the crime stayed in my family tree.

You are the man

Then the prophet Nathan comes to David with a story.

There were two men in a city, one rich and one poor. The rich man had many flocks. The poor man had one little ewe lamb, which he raised with his children. It ate from his plate and slept in his arms like a daughter. When a traveler came to the rich man, he did not want to use one of his own animals, so he took the poor man's lamb and cooked it for his guest (2 Samuel 12:1–4).

David is furious. *The man who has done this deserves to die!*

And Nathan says, *You are the man* (2 Samuel 12:7).

That is how a parable works. You tell a story about someone else. The listener judges the man in the story. Then he discovers the man is himself.

I told stories the same way. When the chief priests heard my story about the tenants who killed the owner's son, Mark says *they perceived that he spoke the parable against them* (Mark 12:12). Nathan taught my people how to tell a king the truth.

What follows

Nathan tells David that the sword will never leave his house (2 Samuel 12:10). Then the book shows you, chapter after chapter.

David's son Amnon rapes his half-sister **Tamar**, and David does nothing (2 Samuel 13:1–21). Her brother Absalom murders Amnon. Absalom leads a revolt against his father and drives him out of Jerusalem. David flees across the Mount of Olives, weeping, barefoot, with his head covered (2 Samuel 15:30).

On the night I was arrested, I went out to that same hill.

In the battle, Absalom's head catches in an oak, and David's general kills him as he hangs there (2 Samuel 18:9–15). And David, the king who had a man killed for his own convenience, breaks down: *My son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! I wish I had died for you* (2 Samuel 18:33).

The census

At the very end of the book, David orders a census of his fighting men. The book says, *Again the LORD's anger burned against Israel, and he moved David against them* (2 Samuel 24:1). A plague follows.

When Chronicles tells the same story centuries later, it changes who moved David. It says, *Satan stood up against Israel, and moved David* (1 Chronicles 21:1). I will come back to that in Chronicles. It is one of the clearest windows you have into how my people's ideas about evil changed over time.

Check It Yourself

Look up: 2 Samuel 12:1–7.

You will find: the parable of the poor man's lamb, and the moment the prophet tells the king he is the man in the story.

Then read Matthew 1:6. See how Matthew names Bathsheba.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/2-samuel**.

The Short Version

- God promises David a **"house,"** a dynasty, and that promise is where the hope for a **Son of David** comes from.
- David **takes Bathsheba** and has her husband **Uriah**, a faithful foreigner, killed.
- The prophet **Nathan** tells David a parable and says **"You are the man."** That is how a parable works.
- The rest of the book shows **the sword in David's house**: rape, murder and civil war among his children.
- My people kept a history of **their greatest king that reads like a confession**.

11. 1 Kings: Solomon's Glory, and Who Paid for It

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Unknown. It continues the long history from Joshua to Kings. It names older sources that are now lost, such as *the book of the acts of Solomon* (1 Kings 11:41).

When: It covers about 970 to 850 BC. Kings reached its final form during the exile, after 561 BC. In my day 1 and 2 Kings were one scroll.

Where it fits: It picks up where 2 Samuel ends, in King David's last days, about 970 BC. It runs through Solomon's reign and the split into two kingdoms, to the death of King Ahab, about 850 BC.

Where I quote it: Solomon in all his glory (Matthew 6:29). The queen of the South (Matthew 12:42). Elijah and the widow of Zarephath (Luke 4:25–26).

If you only read three chapters: 1 Kings 12, 1 Kings 17 and 1 Kings 21.

Words to Know

Forced labor — work the king demanded from his subjects without pay. The Hebrew word is *mas*.

Baal — the Canaanite storm god, rival to the LORD in this book.

Elijah — the great prophet of the northern kingdom. My people expected him to return.

Inheritance — family land, which by the Law was never supposed to be sold away for good.

The Book in Brief

First Kings opens with King David old and dying. In chapters 1 and 2, his son Adonijah tries to make himself king. The prophet Nathan and Bathsheba

persuade David to name her son Solomon instead. After David dies, Solomon has Adonijah and the general Joab killed.

Chapters 3 to 11 tell of Solomon's reign. In a dream God offers him whatever he asks. He asks for wisdom to judge the people, and God adds riches and honor. He settles the case of two women who claim the same baby. With cedar from Hiram, king of Tyre, and forced labor from his own people, he builds the Temple and a great palace, and prays at the Temple's dedication. The queen of Sheba comes to test his wisdom, and gold pours in. But Solomon loves many foreign women, and in his old age they turn his heart to their gods. A prophet tears a new cloak into twelve pieces and gives ten to Jeroboam, one of Solomon's officials, as a sign that he will rule ten tribes.

In chapter 12, after Solomon's death, his son Rehoboam refuses to lighten the people's load, and the kingdom splits in two. The northern tribes make Jeroboam king of Israel. Rehoboam keeps Judah and Jerusalem. Jeroboam sets up two golden calves to keep his people from worshiping in Jerusalem.

Chapter 13 tells of a prophet from Judah who denounces Jeroboam's altar. Chapters 14 to 16 hurry through the next kings, judging each by whether he served the LORD alone. In the north, one king after another is overthrown, until Omri builds a new capital at Samaria. His son Ahab marries Jezebel, a princess from Sidon, and builds a temple for Baal.

Chapters 17 to 22 belong to Ahab and the prophets who oppose him, above all Elijah, who announces a drought, is fed by a widow in Zarephath, defeats the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, and flees from Jezebel to the mountain of God. Jezebel has Naboth killed so that Ahab can take his vineyard. In the last chapter Ahab ignores a prophet's warning, goes to war against Aram, and is killed by an arrow.

I measured a king against a wildflower.

Solomon is the richest, wisest, most glorious king my people ever had. He built the Temple. Kings and queens came from far away to hear him.

I mentioned him twice, and both times I was making him smaller.

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. They don't toil, neither do they spin, yet I tell you that even Solomon in all his glory was not dressed like one of these

(Matthew 6:28–29).

And when people demanded a sign from me, I said the queen of the South would rise up at the judgment and condemn them, *for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, someone greater than Solomon is here* (Matthew 12:42).

The two mothers

Solomon's wisdom is famous for one case (1 Kings 3:16–28). Two prostitutes share a house. Both had babies, and one baby died in the night. Each woman claims the living child is hers.

Solomon calls for a sword and orders the baby cut in half. One woman says, *Oh, my lord, give her the living child, and in no way kill him!* (1 Kings 3:26). And Solomon knows she is the mother.

Notice who stands before the king. Two prostitutes, with no husbands and no family to speak for them. And the king listens to them himself. That is the best of Solomon.

Who built the Temple

Here is the worst.

Solomon took his own people for forced labor. He sent thirty thousand men from Israel to Lebanon to cut timber, in shifts, one month there and two months home. He had seventy thousand carriers and eighty thousand stonecutters in the hills (1 Kings 5:13–15). It took seven years to build the Temple, and thirteen to build his own palace (1 Kings 6:38; 7:1).

Later in the same book, a writer insists that Solomon only made foreigners into bondservants, and that *of the children of Israel Solomon made no bondservants* (1 Kings 9:20–22). Read chapter 5 again and decide for yourself.[1]

What the Law said a king could not do

You may remember that Deuteronomy forbade a king to multiply horses, wives, and silver and gold (Deuteronomy 17:16–17).

Solomon imported horses from Egypt (1 Kings 10:28). He had *seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines* (1 Kings 11:3). And the gold that came to him in a single year weighed *six hundred sixty-six talents* (1 Kings 10:14).

Every line of that law reads like it was written while looking at Solomon.

A heavier yoke

When Solomon dies, his son **Rehoboam** goes to Shechem to be made king. The northern tribes come to him with one request. *Your father made our yoke difficult. Now therefore make the hard service of your father, and his heavy yoke which he put on us, lighter, and we will serve you* (1 Kings 12:4).

Rehoboam asks his father's old advisers. They tell him, *If you will be a servant to this people today, and will serve them ... then they will be your servants forever* (1 Kings 12:7).

Then he asks the young men he grew up with. They tell him to say, *My little finger is thicker than my father's waist. Now my father burdened you with a heavy yoke, but I will add to your yoke. My father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions* (1 Kings 12:10–11).

He takes the young men's advice. The northern tribes walk away. When the king sends his officer in charge of forced labor to bring them back, they stone him to death (1 Kings 12:18).

The kingdom of David and Solomon split in two over forced labor and a heavy yoke.

So listen to what I said, and hear what the people who heard it remembered: *Come to me, all you who labor and are heavily burdened ... Take my yoke upon you ... For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light* (Matthew 11:28–30).

And listen to the old men's advice to Rehoboam, then to what I told my friends: *Whoever wants to become great among you shall be your servant* (Mark 10:43). Rehoboam was told the same thing a thousand years before me. He did not listen.

Golden calves again

The new northern king, **Jeroboam**, does not want his people going to Jerusalem to worship. So he sets up two golden calves, one in Bethel and one in Dan, and he says, *Look and behold your gods, Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt!* (1 Kings 12:28). They are almost the same words the people said over the golden calf in the desert.

From here on, the book judges every northern king by whether he followed *the sins of Jeroboam*.

Elijah and the widow

Then comes **Elijah**, the prophet who appears out of nowhere and tells King Ahab there will be no rain.

During the drought, God sends Elijah to a town called **Zarephath**, outside Israel, in the territory of Sidon. There he finds a widow gathering sticks. She has one handful of flour and a little oil left, and she is about to make a last meal for herself and her son and then die. Elijah asks her to feed him first. She does. Her flour and oil do not run out until the rain comes (1 Kings 17:8–16).

When I preached in my hometown of Nazareth, I reminded them of her. *There were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah ... Elijah was sent to none of them, except to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow* (Luke 4:25–26).

My own neighbors were so angry that they drove me out of town and tried to throw me off a cliff (Luke 4:28–29). That is what it cost to remind them that God's prophets went to foreigners.

Fire and a still small voice

On **Mount Carmel**, Elijah challenges the 450 prophets of Baal to a contest. Each side builds an altar and prays for fire. Baal's prophets shout and dance all day, and nothing happens. Elijah drenches his altar with water and prays once, and fire falls from heaven (1 Kings 18).

Then Elijah has all 450 prophets of Baal killed (1 Kings 18:40).

Then, when the queen threatens his life, the great prophet runs into the desert and asks to die. On the mountain of God there is a wind, then an earthquake, then a fire, and God is not in any of them. After the fire comes *a still small voice* (1 Kings 19:11–12).

God came to Elijah in a quiet voice, after he had tried fire.

Naboth's vineyard

1 Kings 21 is the story I most want you to read.

King Ahab wants a vineyard next to his palace. It belongs to a man named **Naboth**. Ahab offers to buy it or trade for it. Naboth says no: *May the LORD forbid me, that I should give the inheritance of my fathers to you!* (1 Kings 21:3). By the Law, family land was not his to sell for good.

Ahab goes home and sulks. His wife, **Jezebel**, tells him to cheer up and writes letters in his name to the leaders of Naboth's town. She tells them to hold a fast, seat Naboth in a place of honor, and bring *two men, wicked fellows*, to testify that he cursed God and the king (1 Kings 21:9–10).

They do. Naboth is stoned. Ahab takes the vineyard.

Look at how it was done. The Law said a man could only be condemned on the word of two witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15). So they found two. They used the Law's own protection to kill a man and take his land.

Elijah meets Ahab in the vineyard and says, *Have you killed and also taken possession?* (1 Kings 21:19).

When I was tried before the council, Mark says they could not find a charge until false witnesses stood up, and even then their testimony did not agree (Mark 14:55–59). It is an old way to get rid of a man who is in the way.

Check It Yourself

Look up: 1 Kings 12:1–19.

You will find: that the kingdom split because the king refused to lighten the people's yoke.

Then read 1 Kings 21:1–19. Count the witnesses, and see what the Law's own rules were used for.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/1-kings**.

The Short Version

- I measured **Solomon in all his glory** against a **wildflower**.
- Solomon built the Temple with **forced labor** from his own people, and broke every limit Deuteronomy put on kings.
- The kingdom **split over a heavy yoke**. Rehoboam was told to be a servant to the people, and refused.
- I reminded Nazareth that **Elijah was sent to a foreign widow**, and they tried to kill me for it.
- **Naboth** was killed by **two false witnesses** so the king could take his family land.

12. 2 Kings: How It All Fell Down

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Unknown. It completes the long history from Joshua to Kings. In my day it was the second half of the one scroll of Kings.

When: It covers about 850 to 561 BC, from Elijah to the fall of Jerusalem and after. Its last event happened in exile, so it was finished there.

Where it fits: It picks up where 1 Kings ends, about 850 BC, and tells the fall of the north to Assyria in 722 BC and of Jerusalem to Babylon in 586 BC. Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah and Jeremiah preached in these years.

Where I quote it: Naaman the Syrian (Luke 4:27). Elijah taken up and expected back (Mark 9:11–13).

If you only read three chapters: 2 Kings 5, 2 Kings 22 and 2 Kings 25.

Words to Know

Elisha — Elijah's successor, who asked for a double share of his spirit.

Assyria — the great empire that destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC.

Babylon — the empire that destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple in 586 BC.

Exile — the deportation of Judah's leaders and skilled people to Babylon.

Samaritans — the people of the old northern territory around Samaria. In my day, Jews and Samaritans despised each other.

The Book in Brief

Second Kings follows both kingdoms to their end.

Chapters 1 to 8 belong mostly to the prophets. In chapter 2, Elijah is carried up to heaven in a whirlwind, and his follower Elisha takes up his cloak. Elisha raises a

woman's son from the dead, feeds a hundred men with twenty loaves, and heals Naaman, an enemy general from Aram, of his skin disease.

In chapters 9 and 10, at Elisha's word, an army commander named Jehu is anointed king of Israel. He kills the kings of Israel and Judah, has Queen Jezebel thrown from a window, and wipes out Ahab's family and the worshipers of Baal. In chapter 11, the queen mother Athaliah seizes Judah's throne and kills the royal family, but one baby prince, Joash, is hidden in the Temple, and six years later a priest crowns him.

Chapters 12 to 16 hurry through many kings. Elisha dies. Assyria, the great empire to the east, begins swallowing the land. In chapter 17, Assyria captures Samaria and carries the people of the north away. The writer stops to explain why: they worshiped other gods and would not listen to the prophets.

Only Judah is left. In chapters 18 to 20, King Hezekiah trusts the LORD when the Assyrian king Sennacherib threatens Jerusalem. Isaiah promises that the city will be saved, and in the night the angel of the LORD strikes the Assyrian camp. Hezekiah's son Manasseh, in chapter 21, brings back other gods and fills Jerusalem with innocent blood. In chapters 22 and 23, under his grandson Josiah, a scroll of the Law is found in the Temple, and Josiah tears down the shrines.

After Josiah dies fighting Egypt, Judah falls under Babylon. In chapters 24 and 25 the Babylonians take Jerusalem twice. First they carry King Jehoiachin and thousands of his people away. Later they burn the Temple and the city. The governor they leave behind is murdered, and the people left flee to Egypt. The book ends in Babylon, where Jehoiachin is let out of prison and given a seat at the king's table.

This book answers one question: how did God's people lose everything?

Second Kings ends with the Temple burned, Jerusalem in ruins and Judah's king a captive in Babylon. The whole long history from Joshua to Kings was written to explain how it came to that. Its answer is the kings. They worshiped other gods, and they would not listen to the prophets.

The prophets, whom you will meet later in this book, gave another answer as well. The kings and the rich crushed the poor. Both answers are in my scriptures.

Elijah goes up

The book opens with Elijah's last days, and in chapter 2 he is taken away. As he walks with Elisha, *a chariot of fire and horses of fire* separate them, and *Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven* (2 Kings 2:11).

He did not die. So my people expected him to come back. The prophet Malachi said he would return before the great day of the LORD (Malachi 4:5).

Read how Elijah is described: *a hairy man, and wearing a leather belt around his waist* (2 Kings 1:8). Then read how Mark describes my kinsman John: *clothed with camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist* (Mark 1:6).[1] John dressed like Elijah on purpose.

When my friends asked me about Elijah coming first, I told them, *Elijah has come, and they have also done to him whatever they wanted to* (Mark 9:13). I meant John, whom Herod had beheaded. On the mountain, Moses and Elijah appeared with me (Mark 9:4). And on the cross, when I cried out, some of the bystanders thought I was calling for Elijah (Mark 15:35).

Fire on the soldiers

In chapter 1, the king sends a captain and fifty soldiers to arrest Elijah. Elijah calls down fire from heaven and burns them all. The king sends fifty more, and he does it again (2 Kings 1:9–12).

Once, when a Samaritan village would not welcome me, James and John asked, *Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from the sky, and destroy them?* (Luke 9:54). They knew this story.

I turned and rebuked them.[2] We went on to another village.

Elisha's bread

Elisha does many of the same kinds of things I did.

A man brings him twenty loaves of barley bread, and Elisha says to give it to a hundred people. His servant says that is not nearly enough. Elisha says, *They will eat, and will have some left over*, and they do (2 Kings 4:42–44). When John tells of me feeding the crowd, the bread is five barley loaves (John 6:9).

In the village of **Shunem**, Elisha raises a woman's only son from the dead (2 Kings 4:8–37). Luke tells of me raising a widow's only son at the gate of **Nain** (Luke 7:11–17). Nain and Shunem stand on the same hill in Galilee, a short walk apart.[3] After I raised the boy, the crowd said, *A great prophet has arisen among us!* They knew whose village was over the hill.

The book also tells you that when some boys mocked Elisha's bald head, he cursed them, and two bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of them (2 Kings 2:23–24). The prophets in this book are not saints in stained glass.

Naaman

2 Kings 5 is one of the finest stories in the scriptures.

Naaman is the commander of the army of Aram, Israel's enemy. He has a skin disease. A little Israelite girl, captured in a raid and made a slave in his house, tells his wife that the prophet in Samaria could heal him.

So the enemy general comes, with horses and chariots, to Elisha's door. Elisha does not even come out. He sends a message: go wash in the Jordan seven times. Naaman is insulted. He expected a show. His own servants talk him into it. He washes, and his skin becomes *like the flesh of a little child* (2 Kings 5:14).

Then Naaman asks one more thing. When he goes home, his master will lean on his arm in the temple of his god, and he will have to bow there. Will God pardon him for that? Elisha says, *Go in peace* (2 Kings 5:18–19).

In Nazareth I reminded my neighbors: *There were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed, except Naaman, the Syrian* (Luke 4:27). A foreigner, an enemy officer, healed because a slave girl from Israel cared enough to tell him.

The fall of the north

In 722 BC, **Assyria** destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel and carried its people away. Then the Assyrians brought in people from other lands to settle in Samaria (2 Kings 17:6, 24).

The writer of Kings says those settlers worshiped the LORD and their own gods together (2 Kings 17:33). That is the Judean version of where the **Samaritans** came from. The Samaritans told it differently. They said they were descendants of the northern tribes who had never left, and that their temple on Mount Gerizim was the true one.[4]

By my day, Jews and Samaritans would not share a cup (John 4:9). So when I told a story about a good man on the Jericho road, I made him a Samaritan. And when I sat at a well in Samaria, I asked a Samaritan woman for a drink.

The bird in a cage

In 701 BC, the Assyrian king **Sennacherib** invaded Judah and besieged Jerusalem. Kings says King Hezekiah paid him a huge tribute, and then an angel struck the Assyrian camp and he went home (2 Kings 18:13–19:36).

Sennacherib wrote his own account, on clay prisms that still exist. He boasts that he captured forty-six walled towns and shut Hezekiah up in Jerusalem *like a bird in a cage*. He lists the tribute. He never claims to have taken the city.[5]

His palace walls showed his siege of the Judean city of **Lachish**, with prisoners being impaled. Those carvings are in a museum in London. This is where my people's history and the empire's history meet, and they agree on more than you might expect.

The valley of Hinnom

King **Manasseh** is the villain of this book. He sacrificed his own son by fire, and *shed innocent blood very much, until he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another* (2 Kings 21:6, 16). The writer blames the exile on him.

His grandson **Josiah** is the hero. When the scroll of the Law is found in the Temple, Josiah tears down the shrines. He also defiles **Topheth**, the place of child sacrifice in the **Valley of Hinnom**, *that no man might make his son or his daughter to pass through the fire to Molech* (2 Kings 23:10).

That valley, in Hebrew *Gehinnom*, is where my word **Gehenna** comes from. When I used it, I was pointing at a real valley outside the city, where kings of Judah had burned their children.

Josiah was killed by Pharaoh Neco at **Megiddo** in 609 BC (2 Kings 23:29). Chronicles says he was shot in battle there (2 Chronicles 35:20–24). He was the last good king.

The end

In 586 BC, the Babylonians broke through the walls of Jerusalem. They killed King Zedekiah's sons in front of him, then put out his eyes, and took him to Babylon in chains (2 Kings 25:7). They burned the Temple, the palace and every great house (2 Kings 25:9).

Then the book tells you who was left behind. *The captain of the guard left some of the poorest of the land to work the vineyards and fields* (2 Kings 25:12).

The rich were taken. The poor stayed and worked the land. They always do.

A seat at the king's table

The last scene is small. Thirty-seven years into the exile, the new king of Babylon lets Judah's old king, **Jehoiachin**, out of prison, gives him new clothes and a seat at his table, and a daily allowance for the rest of his life (2 Kings 25:27–30).

Archaeologists digging in Babylon found ration lists that record oil given to *Ya'ukin, king of the land of Yahud*.[6] That is Jehoiachin, drawing rations as a captive in Babylon, some thirty years before he was given a seat at the king's table.

The whole history ends there. Not with hope exactly. With a king of David's line still alive, eating at a foreign table, waiting.

Check It Yourself

Look up: 2 Kings 5:1–19, then Luke 4:24–30.

You will find: an enemy general healed by Elisha, and my own town trying to kill me for mentioning it.

Then read 2 Kings 25:8–12. See who was taken to Babylon and who was left behind.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/2-kings**.

The Short Version

- 2 Kings explains **how Israel and Judah were destroyed**: the north by **Assyria in 722 BC**, Jerusalem by **Babylon in 586 BC**.
- **Elijah** was taken up alive, and my people expected him back. **John the Baptist dressed like him**.
- I reminded Nazareth that **Elisha healed Naaman**, an enemy foreigner. When my friends wanted to call down fire like Elijah, **I rebuked them**.
- **Sennacherib's own records** confirm the siege of Jerusalem.
- **Gehenna** is the **Valley of Hinnom**, where kings of Judah burned their children.

13. 1 Chronicles: The Same History, Told Again

At a Glance

Who wrote it: An unknown writer usually called *the Chronicler*, probably connected with the Temple in Jerusalem, and perhaps a Levite.

When: After the exile, probably in the 300s BC. Its family trees run several generations past the return from Babylon. In my day 1 and 2 Chronicles were one scroll, most likely the last book of the scriptures.

Where it fits: Set from Adam to King David's death, about 970 BC; its story of David retells 1 Samuel 31 to 1 Kings 2. Written some six centuries later, for the community back from exile in Babylon.

Where I quote it: Never directly. Like Chronicles, Luke traces my family tree all the way back to Adam (Luke 3:38).

If you only read three chapters: 1 Chronicles 17, 1 Chronicles 21 and 1 Chronicles 29.

Words to Know

Chronicles — the Hebrew title means *the events of the days*. The Greek title means *things left out*.

Genealogy — a family tree. Chronicles opens with nine chapters of them.

Levites — the tribe that served in the Temple as assistants, guards and musicians.

Satan — in Hebrew, *the adversary* or *the accuser*. In Chronicles it begins to look like a name.

The Book in Brief

First Chronicles tells Israel's story again, from the beginning to the death of King David.

Chapters 1 to 9 are family trees. They start with Adam and run through Noah and Abraham to the twelve sons of Israel, then trace the tribes. Judah, David's tribe, comes first and gets the most room, and the Levites, who served at the Temple, get a long chapter of their own. Short stories break in here and there, such as the prayer of a man named Jabez. The lists end with the families living in Jerusalem after the exile, and with the family of Saul.

Chapter 10 tells just one story about Saul: his death in battle with the Philistines on Mount Gilboa.

Chapters 11 to 21 are about David as king. All Israel comes to Hebron to make him king, and he captures Jerusalem. The book lists his mighty warriors. David sets out to bring the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem, but a man named Uzzah touches it and dies, and the ark waits three months. Then the Levites carry it into the city with music, and David appoints Levites to sing God's praise. When David wants to build a house for God, the prophet Nathan brings God's answer: David's son will build it, and God will build David a house, a line of kings. David wins wars on every side. He orders a census, and a plague strikes the people. David buys a threshing floor and builds an altar there, and the plague ends. That spot becomes the site of the Temple.

In chapters 22 to 29, David gets everything ready. He gathers stone, iron, bronze and cedar, and tells Solomon that he himself may not build because he has shed so much blood. He organizes the priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers, the treasurers and the army. He hands Solomon the plans. The leaders and people give gold and silver freely, and David blesses God before them all. Solomon is made king, and David dies at a good old age.

Two histories of the same kings are in my scriptures, side by side, and they do not agree.

Chronicles retells the story you just read in Samuel and Kings. Often it copies them word for word. But it was written for a different time, and it tells the story differently.

The writers of Kings were explaining a catastrophe. Chronicles was written a century or two later, for a small community that had come back from exile to a rebuilt Temple, with no king and no army. They needed to know who they were. So the Chronicler told them.

Starting with Adam

The first word of Chronicles is *Adam* (1 Chronicles 1:1).

Then come nine chapters of names, from Adam to the families living in Jerusalem after the exile. Most people skip them. But the point is not the names. The point is that the little community of the Chronicler's day was connected, unbroken, all the way back to the first human being.

When Luke gives my family tree, he does not stop at Abraham, as Matthew does. He goes all the way back: *the son of Enos, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God* (Luke 3:38). That is a Chronicles way of thinking. My family tree ends in Adam, the father of every human being.

What was left out

The Greek translators called this book *Paraleipomena*, "things left out," because they thought it filled gaps in Samuel and Kings.[1] It does add some things. But what is more striking is what it leaves out.

Read the life of David in Chronicles and you will not find the story of Bathsheba and Uriah. Bathsheba appears only as Solomon's mother, under the name Bath-shua (1 Chronicles 3:5), and Uriah only as a name in a list of David's warriors (1 Chronicles 11:41). You will not find Nathan saying *You are the man*. You will not find the story of Amnon and Tamar, or Absalom's revolt, or David weeping for his son. Those children appear only as names in a family list (1 Chronicles 3:1–9). Saul gets one chapter, the chapter where he dies.

The Chronicler gives you a David who organizes the Temple's singers and gathers gold and cedar for his son to build with. It is a portrait for a statue.

I am not telling you this to call the Chronicler a liar. Samuel and Kings were already there, and everyone could read them. He was preaching, not hiding. He wanted the returned exiles to see the best of their history, and to center their lives on the Temple.

But it shows you something important. My people kept both versions. The confession and the portrait. Nobody threw out Samuel because Chronicles was more flattering.

Who moved David

Here is the most important change in the book.

In 2 Samuel, David takes a census, and a plague follows. The writer says, *Again the LORD's anger burned against Israel, and he moved David against them* (2 Samuel 24:1).

When Chronicles tells the same story, it says, *Satan stood up against Israel, and moved David to take a census of Israel* (1 Chronicles 21:1).

In other books, *the satan* is a title, *the adversary*, an accuser in God's court, as in Zechariah 3 and the book of Job. Here, for one of the first times, the heavenly accuser is called *satan* without *the*, almost like a name.[2] And it takes over an action the older book gave to God.

Over the centuries between Samuel and the Chronicler, my people had come to feel that God could not be the one who pushed David into sin. So they named another power.

By my time, people talked constantly about Satan and his demons. The gospels show me facing him in the desert and casting out demons. You can see the beginning of that change right here, in two versions of one story.

Why David could not build

In 2 Samuel, when David wants to build the Temple, God simply says no and promises him a dynasty instead (2 Samuel 7). In 1 Kings, Solomon explains that his father was too busy with wars (1 Kings 5:3).

Chronicles gives a sharper reason. David says that God told him, *You have shed blood abundantly, and have made great wars. You shall not build a house to my name, because you have shed much blood on the earth in my sight* (1 Chronicles 22:8; see 28:3).

Even the most flattering account of David could not let a man of war build the house of God.

We have given you of your own

At the end of the book, David gathers gifts for the Temple, and the people give freely. Then David prays.

But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to offer so willingly as this? For all things come from you, and we have given you of your own. For we are strangers before you, and foreigners, as all our fathers were (1 Chronicles 29:14–15).

Many churches still sing the middle of that verse, in an older translation's wording, when they take up the offering. It is worth hearing the whole thing. Everything you own came from God. You are only giving it back. And even the king is a foreigner and a passing guest on God's earth.

Check It Yourself

Look up: 2 Samuel 24:1, then 1 Chronicles 21:1.

You will find: the same story, with God moving David in the older book and Satan moving him in the later one.

Then read 2 Samuel 11, and then 1 Chronicles 20:1–3. Chronicles copies the first verse, then skips straight to the capture of Rabbah.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/1-chronicles**.

The Short Version

- Chronicles **retells Samuel and Kings** for the small community that **returned from exile**.
- It begins with **Adam**, and Luke traces my family tree back to Adam too.
- It **leaves out David's crimes**, but my people **kept both versions** of his story.
- Where the older book says **God moved David**, Chronicles says **Satan** did, an early sign of how ideas about evil changed.
- David was not allowed to build the Temple because he had **shed much blood**.

14. 2 Chronicles: The Last Page of My Bible

At a Glance

Who wrote it: The same unknown writer as 1 Chronicles.

When: Probably the 300s BC.

Where it fits: Set from King Solomon, about 970 BC, to the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC and the end of the exile, retelling 1 and 2 Kings from Judah's side; written one or two centuries after the exiles came home.

Where I quote it: The murder of Zechariah in the Temple courtyard, the last murder of a prophet in my scriptures (Luke 11:51; Matthew 23:35; 2 Chronicles 24:20–22).

If you only read three chapters: 2 Chronicles 24, 2 Chronicles 30 and 2 Chronicles 36.

Words to Know

Sabbath of the land — the rest the Law gave the fields every seventh year.

Cyrus — the Persian king who conquered Babylon in 539 BC and let the exiles go home.

Repentance — turning around. The Chronicler believes anyone can do it, even the worst king.

The Book in Brief

Second Chronicles follows the kings of Judah from Solomon to the exile.

Chapters 1 to 9 are Solomon's reign. God offers him whatever he asks, and he asks for wisdom. With help from the king of Tyre, he builds the Temple. At its dedication the priests bring in the ark of the covenant, the singers praise God, and a cloud fills the house. After Solomon's prayer, fire comes down from heaven on the sacrifices. God answers him in the night with a promise and a warning. The queen of Sheba visits, and Solomon grows rich and famous.

In chapter 10, his son Rehoboam refuses to lighten the people's load, and the northern tribes break away. From then on the book follows only David's line in Judah, and mentions the north only when it touches Judah.

Chapters 11 to 36 take those kings one by one. Kings who seek the LORD prosper. Kings who turn away meet trouble, often announced by a prophet. Jehoshaphat sends teachers of the Law through the towns, and wins a battle by sending singers ahead of his army. Joash repairs the Temple, then has Zechariah stoned. Uzziah grows proud, burns incense in the Temple, and is struck with a skin disease.

In chapters 29 to 32, King Hezekiah cleanses the Temple, holds a great Passover, and invites the northern tribes to it. When Assyria attacks Jerusalem, God saves the city. His son Manasseh is the worst king of all, but in chapter 33 he is taken captive to Babylon, humbles himself, and is brought home. In chapters 34 and 35, Josiah cleanses the land, the book of the Law is found in the Temple, and he keeps a great Passover. Then he dies fighting Egypt.

In chapter 36, after four more kings, the Babylonians burn the Temple, break down Jerusalem's walls and take the survivors to Babylon, and the land lies desolate for seventy years. The book ends with Cyrus, king of Persia, announcing that God has charged him to build a house in Jerusalem, and that any of God's people may go up.

My Bible ended with an invitation: go up.

Second Chronicles retells the story of the kings of Judah from Solomon to the exile. It mostly ignores the northern kingdom. For the Chronicler, the true Israel was the one that kept the Temple in Jerusalem.

And in the Jewish order, this is the last book of the scriptures. Its last words are the words of a foreign king telling the exiles to go home: *Whoever there is among you of all his people, the LORD his God be with him, and let him go up* (2 Chronicles 36:23).[1]

That is most likely how my Bible ended. Not with a warning, as yours does with Malachi. With *go up*.

Zechariah in the courtyard

In **2 Chronicles 24**, after the good priest Jehoiada dies, King Joash and his officials turn to other gods. Jehoiada's son **Zechariah** stands up in the Temple and warns them.

They conspired against him, and stoned him with stones at the commandment of the king in the court of the LORD's house. As he died, he said, *May the LORD look at it, and repay it* (2 Chronicles 24:21–22).

When I spoke against the Pharisees and the lawyers, I said that this generation would be charged with *the blood of all the prophets, which was shed from the foundation of the world ... from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zachariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary* (Luke 11:50–51).

Abel was the first murder in Genesis. Zechariah is the last prophet murdered in Chronicles. From the first page to the last. In Matthew's version, Zechariah is called *son of Barachiah*, which seems to mix him up with the prophet Zechariah of a later book.[2] The man I meant was the one stoned in the courtyard, by order of the king, for telling the truth.

Heaven cannot contain you

When Solomon dedicates the Temple, the Chronicler gives him a long prayer, taken mostly from Kings. In the middle of it, Solomon says the most honest thing anyone could say at the opening of a temple:

But will God indeed dwell with men on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens can't contain you; how much less this house which I have built! (2 Chronicles 6:18).

And Solomon prays for **foreigners**, too: when they come from a distant land and pray toward this house, *then hear from heaven, even from your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you for; that all the peoples of the earth may know your name* (2 Chronicles 6:32–33).

When I drove the money-changers out of the Temple courts, I quoted Isaiah: *My house will be called a house of prayer for all the nations* (Mark 11:17). Solomon's prayer had already asked for it.

If my people

You may know one verse from this book better than any other, from signs and bumper stickers:

If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin, and will heal their land (2 Chronicles 7:14).

Read the verse just before it. God is speaking to Solomon about Israel, about drought and locusts and plague in the land of Israel (2 Chronicles 7:13). *My people* means Israel. *Their land* means the land around Jerusalem.

It is a beautiful promise about humility and turning back. It is not a promise about any modern country, and it was never addressed to one.

The prayer for the unclean

Here is a story Kings does not tell.

King **Hezekiah** holds a great Passover in Jerusalem, and he sends letters even to the remnant of the northern tribes, inviting them to come. Most of them laugh at his messengers. Some come (2 Chronicles 30:10–11).

Many of those who came had not purified themselves according to the Law, but they ate the Passover anyway. Hezekiah does not throw them out. He prays for them: *May the good LORD pardon everyone who sets his heart to seek God ... even if they aren't clean according to the purification of the sanctuary.* And the book says, *The LORD listened to Hezekiah, and healed the people* (2 Chronicles 30:18–20).

A king praying that the heart counts for more than the rules of purity. I ate with people the religious leaders called unclean, and they called me a glutton and a drunkard for it. Hezekiah would have understood.

The worst king repents

In Kings, **Manasseh** is the worst king who ever lived, and the exile is his fault (2 Kings 21; 24:3–4).

Chronicles adds an ending. The Assyrians take Manasseh to Babylon with hooks and chains. In his distress, he humbles himself and prays. God hears him and brings him home, and he spends the rest of his reign tearing down the idols he set up (2 Chronicles 33:10–16).

Historians cannot confirm that story.[3] But listen to what the Chronicler believed: even the worst king in Judah's history could repent and be heard. Centuries later, someone wrote the prayer Manasseh might have prayed, and it is in some Bibles today as the Prayer of Manasseh.

I told the story of a son who wasted everything and came home, and of a father who ran to meet him. The Chronicler had already told it about a king.

The land gets its rest

At the very end, Jerusalem falls, the Temple is burned, and the survivors are taken to Babylon. Then the Chronicler explains the exile in a way that surprises people:

To fulfill the LORD's word by Jeremiah's mouth, until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths. As long as it lay desolate, it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years (2 Chronicles 36:21).

The Law gave the land a rest every seventh year. The kings and landowners had not given it. So the land took its rest anyway, all at once, while its owners were in exile.[4]

Go up

Then, in the last two verses, **Cyrus**, king of Persia, issues a decree. God has charged him to build a house in Jerusalem. Any of God's people may go up (2 Chronicles 36:22–23).

The scriptures I grew up on most likely ended there, with a foreign king saying *go up*, and a people standing at the start of a road home. They did not end with everything fixed. They ended with an open door.

Check It Yourself

Look up: 2 Chronicles 24:20–22, then Luke 11:50–51.

You will find: the last murder of a prophet in the Jewish scriptures, and my use of it.

Then read 2 Chronicles 7:13–14 together. See who "my people" are and which land is meant.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/2-chronicles**.

The Short Version

- In the Jewish order, **2 Chronicles is the last book of the scriptures**, and it ends with **"Let him go up."**
- **"From the blood of Abel to the blood of Zachariah"** meant from the first murder in the scriptures to the last murder of a prophet.
- **"If my people ... heal their land"** was spoken about **Israel and its land**.
- **Hezekiah prayed for people who were not ritually clean**, and God healed them.
- The Chronicler believed **even Manasseh, the worst king, could repent**, and that the exile gave the land **the sabbaths it had been denied**.

15. Ezra: Coming Home, and Who Was Sent Away

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Unknown. It includes what appears to be Ezra's own memoir, in the first person in Ezra 7:27–9:15, within the Ezra story of chapters 7 to 10, and copies of official letters, some in Aramaic. In my day Ezra and Nehemiah were one book.

When: It covers 538 BC to about 450 BC. It was put together around 400 BC or later.

Where it fits: It begins where 2 Chronicles ends (2 Chronicles 36:22–23), with Cyrus of Persia freeing the exiles in 538 BC. It follows the rebuilding of the Temple and then, after a long gap, Ezra's own mission.

Where I quote it: Never.

If you only read three chapters: Ezra 1, Ezra 3 and Ezra 10.

Words to Know

Return — the journey of the exiles back from Babylon to Judah, after Persia conquered Babylon.

Aramaic — the common language of the Persian Empire, and later the language I spoke. Parts of this book are written in it.

Scribe — at first a royal secretary. By Ezra's time, a man expert in the Law of Moses.

People of the land — in this book, the people who were already living in and around Judah when the exiles returned.

The Book in Brief

Ezra is a history in ten chapters, in two halves. It picks up where 2 Chronicles ends, and parts of it are written in Aramaic.

Chapters 1 to 6 tell of the first return. Cyrus, king of Persia, announces that the God of heaven has told him to build a house in Jerusalem, and he lets any Jews who wish to go home. He gives back the gold and silver vessels Nebuchadnezzar took from the Temple. Chapter 2 lists about forty-two thousand people who go. In chapter 3 they rebuild the altar, keep the feast of booths and lay the Temple's foundation. The people shout for joy while the old men who remember the first Temple weep. In chapter 4 their neighbors ask to help and are refused, then work against them, writing letters to the Persian kings. The work stops. In chapter 5 the prophets Haggai and Zechariah get the people building again, and a Persian governor writes to King Darius to ask by what right. Darius has the archives searched, and in chapter 6 Cyrus's decree is found. Darius orders the work to go on. The Temple is finished and dedicated, and the Passover is kept.

Chapters 7 to 10 tell of Ezra, a priest and scribe who knows the Law of Moses. King Artaxerxes sends him from Babylon to Jerusalem with silver, gold and the power to teach the Law, and a new group of exiles goes with him. From the end of chapter 7 (7:27) through chapter 9, Ezra tells the story himself, in the first person. In chapter 9 the leaders report that many Jews, even priests and Levites, have married women from the surrounding peoples. Ezra tears his clothes, sits stunned, and prays in grief. In chapter 10 the people agree to send these wives and their children away. A committee examines the cases for three months. The book ends with a list of the men who had married foreign women.

The book about coming home ends with wives and children being sent away.

Ezra picks up exactly where Chronicles leaves off, with the decree of **Cyrus**, king of Persia, letting the exiles go home to rebuild the Temple (Ezra 1:1–4).

Cyrus did not do this out of love for my people. Persian kings let conquered peoples restore their temples because it kept the provinces quiet and the gods on Persia's side. A clay cylinder from Babylon records Cyrus boasting about returning gods and peoples to their homes. It does not mention Judah or the Jews.[1]

But my prophets saw God's hand in it. Isaiah even called Cyrus the LORD's *anointed*, his *messiah* (Isaiah 45:1). A foreign king who never worshiped the

God of Israel, called by the same word my followers later used for me.

Joy and weeping

The exiles come home and lay the foundation of the new Temple. The priests blow trumpets, the Levites sing, and the people shout.

But the old men who had seen the first Temple before it was burned look at the new foundation and weep aloud. *The people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people; for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the noise was heard far away* (Ezra 3:12–13).

That is what coming home after a disaster sounds like. Joy and grief so mixed that you cannot tell them apart.

The help that was refused

When the building starts, people from the surrounding area come and offer to help. *Let us build with you; for we seek your God, as you do; and we have been sacrificing to him since the days of Esar Haddon king of Assyria, who brought us up here* (Ezra 4:2).

The leaders of the returned exiles refuse. *You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God* (Ezra 4:3).

After that, those people become enemies, and they write to the Persian king to stop the work.

Ezra calls them *adversaries*. They were the people who had been living in the land the whole time, and who said they worshiped the same God. The hostility between Jews and **Samaritans** in my day had many causes, but this kind of moment is part of where it came from.[2]

The letters in Aramaic

From Ezra 4:8 to 6:18, and again in 7:12–26, the book switches from Hebrew to **Aramaic**. These are copies of letters to and from the Persian court: complaints, investigations, a search of the royal archives, a decree.

That was the language of the empire's offices. By my day, Aramaic was the language my people spoke at home. I spoke it. Some of my words are still in your gospels in it: *Talitha cumi*, which means *Girl, I tell you, get up* (Mark 5:41).

Ezra the scribe

The second half of the book introduces **Ezra** himself, decades after the first return. He is a priest and a **scribe**, *skilled … in the law of Moses* (Ezra 7:6). The book says *Ezra had set his heart to seek the LORD's law, and to do it, and to teach* (Ezra 7:10).

Seek it, do it, teach it, in that order. That is a good description of what a scribe was supposed to be.

The scribes of my day were Ezra's heirs. I argued with them often. But notice that I did not argue with Ezra's order. I argued with scribes who taught it and did not do it. *They say, and don't do* (Matthew 23:3).

The foreign wives

Then comes the end of the book, and it is hard.

Ezra learns that many of the returned men, including priests and Levites, have married women from the surrounding peoples. He tears his clothes and pulls hair from his head and beard, and sits stunned until evening (Ezra 9:3–4).

The people gather in the rain in front of the Temple, trembling, and agree to *put away all the wives, and those who are born of them* (Ezra 10:3, 9–12). A committee works for three months, going through the cases one by one. The book ends with a list of the men who had married foreign women, and its last line reads, *All these had taken foreign wives; and some of them had wives by whom they had children* (Ezra 10:44).[3]

That is how the book ends. Women and children sent away.

You should understand why Ezra was afraid. His community was tiny, and it had just survived an exile that nearly erased it. He believed that mixing with the surrounding peoples and their gods was exactly what had destroyed Israel the first time. He thought he was saving his people.

You should also know that my scriptures did not leave his answer standing alone. The book of **Ruth** tells of a Moabite woman who married into Israel and became King David's great-grandmother. Isaiah says that foreigners who join themselves to the LORD will be brought to God's holy mountain, *for my house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples* (Isaiah 56:6–7).

Who belongs

I did not speak about Ezra. But I was asked, again and again, who belongs.

When the Pharisees asked about divorce, I said, *What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate* (Mark 10:9).

And once, in the region of Tyre, a foreign woman begged me to heal her daughter. I told her it was not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. She answered me, *Yes, Lord. Yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs*. And I healed her daughter (Mark 7:24–30).

I will not pretend I did not say what I said to her. She argued with me, and she was right. That is in your gospels too.

> Check It Yourself
>
> **Look up:** Ezra 3:10–13.
>
> **You will find:** a crowd so full of joy and grief that no one could tell the two sounds apart.
>
> **Then read Ezra 10:1–5 and 10:44, and then Isaiah 56:3–7.** Two answers in my scriptures to the same question.
>
> **Go deeper:** the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/ezra**.

The Short Version

- Ezra tells of the **return from Babylon** and the **rebuilding of the Temple**, under Persian rule.
- Isaiah called **Cyrus**, a foreign king, the LORD's **anointed**.
- The returned exiles **refused help** from the people already in the land, part of the long story behind **Jews and Samaritans**.
- Parts of the book are in **Aramaic**, the language I spoke.
- The book ends with **foreign wives and their children sent away**. Ruth and Isaiah answer it differently.

16. Nehemiah: The Governor Who Cancelled the Debts

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Much of it is Nehemiah's own memoir, written in the first person. Other material was added by the editor who joined it to Ezra. In my day it was the second half of the book of Ezra.

When: Nehemiah came to Jerusalem as governor in 445 BC. The book was put together around 400 BC or later.

Where it fits: It is set in Jerusalem in the 400s BC, about 140 years after the city fell in 586 BC and after the Temple was rebuilt (Ezra 6). It continues the story of Ezra.

Where I quote it: Never.

If you only read three chapters: Nehemiah 1, Nehemiah 5 and Nehemiah 8.

Words to Know

Cupbearer — the servant who tasted and served the king's wine. A trusted position close to the throne.

Governor — the Persian official in charge of a province. Nehemiah was governor of Judah.

Usury — interest, what a lender charges for a loan. The Law forbade charging it to a fellow Israelite, and especially to the poor.

Collateral — property handed over as security for a loan: a field, a house, even a child.

The Book in Brief

Nehemiah is a history in thirteen chapters. Much of it is told by Nehemiah himself, in the first person.

In chapter 1, Nehemiah, a Jew who serves as cupbearer to the Persian king Artaxerxes in Susa, hears that the walls of Jerusalem are still broken and its gates burned. He weeps, fasts and prays. In chapter 2 the king notices his sad face and sends him to Jerusalem as governor, with letters and timber. Nehemiah inspects the ruined walls by night and calls the people to build. Chapter 3 lists the families who repair each section. Their neighbors Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem mock them and then plot against them, and in chapter 4 half the workers stand guard while the other half build. Chapter 5 tells of poor families losing their fields and children to debt. Nehemiah is furious, makes the lenders give everything back, and refuses the governor's food allowance. In chapter 6 his enemies try to lure and frighten him, and the wall is finished in fifty-two days.

Chapter 7 gives a list of the families who returned. In chapter 8 the people gather, and Ezra reads the Law aloud while the Levites explain it. The people weep, then keep the feast of booths. In chapter 9 they fast, confess their sins and pray a long prayer that retells their history. In chapter 10 they sign a pledge to keep the Law, avoid marriage with the surrounding peoples, rest on the Sabbath and support the Temple. Chapter 11 tells how one person in ten, chosen by lot from the rest of the people, moves to live in Jerusalem. In chapter 12 the wall is dedicated, with two choirs walking in procession along the top of it.

In chapter 13, after a time away at the Persian court, Nehemiah returns and finds the pledge broken. Tobiah has been given a room in the Temple, the Levites have not been paid, people are trading on the Sabbath, and some men have married foreign wives. Nehemiah puts each wrong right. The book ends with his short prayer that God will remember him for good.

This is the chapter in my scriptures where debts were actually cancelled.

Nehemiah was a Jew serving at the Persian court in Susa as the king's **cupbearer**. One day his brother came from Judah with news. Jerusalem's walls were still broken down, and the people there were *in great affliction and reproach* (Nehemiah 1:3).

Nehemiah sat down and wept for days. When he served the king wine, the king noticed his face. *Why is your face sad, since you are not sick?* Nehemiah was terrified, because you did not look unhappy in front of a Persian king. But he told the truth, and the king sent him to rebuild (Nehemiah 2:1–8).

The wall

Nehemiah rebuilds the walls of Jerusalem in fifty-two days (Nehemiah 6:15). He organizes it by families, each one repairing the section near its own house (Nehemiah 3).

Neighboring officials try to stop him: **Sanballat** the governor of Samaria, **Tobiah** the Ammonite, and **Geshem** the Arab. The builders work with a tool in one hand and a weapon in the other (Nehemiah 4:17).

Those enemies were real people. A letter written in 407 BC by Jews living on an island in the Nile, at Elephantine, mentions *the sons of Sanballat, governor of Samaria*.[1] The same letter names the high priest in Jerusalem, Johanan, who also appears in this book (Nehemiah 12:22).

The cry

Then comes **Nehemiah 5**, the chapter I want you to read twice.

While the wall is going up, there is a great cry of the people, and their wives, against their own fellow Jews.

Some say they have many children and must get grain just to stay alive.

Some say, *We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses. Let us get grain, because of the famine.*

Some say, *We have borrowed money for the king's tribute using our fields and our vineyards as collateral.*

And then: *Behold, we bring our sons and our daughters into bondage to be servants, and some of our daughters have been brought into bondage. It is also not in our power to help it, because other men have our fields and our vineyards* (Nehemiah 5:1–5).[2]

Read that list again. It is the same list I grew up hearing in Galilee. Borrow to eat. Mortgage the land. Borrow to pay the tax. Lose the land. Lose the children.

What Nehemiah did

Nehemiah says, *I was very angry when I heard their cry* (Nehemiah 5:6).

He called a great assembly and confronted the nobles and officials. *You exact usury, everyone of his brother* (Nehemiah 5:7). We have been buying back our own people who were sold to foreigners, he said, and now you are selling your own brothers, so that they have to be sold back to us.

They had nothing to say.

Then he gave them an order: *Restore to them, even today, their fields, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, also the hundredth part of the money, and of the grain, the new wine, and the oil, that you are charging them* (Nehemiah 5:11).

They agreed. He made them swear it in front of the priests. Then he shook out the fold of his robe and said, *So may God shake out every man from his house, and from his labor, that doesn't perform this promise*. And all the people said *Amen* (Nehemiah 5:12–13).

He also refused the food allowance the governor was entitled to, *because the bondage was heavy on this people* (Nehemiah 5:14–18).

That is the only place in my scriptures where you can watch the land being given back and the interest refunded, all in one day, by order of the man in charge.

When I taught my friends to pray *forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors* (Matthew 6:12), it was a prayer for a world where Nehemiah 5 happened every day.

The day the Law was read

In **Nehemiah 8**, all the people gather in the square by the Water Gate, and Ezra reads the Law aloud from early morning until midday. The Levites go among the people and help them understand. *They read in the book, in the law of God, distinctly; and they gave the sense, so that they understood the reading* (Nehemiah 8:8).

Later Jewish teachers connected this verse with the custom of translating the reading into Aramaic, for people who no longer understood Hebrew well.[3] In my day, that is probably how the scriptures were heard in many synagogues. Someone read the Hebrew, and someone gave the sense.

When the people hear the Law, they start to weep. Nehemiah and Ezra stop them.

Go your way. Eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to him for whom nothing is prepared, for today is holy to our Lord. Don't be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength (Nehemiah 8:10).

The holy day is a feast. And a feast is not holy unless food goes out to the people who have none.

The gates on the Sabbath

Near the end, Nehemiah finds people treading wine presses and bringing in grain on the Sabbath, and merchants from Tyre selling fish in Jerusalem. He shuts the city gates at dusk before the Sabbath and posts guards so that no load can come in. When the merchants camp outside the walls, he threatens to arrest them (Nehemiah 13:15–22).

The Sabbath, for Nehemiah, was the day the market stopped. That is close to what the Law intended. A day when no one could be made to work, and nobody could buy and sell.

The other side of Nehemiah

Nehemiah also does what Ezra did, and worse.

He finds men who have married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab, whose children cannot speak the language of Judah. *I contended with them, and cursed them, and struck certain of them, and plucked off their hair* (Nehemiah 13:25).

He is the same man who cancelled the debts. He is fierce for the poor of his own people and fierce against the foreigners in their families. My scriptures do not make him simpler than he was.

Remember me

All through his memoir, Nehemiah stops to pray one short prayer: *Remember me, my God, for good, all that I have done for this people* (Nehemiah 5:19; see 13:14, 22, 31).

It is a very human prayer. He did hard things, some of them good and some of them harsh, and he wanted God to remember the good.

Check It Yourself

Look up: Nehemiah 5:1–13.

You will find: families losing their land and their children to debt, and a governor who forced the lenders to give it all back.

Then read Nehemiah 8:9–12. See what made the holy day holy.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/nehemiah**.

The Short Version

- Nehemiah, the Persian king's cupbearer, became **governor of Judah** and **rebuilt the walls** of Jerusalem.
- His enemy **Sanballat** appears in a **letter from 407 BC** found in Egypt.
- In **Nehemiah 5**, families were losing **land and children to debt**, and he made the lenders **return the land and the interest**.
- When the Law was read, the Levites **gave the sense**, and the holy day ended with **food sent to those who had none**.
- He was also **violent against men with foreign wives**. My scriptures show him whole.

17. Esther: The Book That Never Mentions God

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Unknown.

When: It is set at the Persian court under King Ahasuerus, usually identified with Xerxes I (486–465 BC). It was probably written between the 400s and 200s BC.

Where it fits: Set among the Jews who stayed in Persia after the exile, in the gap between Ezra 6 (the Temple finished) and Ezra 7 (Ezra's mission). Ezra 4:6 mentions the same king, Ahasuerus.

Where I quote it: Never.

If you only read three chapters: Esther 4, Esther 7 and Esther 9.

Words to Know

Purim — the festival that celebrates the rescue in this book. The name comes from *pur*, a lot, like a die thrown to choose a day.

Ahasuerus — the Hebrew form of the Persian king's name, usually identified with Xerxes.

Agagite — a descendant of Agag, king of the Amalekites, Israel's ancient enemy. The villain, Haman, is one.

The Additions — six passages added to Esther in the Greek translation. They put prayers and God into the story.

The Book in Brief

Esther is a story in ten chapters, set in the Persian capital, Susa. It tells how a Jewish queen saves her people. God is never named.

In chapter 1, King Ahasuerus, who rules 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia, holds a long feast. Drunk, he orders Queen Vashti to appear before his guests. She

refuses, and he removes her. In chapter 2, young women are brought to the palace, and the king chooses Esther, a Jewish orphan raised by her cousin Mordecai. She keeps her people secret. Mordecai uncovers a plot against the king, and it is written in the royal records.

In chapter 3 the king promotes Haman the Agagite. Everyone bows to Haman except Mordecai. Furious, Haman gets the king to order the destruction of every Jew in the empire, on a day chosen by casting lots, the *pur*. In chapter 4 Mordecai tells Esther she must plead with the king, though going to him unsummoned could cost her life. She asks the Jews of Susa to fast for three days, then goes in. In chapter 5 she invites the king and Haman to a banquet, and then to a second one. Haman is delighted, but the sight of Mordecai still enrages him, and at his wife's urging he has a gallows built to hang him.

In chapter 6 the king cannot sleep, has the records read, and finds that Mordecai was never rewarded. He asks Haman how to honor a man he delights in. Haman, thinking it is himself, describes a royal parade, and must then lead Mordecai through it. In chapter 7, at the second banquet, Esther tells the king that Haman plans to destroy her people. Haman is hanged on his own gallows.

In chapter 8 Mordecai is given Haman's place. A royal order cannot be undone, so a second order lets the Jews defend themselves. In chapter 9 they do so on the appointed day, and the book says seventy-five thousand of their enemies die in the provinces. They take no plunder. Mordecai and Esther set up two days of feasting each year, called Purim. Chapter 10 ends with Mordecai second only to the king.

God is not mentioned once. The Greek translators could not stand it.

Read the Hebrew book of Esther from beginning to end. You will not find the word *God*. There is no prayer, no Temple, no sacrifice, no mention of the Law. The Jews in this story fast, but the book never says to whom.

When the book was translated into Greek, the translators added six long passages, about a hundred verses, full of prayers and dreams and the name of God.[1] Those additions are still in Catholic and Orthodox Bibles. In Protestant Bibles, if they appear at all, they are in the Apocrypha.

So you have two books of Esther. In one, God is everywhere. In the other, God is never named, and the people have to save themselves.

The story

The king of Persia shows off his wealth for six months, then throws a seven-day banquet. On the seventh day, drunk, he orders his queen, **Vashti**, to come and show off her beauty to his guests. She refuses (Esther 1:10–12).

His advisers panic. If the queen can say no, every wife in the empire will say no. So Vashti is deposed, and a decree goes out to every province that *every man should rule his own house* (Esther 1:22). The book is laughing at them.

A new queen is chosen by a kind of beauty contest. She is **Esther**, a young Jewish orphan raised by her cousin **Mordecai**. She hides that she is Jewish.

Mordecai refuses to bow down to the king's chief minister, **Haman** (Esther 3:2). Haman is so enraged that he decides to destroy not only Mordecai but every Jew in the empire. He casts lots, the *pur*, to pick the day. He offers the king ten thousand talents of silver for the right to do it (Esther 3:7–9). The king hands him his signet ring and says, essentially, do what you like.

For such a time as this

Mordecai sends word to Esther. She must go to the king and plead for her people.

But anyone who goes to the king without being summoned can be put to death. Esther is afraid.

Mordecai sends back the line the book turns on: *Don't think to yourself that you will escape in the king's house any more than all the Jews … Who knows if you haven't come to the kingdom for such a time as this?* (Esther 4:13–14).

And Esther answers: *I will go in to the king, which is against the law; and if I perish, I perish* (Esther 4:16).

Notice the words *who knows*. Mordecai does not say God put her there. He only asks. Nobody in this book has a vision. They have to act without one.

The gallows

Esther invites the king and Haman to two banquets. At the second, she tells the king that someone has sold her people to be destroyed. *Who is he, and where is he who dared presume in his heart to do so?* the king asks. *An adversary and an enemy, even this wicked Haman!* (Esther 7:5–6).

Haman is hanged on the very pole he had built for Mordecai (Esther 7:10).

Under Persian law in this story, a royal decree cannot be cancelled. So the king issues a second decree letting the Jews defend themselves. On the appointed day, they kill their attackers. The book says seventy-five thousand died across the provinces (Esther 9:16).

The book ends with a feast, and a law for keeping it every year. Days of feasting and gladness, *sending presents of food to one another, and gifts to the needy* (Esther 9:22).

Is it history?

Most scholars read Esther as a historical novel, not a record.

No Persian source mentions Vashti, Esther, Haman or Mordecai as queen or minister. The Greek historian Herodotus names Xerxes' queen as Amestris. If Mordecai was one of the exiles taken from Jerusalem in 597 BC, as the book may say, he would have been over a hundred by the time of Xerxes. And there is no evidence for a Persian law that could never be revoked.[2]

The book does know the Persian court well. It knows the palace at Susa, the royal messengers and the customs of the banquet. It is a story told by people who lived under Persian rule and knew how it felt to depend on the whim of a king.

The argument over Esther

My people argued over this book. It is missing from the Dead Sea Scrolls. The earliest surviving Christian list of Old Testament books, from about 170, leaves it out.[3]

Fifteen hundred years after my time, Martin Luther said at his dinner table that he wished Esther and 2 Maccabees did not exist at all, because they were too Jewish.[4] You should know the kind of man who said that, and what his words about the Jews helped to do later.

What it gives you

So why keep a book that never mentions God?

Because most of life is like the book of Esther. Most people never see a burning bush. They live under powers they cannot control, and they have to decide, without a voice from heaven, whether to risk themselves for other people.

Esther did not know that God had put her there. She went anyway. *If I perish, I perish.*

And Mordecai would not bow to a man who demanded it. In my scriptures, the refusal to bow is where the rescue starts.

I am sometimes asked which festival I went up to in John's gospel, when John only calls it *a feast of the Jews* (John 5:1). Some have guessed Purim. Nobody knows.[5]

> **Check It Yourself**
>
> **Look up:** Esther 4:12–17.
>
> **You will find:** "for such a time as this" and "if I perish, I perish," in a story where nobody hears from God.
>
> **Then read the whole book** and try to find the word *God*.
>
> **Go deeper:** the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/esther**.

The Short Version

- The Hebrew book of Esther **never mentions God**. The Greek translation **added prayers and God's name**.
- A young Jewish queen **risks her life** to stop a **plan to destroy her people**: "**If I perish, I perish.**"
- Most scholars read it as a **historical novel**, set at a court its writer knew well.
- It is the **one book of the Hebrew scriptures missing from the Dead Sea Scrolls**, and it was left off the earliest Christian list.
- **Purim** includes **gifts to the needy**, by the book's own command.

PART THREE — POETRY AND WISDOM

These five books do not tell the nation's story. They are poems, prayers and the hard-won wisdom of ordinary life. Job argues with God about suffering. The Psalms are my people's songbook and prayer book. Proverbs gathers the sayings parents taught their children. Ecclesiastes asks what any of it means when everyone dies. The Song of Songs is a set of love poems. Tradition linked four of them to famous kings, the Psalms to David and the other three to Solomon, though much of them was written long after those kings. In the Hebrew Bible all five stand among the Writings, the third part of the scriptures, which was still taking shape in my day. You can read them in any order.

18. Job: The Man Who Put God on Trial

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Unknown. The prose story at the beginning and end may be an old folk tale. The long poem in the middle was written by a great poet whose name is lost.

When: Debated. Most scholars place the poem between the 500s and 300s BC.

Where it fits: Set in a world like Genesis, with herds and family altars, in a land outside Israel. The poem was written much later, probably in or after the exile, though Ezekiel already knew Job as a hero of old (Ezekiel 14:14).

Where I quote it: Never directly. But when my friends asked whether a blind man's sin caused his blindness, I gave Job's answer (John 9:2–3).

If you only read three chapters: Job 1, Job 31 and Job 38.

Words to Know

The satan — in this book, *the accuser*, a member of God's heavenly court whose job is to test. Not yet the devil.

Uz — Job's country, outside Israel. Job is not an Israelite.

Redeemer — in Hebrew *go'el*, the relative who would stand up for you and win back what you lost.

Whirlwind — the storm out of which God finally answers Job.

Leviathan — a great sea monster, a picture of chaos that only God can tame.

The Book in Brief

Job is a long book, part story and part poem. A short prose story opens it in chapters 1 and 2 and closes it at the end of chapter 42. Between them is a long poem of speeches.

Job lives in the land of Uz. He is blameless, rich, and the father of ten children. In chapter 1 the scene shifts to heaven, where God's sons come before the LORD and the satan, the accuser, is among them. God points out Job. The accuser says Job fears God only because it pays. God lets him take everything Job has, but not Job himself. In one day Job loses his herds, his servants and all ten children. In chapter 2 the accuser is allowed to strike Job's body, and Job is covered in sores. His wife tells him to give up on God. Job will not. Three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, come to comfort him and sit in silence with him for seven days.

In chapter 3 Job breaks the silence by cursing the day he was born. Chapters 4 to 27 are a debate in three rounds. Each friend speaks in turn, and Job answers each time. The friends insist that suffering is punishment and urge Job to admit his sin. Job insists that he is innocent, says God is treating him as an enemy, and wants to argue his case before God. The third round breaks down, and Zophar does not speak again. Chapter 28 is a poem asking where wisdom can be found. In chapters 29 to 31 Job makes his last speech. He remembers his old life, describes his shame, and swears a long oath of innocence that ends with a demand that God answer him.

In chapters 32 to 37 a younger man, Elihu, who has been listening, angrily rebukes Job and the friends. He says God speaks through suffering and is greater than anyone understands.

In chapters 38 to 41 the LORD answers Job out of a whirlwind. God does not explain what happened. He questions Job about the making of the earth, the sea, the storms and the wild animals, and describes two great creatures, Behemoth and Leviathan. Job answers that he spoke of things he did not understand, and that now his eye has seen God.

In chapter 42 God tells Eliphaz that he and his friends have not spoken rightly of him, as Job has. Job prays for them, and God restores his fortunes twice over. He has seven sons and three daughters again, and he lives to see four generations before he dies, old and full of days.

My friends had a theory about suffering. So did Job's.

Once, my friends and I passed a man who had been blind from birth. They asked me, *Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?* (John 9:2).

They were not being cruel. They were asking the question everyone asked. If something terrible happens to you, you must have done something to deserve it. Or your parents did.

I said, *This man didn't sin, nor did his parents* (John 9:3).

That answer is the whole book of Job.

Does Job serve God for nothing?

The book opens in heaven. God is holding court, and among the heavenly beings is one called **the satan**, *the accuser*. He is not the devil you picture. He is more like a prosecutor in God's court, going to and fro on the earth, checking up on people (Job 1:6–7).[1]

God points out Job, a man in the land of Uz who is *blameless and upright*. The accuser asks one question: *Does Job fear God for nothing?* (Job 1:9).

Take away everything you have given him, he says, and he will curse you to your face.

That is the question of the book. Will anyone love God when it gets them nothing? Is all religion just a deal?

Everything is taken

In one day, raiders take Job's oxen and donkeys and kill his servants. Fire falls and burns his sheep. Another band takes his camels. And a great wind collapses a house on his sons and daughters while they are eating, and they all die (Job 1:13–19).

Job tears his robe, shaves his head and falls to the ground. *The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the LORD's name* (Job 1:21).

Then he is struck with sores from head to foot. He sits in the ashes, scraping himself with a piece of broken pottery. His wife says, *Renounce God, and die* (Job 2:9).

The best thing his friends did

Three of Job's friends hear what happened and come to comfort him. When they see him, they do not recognize him. They weep and tear their clothes.

They sat down with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his grief was very great (Job 2:13).

That was the best thing they did in the whole book. They sat with him and kept quiet.

Then they started talking.

The friends' theory

The friends say what everyone says.

Eliphaz: *Remember, now, whoever perished, being innocent?* (Job 4:7).

Bildad, about Job's dead children: *If your children have sinned against him, he has delivered them into the hand of their disobedience* (Job 8:4).

Zophar: *Know therefore that God exacts of you less than your iniquity deserves* (Job 11:6).

Their theory is simple and comforting. The world is fair. Good people prosper. If you are suffering, you did something wrong. Confess, and God will restore you.

Notice what that theory does. It protects the friends. If the world is fair, then what happened to Job cannot happen to them, as long as they are good.

Job will not accept it

Job refuses. He knows he has not done anything to deserve this. And he says so, for thirty chapters, in the angriest poetry in the scriptures.

He curses the day he was born (Job 3). He says God is attacking him like an enemy. He demands a trial. *Surely I would speak to the Almighty. I desire to reason with God* (Job 13:3).

You may know a famous line from the King James Bible: *Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him* (Job 13:15). The Hebrew can be read two ways, and many translations now read it as nearly the opposite: *Behold, he will kill me. I have no hope. Nevertheless, I will maintain my ways before him.*[2] Job was not being meek. He was preparing to argue.

And then, in the middle of his despair, he says, *I know that my Redeemer lives* (Job 19:25). His *go'el*, the one who would stand up for him. Job is saying that even if God is against him, someone will vindicate him in the end. The Hebrew of the verses that follow is very hard to translate, and scholars argue over what Job hoped for.[3] Handel set the line to music, and you have probably heard it sung.

What Job meant by righteous

Read **Job 31**, where Job swears his innocence, because it tells you what a righteous man was in my scriptures.

He does not list prayers or sacrifices. He lists how he treated people.

If I have despised the cause of my male servant or of my female servant, when they contended with me ... Didn't he who made me in the womb make him? (Job 31:13, 15).

If I have withheld the poor from their desire, or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail, or have eaten my morsel alone, and the fatherless has not eaten of it ... if I have seen any perish for want of clothing, or that the needy had no covering ... (Job 31:16–19).

Job's whole case before God rests on whether he fed the hungry, clothed the naked and treated his servants as human beings made by the same God. When I described the last judgment, the questions were the same: *I was hungry, and you gave me food to eat ... I was naked, and you clothed me* (Matthew 25:35–36).

God answers

At last, God answers Job, out of the **whirlwind**.

But God does not answer the question. God does not explain the bet in heaven. God asks questions back.

Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? (Job 38:4).

Then God takes Job on a tour of creation. The sea and the dawn and the snow. The lion hunting. The wild donkey that laughs at the city. The mountain goats giving birth where no human sees. The ostrich, who leaves her eggs in the dust and laughs at the horse and rider. The great beasts, **Behemoth** and **Leviathan**, that no man can tame.

And rain, *on a land where there is no man, on the wilderness, in which there is no man* (Job 38:26).

The world is bigger than Job's question. God cares for parts of it no human ever sees. It was not made only around us.

I said something close: God *makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust* (Matthew 5:45). The rain does not fall as a reward.

Who spoke rightly

Job answers God humbly. *I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you* (Job 42:5).

And then the most surprising verse in the book. God turns to the friends, the ones who had defended God for thirty chapters, and says:

My wrath is kindled against you, and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me the thing that is right, as my servant Job has (Job 42:7).

The man who shouted at God spoke rightly. The men who defended God with neat answers did not.

That is in my scriptures. God would rather have your honest anger than your tidy theology.

The patience of Job

In the New Testament, the letter of James speaks of *the perseverance of Job*. The King James calls it his *patience* (James 5:11).

Job was not patient. He endured, yes. He did not let go of God. But he argued, protested and demanded an answer for most of the book. If that is patience, it is the patience of a man who will not stop knocking.

I told a story about a widow who kept coming to an unjust judge, again and again, until he gave her justice just to be rid of her (Luke 18:1–8). That was the kind of patience I meant.

The ending

At the end, Job's fortunes are restored, double. He has new children. His three daughters are named, **Jemimah, Keziah and Keren-happuch**, and the book says *their father gave them an inheritance among their brothers* (Job 42:13–15). In my world, daughters with brothers did not usually inherit.

Some readers find the happy ending too easy. New children do not replace dead ones. That is true. But notice that even here, at the end, the book does something unexpected for the people at the bottom.

When people told me about Galileans killed by Pilate, and eighteen people killed when a tower fell at Siloam, I asked, *Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the men who dwell in Jerusalem? I tell you, no* (Luke 13:1–5).

That was Job's answer, and it was mine.

> Check It Yourself
>
> **Look up:** Job 42:7.
>
> **You will find:** God saying that Job, who argued with him, spoke rightly, and the friends who defended him did not.
>
> **Then read Job 31:13–23 and Matthew 25:35–40.** Compare what counts as righteous.
>
> **Go deeper:** the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/job**.

The Short Version

- Job asks **whether anyone serves God for nothing**, and whether **suffering is always deserved**.
- His friends say **it is**. Job says **it is not**, and **argues with God** for thirty chapters.
- God answers out of the **whirlwind** with a creation **bigger than human questions**.
- God says **Job spoke rightly and the friends did not**.
- When asked whose sin caused a man's blindness, I gave **Job's answer: neither**.

19. Psalms: The Last Thing We Did Was Sing

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Many singers over many centuries. Seventy-three psalms are headed *of David*, but the headings were added later, and some psalms come from the exile, long after him.

When: Roughly from the time of the kings, around 1000 BC at the earliest, to after the exile, in the 500s BC and later. The collection was still settling in my lifetime.

Where it fits: The songs come from all of Israel's history, from David's kingdom (1 Samuel 16 to 1 Kings 2) to the exile after Jerusalem fell in 586 BC (2 Kings 25) and beyond. The book gathers them into one song book.

Where I quote it: More than almost any other book. Psalm 118 against the chief priests (Mark 12:10–11). Psalm 110 as a riddle (Mark 12:35–37). Psalm 82 (John 10:34). Psalm 37 on the humble (Matthew 5:5). Psalm 8 (Matthew 21:16). Psalm 6 (Matthew 7:23). From the cross, Psalm 22 (Mark 15:34) and Psalm 31 (Luke 23:46).

If you only read three chapters: Psalms 22, 72 and 137.

Words to Know

Psalm — from a Greek word for a song sung to a plucked instrument. The Hebrew name of the book is *Tehillim*, which means "praises."

Lament — a prayer of complaint, grief or protest, spoken directly to God. More psalms are laments than any other kind.

Hallel — Psalms 113 to 118, sung together at the great festivals, including the Passover meal. The word means "praise," as in *hallelujah*, "praise the LORD."

Selah — a word that appears seventy-one times in the Psalms. It is probably an instruction to the musicians. Nobody knows for certain what it means.[1]

Septuagint — the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, made in the centuries before I was born. Most of the writers of the New Testament quoted from it.

The Book in Brief

The book of Psalms is a collection of 150 songs and prayers, written by many people over many centuries. Nearly all are poems meant to be sung. The editors divided them into five books, and the first four each end with a short blessing of God. Psalm 150 closes the whole collection with praise.

Two psalms stand at the door. Psalm 1 sets two roads side by side. The person who loves God's teaching is like a tree planted by a stream, and the wicked are like chaff the wind blows away. Psalm 2 is about a king. The nations plot against him, and God says that he is God's son.

Book One, Psalms 3 to 41, is mostly headed *of David*. Much of it is people in trouble crying for help, with a few songs of thanks for rescue. Psalm 8 wonders at the stars and at the place of human beings. Psalm 22 begins in abandonment and ends in praise. Psalm 23 is the shepherd psalm.

Book Two, Psalms 42 to 72, opens with songs of the sons of Korah. Psalm 51 is headed as David's prayer for mercy after the prophet Nathan confronted him over Bathsheba. The book closes with Psalm 72, a prayer for the king.

Book Three, Psalms 73 to 89, begins with the songs of Asaph. Psalm 73 asks why the wicked do so well. Psalm 74 mourns a sanctuary burned to the ground. The book ends with Psalm 89, which recalls God's promise to David and then says that God has thrown his king aside.

Book Four, Psalms 90 to 106, opens with the only psalm headed *of Moses*. Several of its songs declare that the LORD reigns. It ends by retelling Israel's history, failures included, and asking to be gathered from the nations.

Book Five, Psalms 107 to 150, opens by thanking God for gathering people from every direction. It holds the Hallel (113 to 118), Psalm 119, a poem of 176 verses in praise of God's teaching, and fifteen songs for pilgrims going up to Jerusalem (120 to 134). Psalm 137 mourns by the rivers of Babylon. The last five psalms, 146 to 150, are all songs of praise.

Across the five books a few kinds of psalm keep turning up. Laments, the most common, complain to God. Songs of thanks tell of a rescue. Hymns praise God as creator and king. Royal psalms pray for the king and celebrate his crowning. Wisdom psalms teach how to live. Songs of Zion honor Jerusalem and the Temple.

Before you read it as comfort, read it as a song book for a whole people.

The last thing my friends and I did together, before we walked out to the garden where I was arrested, was sing.

When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives (Mark 14:26).

It was the Passover meal. At that meal, my people sang the **Hallel**, Psalms 113 to 118. It was most likely the hymn we sang that night.[2]

So think about what was in our mouths. Psalm 118 says, *The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone* (Psalm 118:22). It also says, *Blessed is he who comes in the LORD's name* (Psalm 118:26).

Both of those lines had been heard in Jerusalem that same week. The crowd had shouted the second one at me on the road into the city (Mark 11:9), and I gave it back to the city a few days later (Matthew 23:39). I had thrown the first one at the chief priests in the Temple, and they knew exactly who I meant (Mark 12:10–12).

Then we sang them together, and went out into the dark.

That is the book I want to tell you about. It was not a book I read. It was a book I sang.

Whose songs these are

The book has 150 psalms. Seventy-three of them carry a heading in Hebrew that says *of David*.[3]

You were probably taught that David wrote the Psalms. Here is what the book itself tells you.

The little Hebrew word in those headings can mean *by* David, *for* David, *about* David or *belonging to* David's collection. The headings were added by the people who gathered the songs, not by the singers.

Other psalms are headed with other names: **Asaph**, **the sons of Korah**, **Solomon**, even **Moses** (Psalm 90). Many have no name at all.

Some cannot be David's. *By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down. Yes, we wept, when we remembered Zion* (Psalm 137:1). That song was written after Babylon burned Jerusalem and marched my people into exile, about four hundred years after David died.

And in the middle of the book there is a line that gives the game away. At the end of Psalm 72 an editor wrote: *This ends the prayers by David, the son of Jesse* (Psalm 72:20). Then the book keeps going, and more psalms marked *of David* turn up later. Somebody stitched collections together and left the seam showing.

The book is in **five parts**, and each part closes with a short blessing: at the end of Psalms 41, 72, 89 and 106, and then the whole book ends with Psalm 150.[4]

In my lifetime the collection was still not fixed everywhere. Among the **Dead Sea Scrolls**, hidden in caves near my own country, there are more copies of the Psalms than of any other book. One of the largest scrolls puts the later psalms in a different order and includes songs your Bible does not have. It even claims that David wrote 4,050 songs.[5]

One practical note, because it confuses people. The Greek translation counts the psalms a little differently. It joins Psalms 9 and 10 into one, and later splits others. So in many older Catholic and Orthodox Bibles, most psalm numbers are one lower. If your grandmother's Bible calls the shepherd psalm Psalm 22, that is why.[6]

What it was for

The Psalms were not written to be read silently in a chair. They were sung.

The Levites sang them in the Temple. An old Jewish tradition, written down about two hundred years after me, lists a psalm for each day of the week. The Sabbath psalm is Psalm 92, and the Bible itself gives it that heading: *A song for the Sabbath day*.[7]

Every year my family went up to Jerusalem for Passover (Luke 2:41). Fifteen psalms, 120 to 134, carry the heading *A Song of Ascents*. They are most likely songs for that road: *I will lift up my eyes to the hills* (Psalm 121:1). *I was glad when they said to me, "Let's go to the LORD's house!"* (Psalm 122:1).[8]

The Hebrew name of the book means *praises*, but more of the psalms are **complaints** than any other kind. People in trouble shout at God in them. They ask where he has gone. They ask how long. They say they are sick, betrayed, surrounded and about to die.

One of them never turns around at all. Psalm 88 begins in darkness and ends there: *You have put lover and friend far from me, and my friends into darkness* (Psalm 88:18). It is in the book anyway. Somebody decided that a prayer with no happy ending was still a prayer.

That is what this book taught my people. You are allowed to bring the worst thing you feel straight to God, and you are allowed to do it out loud, together.

How I used it

I quoted the Psalms more than almost any other book. Here are some of the places the gospels remember.

When I blessed the gentle. *Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth* (Matthew 5:5). That is Psalm 37: *The humble shall inherit the land* (Psalm 37:11). Read the whole psalm and you will see what the land is doing there. Psalm 37 is about powerful men who take the land and squeeze the poor, and it promises five times that the land will come back to the humble (Psalm 37:9, 11, 22, 29, 34). It says *the wicked borrow, and don't pay back* (Psalm 37:21).

Everyone listening to me knew that song. When I said *inherit the earth*, they heard *inherit the land*.

When I faced the chief priests. After I told the story of the tenants who kill the owner's son, I quoted Psalm 118: the stone the builders threw away became the cornerstone. Mark says they wanted to arrest me on the spot, because they realized I had told that story against them (Mark 12:10–12). The builders were the men running the Temple.

When I set a riddle in the Temple. Psalm 110 begins, *The LORD says to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool for your feet."* I asked the crowd how the Messiah could be David's son if David calls him "my Lord" (Mark 12:35–37). I was making them think about what kind of king they were waiting for. Mark says the crowd listened with delight. Psalm 110 is quoted in the New Testament more often than any other psalm.

When they accused me of making myself God. In John's gospel I answer with Psalm 82: *I said, you are gods* (John 10:34; Psalm 82:6). Now read Psalm 82. God stands up in the council of the gods and puts them on trial, and the charge is this: *Defend the weak, the poor, and the fatherless. Maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy* (Psalm 82:3–4). They did not, so they will die like anyone else (Psalm 82:7). In that psalm, the test of anything that calls itself divine is what it does for the poor. It was also the Temple song for one of the days of the week.[7]

When the children shouted in the Temple. The priests were offended, and I answered with Psalm 8: *Out of the mouth of babes and nursing babies you have perfected praise* (Matthew 21:16). Matthew quotes it in the Greek wording. The Hebrew says *strength*, not *praise*.[9]

When I described the people I would not know at the end. *Depart from me, you who work iniquity* (Matthew 7:23) is Psalm 6:8.

And one more, which I did not quote.

In the desert, the devil quoted a psalm to me. *He will command his angels concerning you ... On their hands they will bear you up* (Psalm 91:11–12;

Matthew 4:6). He wanted me to throw myself off the top of the Temple and let the verse catch me.

I answered him with Deuteronomy: do not put the LORD your God to the test (Matthew 4:7).

Remember that the next time someone uses a psalm as a promise that nothing bad can happen to you. In the gospels, the one person who reads Psalm 91 that way is the devil.

What the Psalms say a king is for

My people called their king God's son. On the day a king was crowned, they sang Psalm 2: *You are my son. Today I have become your father* (Psalm 2:7). It was a title that came with a job.

Psalm 72 is a prayer for the king, and it spells out the job:

He will judge the poor of the people. He will save the children of the needy, and will break the oppressor in pieces (Psalm 72:4).

He will deliver the needy when he cries; the poor, who has no helper. He will have pity on the poor and needy. He will save the souls of the needy. He will redeem their soul from oppression and violence. Their blood will be precious in his sight (Psalm 72:12–14).

That is what a king was for. Not glory or wars or palaces. The poor.

And because kings mostly failed at it, Psalm 146 says this: *Don't put your trust in princes* (Psalm 146:3). Then it lists what God does instead: he *executes justice for the oppressed*, *gives food to the hungry*, *frees the prisoners*, *opens the eyes of the blind*, *raises up those who are bowed down*, *preserves the foreigners* and *upholds the fatherless and widow* (Psalm 146:7–9).

Put that list beside what I told John the Baptist's messengers when they asked who I was: the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them (Matthew 11:4–5).

Most of my list echoes Isaiah (Isaiah 35:5–6; 61:1), but Psalm 146 sings the same song. Lay them side by side and read them.

The shepherd

Psalm 23 is one of the passages most often read at funerals. *The LORD is my shepherd: I shall lack nothing.*

It is beautiful, and it is also political.

In the world I grew up in, **shepherd** was a word for a king. Kings in Babylon called themselves shepherds of their people centuries before David.[10] My own prophets used the word the same way. Ezekiel attacked the rulers of Israel as shepherds who fed themselves and let the flock scatter (Ezekiel 34:2–6).

So when the psalm says *the LORD is my shepherd*, it is also saying who is not. The man on the throne is not. The one who leads you to water, who keeps you alive in the valley, who sets a table for you in front of the people who hate you, is God.

John remembers me calling myself the good shepherd, the one who lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:11). Notice what kind of shepherd that is. A shepherd who dies for the flock is the opposite of a ruler who feeds on it.

The prayers I would not pray

I will be honest about the hard ones, because the book is honest about them.

Psalm 137, the song of the exiles by the rivers of Babylon, ends like this: *Happy shall he be, who takes and dashes your little ones against the rock* (Psalm 137:9).

Psalm 109 asks God to make an enemy's children fatherless and his wife a widow, and to let his children wander and beg (Psalm 109:9–10).

These are in the book. Nobody cut them out.

I never quoted them. I taught something else: *You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I tell you, love your enemies … and pray for those who mistreat you and persecute you* (Matthew 5:43–44).

But I will not pretend those psalms are not there, and I will not pretend I do not understand them. Psalm 137 is what people sound like after their city has been burned and their children killed in front of them. The book does not tell them to hide that. It lets them say it to God instead of doing it with their own hands. Then the book keeps going, and a few pages later it ends with *Let everything that has breath praise the LORD!* (Psalm 150:6).

The Psalms hold all of it: rage, grief, doubt, joy. That is why people still open them when nothing else will do.

The first line of a song

And so I come to the cross.

Near the end, Mark and Matthew remember me crying out in my own language: *Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?* My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Mark 15:34; Matthew 27:46).

That is the first line of **Psalm 22**.

People have argued for centuries about what that cry means. Some hear only abandonment. Others point out that everyone standing there knew the song, and that Psalm 22 does not stop at its first line. It moves from *I am a worm, and no man* (Psalm 22:6) to *neither has he hidden his face from him; but when he cried to him, he heard* (Psalm 22:24), and it ends with generations not yet born hearing what God has done (Psalm 22:30–31).

Here is what I can tell you. It was a song. It was the first line of a song a whole people knew by heart, and that song does not end where I stopped.

The men who wrote my death down did not agree on my last words. Luke remembers a different line: *Father, into your hands I commit my spirit* (Luke 23:46). That one is from the Psalms too. It is Psalm 31:5.[11]

Three of the four witnesses remember me, at the very end, praying from the same book.

When there was nothing left for me to say in my own words, I had these.

Check It Yourself

Look up: Psalm 22, all of it, then Mark 15:34.

You will find: that the cry from the cross is the first line of a song that ends in hope.

Then read Psalm 72:1–4 and Psalm 146:5–9. Ask yourself what those songs say a ruler is for, and whether you have ever heard them preached that way.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/psalms**.

The Short Version

- The Psalms were my people's **song book**. I most likely sang the **Hallel**, Psalms 113 to 118, with my friends on the night I was arrested.
- **David did not write all of them.** The headings were added later, and some psalms come from the exile, centuries after him.
- More psalms are **complaints** than any other kind, and the book keeps even the angriest and darkest prayers.
- The Psalms say a king exists to **defend the poor**, and they tell you **not to trust princes**.
- My cry from the cross is the **first line of Psalm 22**, a song that ends in hope. Luke's last words for me come from **Psalm 31**.

20. Proverbs: Where Parables Come From

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Tradition says Solomon. The book itself names other authors too: *the words of the wise*, the men of King Hezekiah who copied sayings, a man named Agur and the mother of a king named Lemuel.

When: The collections grew from the time of the kings to after the exile. The book reached its final form around the 400s or 300s BC.

Where it fits: Tradition ties it to Solomon's Jerusalem, where he spoke three thousand proverbs (1 Kings 4:29–34). Sayings were added in Hezekiah's day (Proverbs 25:1; 2 Kings 18–20), and the book took its final shape after the exile.

Where I quote it: My advice to take the lowest seat at a wedding feast follows Proverbs 25:6–7 (Luke 14:8–11). I spoke of Wisdom as a woman, justified by her children (Matthew 11:19) or by all her children (Luke 7:35).

If you only read three chapters: Proverbs 8, Proverbs 22 and Proverbs 31.

Words to Know

Proverb — in Hebrew *mashal*. The same word can mean a parable, a byword, a taunt or a comparison.

Wisdom — in Hebrew *hokmah*. In this book she is a woman who calls out in the streets.

Fool — not a stupid person, but someone who will not listen and does what he likes.

Amenemope — an Egyptian teacher whose book of advice shares many sayings with Proverbs.

The Book in Brief

Proverbs is a collection of collections. Most of it is short sayings, usually two lines long, in which the second line answers or sharpens the first. The book names its

sources as it goes.

Chapters 1 to 9 are different. They are a long speech by a father or teacher to *my son*. He urges the young man to chase wisdom, to avoid friends who offer easy money by violence, and to stay away from a seductive woman whose house leads to death. Wisdom herself appears as a woman who calls aloud at the street corners and the city gates. In chapter 8 she says that she was with God before the world was made. Chapter 9 ends with two feasts. Wisdom sets a table and invites the simple to come in, and a woman called Folly sits at her door and calls out to the same passersby.

Chapters 10 to 22 are the proverbs of Solomon proper, hundreds of sayings set side by side with no plot connecting them. They set the honest against the crooked, the hard worker against the lazy one, and careful speech against gossip, and they take up money, family, anger and kings. A section called the words of the wise follows, with thirty sayings, and then a few more from the same wise men.

Chapters 25 to 29 are more proverbs of Solomon, copied out by the men of King Hezekiah. They are full of comparisons from daily life, with warnings about fools, lazy people and quarrels, and advice for dealing with rulers.

Chapter 30 is the words of Agur: riddles, sayings built on counting things in threes and fours, and a prayer to be given neither poverty nor riches. Chapter 31 opens with the words of King Lemuel, which his mother taught him, about ruling justly and speaking up for the poor. The book ends with a poem about a worthy woman, each line beginning with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

The Hebrew word for proverb is the same word as parable.

When I taught in parables, I was not inventing a new way to teach. My people already had a word for it: *mashal*. It means a proverb, a parable, a comparison, a short saying that makes you think. The book of Proverbs is called *Mishle*, the *meshalim* of Solomon.[1]

So this book is where my way of teaching comes from. Short. Earthy. Drawn from fields and kitchens and money and family. Easy to remember and hard to forget.

Take the lower seat

Here is one I came close to repeating.

Proverbs: *Don't exalt yourself in the presence of the king, or claim a place among great men; for it is better that it be said to you, "Come up here," than that you should be put lower in the presence of the prince* (Proverbs 25:6–7).

Me, at a dinner where I watched the guests jostling for the best seats: *When you are invited by anyone to a wedding feast, don't sit in the best seat ... go and sit in the lowest place, so that when he who invited you comes, he may tell you, 'Friend, move up higher.'* (Luke 14:8–10).

Then I went one step further than Proverbs. I told my host that when he gives a banquet, he should not invite his friends or rich neighbors who can invite him back, but *the poor, the maimed, the lame, or the blind* (Luke 14:13).

Borrowed from Egypt

In 1923, scholars published an Egyptian text called the **Instruction of Amenemope**, advice from a father to a son, written centuries before Solomon. When they read it beside Proverbs, they found that one section of Proverbs, especially 22:17 to 23:11, follows it closely.[2]

Amenemope has thirty chapters. Proverbs 22:20 asks, *Haven't I written to you thirty excellent things of counsel and knowledge ...?*

Amenemope says not to move the boundary marker of a field and not to rob the poor. Proverbs says, *Don't exploit the poor, because he is poor* (Proverbs 22:22) and *Don't move the ancient boundary stone* (Proverbs 23:10).

My people took good advice from Egypt, the land of their slavery, and put it in their scriptures. Wisdom crossed borders. They did not mind.

Lady Wisdom

In the first nine chapters, **Wisdom** is a woman. She stands at the street corners and the city gates and calls out to anyone passing. *How long, you simple ones, will you love simplicity?* (Proverbs 1:22).

In **Proverbs 8**, she says something astonishing. She was there before the world was made. *The LORD possessed me in the beginning of his work ... when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was the craftsman by his side. I was a delight day by day* (Proverbs 8:22, 29–30).

Then she builds a house, sets a table and sends out her servant girls to invite everyone: *Come, eat some of my bread, Drink some of the wine which I have mixed!* (Proverbs 9:5).

I spoke of Wisdom as she. When people called John a demon-possessed man for fasting and called me a glutton and a drunkard for feasting, I said, *Wisdom is justified by her children* (Matthew 11:19). Luke remembers it as *by all her children* (Luke 7:35).

And when John wrote his gospel, he began, *In the beginning was the Word ... All things were made through him* (John 1:1, 3). Many scholars think he was thinking of Wisdom, who was beside God at creation.[3]

That verse, *The LORD possessed me*, later became a key text in one of the biggest fights in church history. The Greek translation the early church read has "The Lord created me." In the 300s, a priest named Arius said it proved that I was created, and so less than God. His opponents said it meant something else. The fight led to the Council of Nicaea.[4] A line about Lady Wisdom at a street corner became the center of an argument about me.

What Proverbs says about the poor

Proverbs is often read as a book of tips for getting ahead. Read what it says about the poor.

He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for his Maker, but he who is kind to the needy honors him (Proverbs 14:31).

He who has pity on the poor lends to the LORD; he will reward him (Proverbs 19:17).

Whoever stops his ears at the cry of the poor, he will also cry out, but shall not be heard (Proverbs 21:13).

And this, which is a description, not a recommendation: *The rich rule over the poor. The borrower is servant to the lender* (Proverbs 22:7).

When I said that whatever you did for the least of my brothers and sisters, you did for me (Matthew 25:40), Proverbs had already said that kindness to the poor is a loan to God.

Give me neither poverty nor riches

Near the end there is a prayer by a man named **Agur**:

Give me neither poverty nor riches. Feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full, deny you, and say, 'Who is the LORD?' or lest I be poor, and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God (Proverbs 30:8–9).

Food that is needful. Not more. When I taught my friends to ask for their daily bread, Agur's prayer was already old.

Proverbs are not promises

Here is something that will save you a great deal of grief.

Proverbs are true the way proverbs are true. They describe how things usually go. They are not guarantees.

Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it (Proverbs 22:6). Good advice. Not a promise that no child of good parents will ever go wrong.

The book tells you this itself. Look at two verses side by side: *Don't answer a fool according to his folly, lest you also be like him.* And the very next verse: *Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes* (Proverbs 26:4–5).

Which is it? Both. It depends on the fool and the moment. That is what wisdom is: knowing which proverb fits.

When people turn Proverbs into promises, that the righteous will always be rich and the wicked will always fall, they end up as Job's friends, telling suffering people it is their own fault. Job and Ecclesiastes are in my scriptures to keep Proverbs honest.

And one more thing. *Spare the rod and spoil the child* is not in the Bible. It is an old English saying, made famous by a comic poem of the 1660s. The proverb is *One who spares the rod hates his son* (Proverbs 13:24).[5]

A mother's advice to a king

The book ends with two women.

First, the advice a king named **Lemuel** learned from his mother. Do not give your strength to women or wine. And then: *Open your mouth for the mute, in the cause of all who are left desolate. Open your mouth, judge righteously, and serve justice to the poor and needy* (Proverbs 31:8–9).

Then comes a poem about a **worthy woman**, each verse starting with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. She buys a field and plants a vineyard with her own earnings. She trades. She works through the night. And *she opens her arms to the poor; yes, she extends her hands to the needy* (Proverbs 31:16, 20).

The book that began with Woman Wisdom calling in the street ends with a working woman with open arms.

> Check It Yourself
>
> **Look up:** Proverbs 25:6–7, then Luke 14:7–11.
>
> **You will find:** the same advice about the lower seat, a thousand years apart.
>
> **Then read Proverbs 26:4–5.** Two proverbs in a row that say opposite things.
>
> **Go deeper:** the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/proverbs**.

The Short Version

- The Hebrew word for **proverb** is the same as **parable**. This book is where my way of teaching comes from.
- One section closely follows an **Egyptian book**, the Instruction of Amenemope.
- **Lady Wisdom** was with God at creation. John's **"In the beginning was the Word"** draws on her.
- Proverbs says **oppressing the poor shows contempt for God** and **kindness to the poor is a loan to God**.
- **Proverbs are not promises.** The book even puts two opposite sayings side by side.

21. Ecclesiastes: Breath

At a Glance

Who wrote it: A writer who calls himself *Qohelet*, the Teacher, and speaks as if he were Solomon. The real author is unknown, and lived long after Solomon.

When: Its Hebrew is late and uses Persian words. Most scholars date it to the 300s or 200s BC.

Where it fits: Set, by the writer's pose, in the Jerusalem of King Solomon (1 Kings 1–11). Written much later, after Jerusalem fell in 586 BC, when Judah lived under Persian or Greek rulers.

Where I quote it: Never. But my parable of the rich fool makes Ecclesiastes' argument (Luke 12:16–21).

If you only read three chapters: Ecclesiastes 1, Ecclesiastes 3 and Ecclesiastes 9.

Words to Know

Qohelet — the writer's title. It means something like *the one who gathers an assembly*. The Greek *Ecclesiastes* means the same. I call him the Teacher. Your Bible may call him *the Preacher*.

Hevel — the book's key word. It means *breath*, *vapor* or *mist*. Your Bible may say *vanity* or *meaningless*.

Under the sun — the writer's phrase for life as we can see it, here, on earth.

Labor — hard work, and what it gets you.

The Book in Brief

Ecclesiastes is the meditation of a man who calls himself the Teacher, a son of David and king in Jerusalem. It does not move in a straight line. It circles the same questions again and again. What do people get from all their work? What is left when they die?

In chapter 1 he announces that everything is breath. Generations come and go, the sun rises and sets, the rivers run to the sea, and nothing is new under the sun. In chapter 2 he tests pleasure, wine, great building projects, gardens, servants, silver and gold, and finds nothing that lasts. Wisdom is better than folly, yet the wise man and the fool both die, and whoever comes after him will inherit what he built. Chapter 3 is the famous poem of times, a time to be born and a time to die, followed by a plain admission that no one can see the whole of what God is doing.

Chapters 4 to 6 look at the world around him: the tears of the oppressed, rivalry, loneliness, officials stacked on officials, and the way money never satisfies. Chapters 7 to 9 are sayings and observations. It is better to go to a funeral than to a party. The good sometimes suffer and the wicked sometimes prosper, and the same fate comes to everyone. He urges his reader to eat bread with joy, to enjoy the wife he loves and to work hard while there is time, because chance strikes the strong and the weak alike. Chapters 10 and 11 are mostly short proverbs about fools, rulers and taking risks, with a call to rejoice while young and to remember that God will judge.

Chapter 12 begins with advice to remember your Creator in your youth, then gives a poem about the body failing in old age. The book ends with someone speaking about the Teacher in the third person. He says that the Teacher taught the people knowledge and weighed many proverbs, and he sums up: people should fear God and keep his commandments.

The first man to die in the scriptures was named Breath.

The book opens with one word, repeated: *"Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher; "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."* (Ecclesiastes 1:2).

The Hebrew word is **hevel**. It does not mean pride. It means *breath*, *vapor*, the mist you see on a cold morning that is gone before you can touch it. *Breath of breaths. Everything is breath.*

Abel, the first person killed in the scriptures, has the same name in Hebrew: *Hevel*. A breath. Here and gone.

The experiment

The Teacher speaks as a king in Jerusalem, a son of David, and he runs an experiment on his own life.

He tries pleasure. He tries wine. He builds houses, plants vineyards, makes gardens and parks with pools. He buys slaves, collects silver and gold, gathers singers. *Whatever my eyes desired, I didn't keep from them* (Ecclesiastes 2:10).

And then: *I looked at all the works that my hands had worked, and at the labor that I had labored to do; and behold, all was vanity and a chasing after wind* (Ecclesiastes 2:11).

The word *paradise* comes from a Persian word for an enclosed garden. That word is in this book, in the list of the Teacher's parks (Ecclesiastes 2:5). It is one of the signs that the book was written centuries after Solomon, in a world shaped by Persia.[1]

Who will get it?

What troubles the Teacher most is death. *The wise man must die just like the fool!* (Ecclesiastes 2:16).

And then the money. *I hated all my labor in which I labored under the sun, because I must leave it to the man who comes after me. Who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool?* (Ecclesiastes 2:18–19).

I told a story about this. A rich man had such a good harvest that he had nowhere to put it. So he decided to tear down his barns and build bigger ones, and then say to himself, *Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years. Take your ease, eat, drink, and be merry.*

But God said to him, 'You foolish one, tonight your soul is required of you. The things which you have prepared—whose will they be?' (Luke 12:19–20).

That is the Teacher's question, in a story. Whose will they be?

A time for everything

You probably know Ecclesiastes 3, even if you have never opened the book.

For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted ... (Ecclesiastes 3:1–2).

An American folk singer set those verses to music in the 1950s, and a rock band made it a hit in 1965.[2] It became one of the few pieces of the scriptures that people who never go to church can sing.

Read on past the famous part, though. A few verses later the Teacher says that humans and animals share the same fate. *All go to one place. All are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knows the spirit of man, whether it goes upward, and the spirit of the animal, whether it goes downward to the earth?* (Ecclesiastes 3:20–21).

He did not know. He said so. That is in my scriptures too.

The tears of the oppressed

The Teacher is not only gloomy about himself. He looks at the world and sees injustice.

Then I returned and saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and behold, the tears of those who were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter (Ecclesiastes 4:1).

And he understood how it works. *If you see the oppression of the poor, and the violent taking away of justice and righteousness in a district, don't marvel at the matter, for one official is eyed by a higher one, and there are officials over them* (Ecclesiastes 5:8).

An official over an official over an official, each one taking his share, all the way up. Nobody in particular is responsible. That is how the poor are ground down in every empire, and the Teacher saw it in his.

Money

He who loves silver shall not be satisfied with silver (Ecclesiastes 5:10).

The sleep of a laboring man is sweet, whether he eats little or much; but the abundance of the rich will not allow him to sleep (Ecclesiastes 5:12).

He watched a man pile up riches and lose them in a bad venture, so that his son was born with nothing in his hand (Ecclesiastes 5:13–14).

I said, *Don't lay up treasures for yourselves on the earth, where moth and rust consume, and where thieves break through and steal* (Matthew 6:19). The Teacher would have nodded.

Eat your bread

And yet this is not a hopeless book. Over and over, the Teacher comes back to the same advice.

Go your way—eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart ... Live joyfully with the wife whom you love all the days of your life of vanity ... Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might (Ecclesiastes 9:7–10).

Life is breath. So do not waste it on chasing more. Eat with the people you love. Do your work well. Enjoy the day you have.

I was called a glutton and a drunkard. At a wedding in Cana, when the wine ran out, I made more (John 2:1–11). And I told my friends, *Don't be anxious for tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Each day's own evil is sufficient* (Matthew 6:34).

The Teacher would have come to that wedding.

Time and chance

The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happen to them all (Ecclesiastes 9:11).

That is a hard verse for anyone who believes the world is perfectly fair. Like Job, the Teacher refuses to pretend.

The ending someone added

The book ends with a beautiful, sad poem about growing old, and the body failing, *before the silver cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken … and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it* (Ecclesiastes 12:6–7).

Then, in the last few verses, the voice changes. The narrator who briefly framed the book at the start now speaks *about* the Teacher in the third person at length, and sums up: *Fear God and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man* (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

Most scholars think an editor added those lines, perhaps to make the book safe for the scriptures.[3] Even so, my people kept arguing. Teachers after me still debated whether Ecclesiastes was holy.[4]

It stayed. A book that says *I do not know*, and *everything is breath*, and *eat your bread with joy*, is in the scriptures I grew up on. That should give you permission to say the same things.

> Check It Yourself
>
> **Look up:** Ecclesiastes 2:18–23, then Luke 12:16–21.
>
> **You will find:** the Teacher's question about who gets your wealth, and my story that asks it again.
>
> **Then read Ecclesiastes 5:8–12.** See how the Teacher describes power over the poor.
>
> **Go deeper:** the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/ecclesiastes**.

The Short Version

- The key word is ***hevel***, **breath** or **vapor**: life is brief and cannot be held.
- The Teacher speaks as **Solomon**, but the book was written **centuries later**.
- He sees **the tears of the oppressed** and **officials stacked on officials** grinding down the poor.
- His advice: **eat your bread with joy**, love the people you love, do your work well.
- My **rich fool** parable asks the Teacher's question: **whose will they be?**

22. Song of Songs: The Love Poem in the Bible

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Its first line ties it to Solomon, but the Hebrew can mean *by*, *for* or *about* Solomon. The poets are unknown.

When: Debated. Some of the poems may be old. Its language has late features, and many scholars date the collection to the 400s to 200s BC.

Where it fits: Its title points to King Solomon's time (1 Kings 4:32 says he wrote 1,005 songs). But many scholars think the collection took shape long after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC.

Where I quote it: Never.

If you only read three chapters: It has only eight. Read all of it, out loud if you dare.

Words to Know

Song of Songs — a Hebrew way of saying *the greatest song*, the way *holy of holies* means the holiest place.

Beloved — what the two lovers call each other.

Allegory — reading a story as a picture of something else. For centuries this book was read as a picture of God's love.

Shulammite — the name given to the woman in a single verse of the poem (Song of Songs 6:13). Its meaning is uncertain.

The Book in Brief

The Song of Songs is a collection of love poems, eight chapters long. There is no plot. A woman and a man speak, and a chorus called the daughters of Jerusalem joins in now and then. Gardens, vineyards, spices, gazelles and mountains fill its pictures.

In chapter 1 the woman longs for the man's kisses and tells the daughters of Jerusalem that she is dark but lovely. In chapter 2 she calls him an apple tree among the trees of the wood, and he calls her to come away, because winter is over and spring has come. Chapter 3 tells of a night when she goes looking for him in the city and finds him, and then describes King Solomon's carriage on his wedding day. Chapter 4 is the man's long praise of her beauty, and she invites him into her garden.

In chapter 5 he knocks at her door at night. She is slow to open, and he is gone. She searches the city, the watchmen beat her, and she describes him to the daughters of Jerusalem. Chapters 6 and 7 bring more praise and a dance, and she says that she belongs to her beloved. In chapter 8 she asks him to set her as a seal on his heart and says that love is as strong as death and no flood can drown it. The book ends with her calling him to come away like a gazelle on the mountains of spices.

There is a book in the scriptures about desire, and it never clearly names God.

The Song of Songs is a collection of love poems. A woman and a man long for each other, search for each other, praise each other's bodies in detail, and meet in gardens and vineyards at night.

It is not subtle. *Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth; for your love is better than wine* (Song of Songs 1:2). That is the first line after the title.

God is never clearly named in it. The only possible mention is a single syllable near the end.[1] There is no law, no Temple, no prayer, no moral at the end. And it is in my scriptures.

Her voice

Notice who does most of the talking. It is the woman.

She speaks first. She speaks most. She goes looking for him. *By night on my bed, I sought him whom my soul loves* (Song of Songs 3:1). Once, when she goes out searching the city streets at night, the watchmen find her and beat her (Song of Songs 5:7). She keeps looking.

She says, *I am dark, but lovely* (Song of Songs 1:5).

And the love is mutual. *My beloved is mine, and I am his* (Song of Songs 2:16). Nobody owns anybody here. In a world where a wife was often treated as her husband's property, that line meant something.

Strong as death

Near the end comes the line people read at weddings:

Set me as a seal on your heart, as a seal on your arm; for love is strong as death. Jealousy is as cruel as Sheol. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a very flame of the LORD. Many waters can't quench love, neither can floods drown it (Song of Songs 8:6–7).

Strong as death. In my scriptures, death is the one power no one escapes. This poem says love is just as strong.

The argument over the Song

Teachers after me argued over whether this book was holy. The great teacher **Akiva** defended it with a famous line: *All the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.*[2]

Another early Jewish ruling warned that anyone who sang the Song in a banquet hall like an ordinary love song would have no share in the world to come.[3] Think about what that tells you. People were singing it at parties. It was a love song before it was anything else.

The allegory

The way the Song stayed holy was by being read as a picture.

My people came to read it as the love between God and Israel. It is still read in synagogues at Passover.

Christians read it as the love between Christ and the church, or between Christ and the soul. Origen, a great Christian scholar of the 200s, wrote a long commentary on it. In the 1100s, a monk named **Bernard of Clairvaux**

preached eighty-six sermons on the Song and only reached the beginning of chapter 3.[4]

A bishop named **Theodore of Mopsuestia**, around 400, said it was simply Solomon's love poetry. More than a century after his death, his writings were condemned by a church council, and his reading of the Song was among the things held against him.[5]

I will not tell you the allegory is wrong. People have found God in this book for two thousand years, and the scriptures use marriage as a picture of God and Israel again and again. But you should know that it was a love poem first, and that you are allowed to read it that way.

What I would say

I never quoted the Song. But I went to weddings. My first sign in John's gospel was at a wedding in Cana, where I made sure the wine did not run out (John 2:1–11).

More than once I compared the kingdom of heaven to a wedding feast (Matthew 22:2; 25:1–13). When people asked why my friends did not fast, I said, *Can the groomsmen fast while the bridegroom is with them?* (Mark 2:19).

The first page of the scriptures says that God made people male and female, and looked at everything that had been made, *and, behold, it was very good* (Genesis 1:31). Bodies were good. Love was good. Desire was part of creation, not a mistake in it.

The Song of Songs was kept in the scriptures by people who could have thrown it out. They did not think the body was something to be ashamed of before God. Neither should you.

Check It Yourself

Look up: Song of Songs 8:6–7.

You will find: "love is strong as death," and "a very flame of the LORD," the one place where this book may name God.

Then read the whole Song and count how much of it is spoken by the woman.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/song-of-songs**.

The Short Version

- The Song of Songs is a collection of **love poems**, frank about desire, and **God is never clearly named**.
- **The woman speaks first and most**, and the love is **mutual**: "**My beloved is mine, and I am his.**"
- **Love is strong as death.** Many waters cannot quench it.
- Teachers argued over it. **Akiva called it the Holy of Holies**, and people **sang it at banquets**.
- It was kept holy by being read as an **allegory**, but it was **a love poem first**.

PART FOUR — THE MAJOR PROPHETS

A prophet was not a fortune-teller. He was someone who spoke for God to kings and people in a crisis, mostly about injustice, false worship and what was coming because of them. These books are called major because they are long, not because they matter more. Your Bible prints them after the history books, but the prophets lived inside that history. Isaiah spoke in Jerusalem while Assyria threatened it, and his scroll carries on into the exile and after. Jeremiah lived through Jerusalem's last years and its fall. Lamentations mourns the ruined city. Ezekiel was a priest carried off to Babylon. Daniel is set in Babylon too, but was finished centuries later. In the Hebrew Bible as it later took shape, Lamentations and Daniel are among the Writings, not the Prophets. Each chapter's At a Glance box tells you where its book fits in the story.

23. Isaiah: The Scroll They Handed Me

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Chapters 1 to 39 are largely the work of Isaiah son of Amoz, a prophet in Jerusalem. Most scholars think chapters 40 to 55 come from a later prophet in his tradition, during the exile, and chapters 56 to 66 from after the return. Some scholars still hold that one prophet wrote it all.

When: From about 740 BC to the late 500s BC or later.

Where it fits: The first part belongs to Judah under Assyria, in the years of 2 Kings 15 to 20, before and after the north fell in 722 BC. The later parts speak to the exile in Babylon and the years after.

Where I quote it: At Nazareth (Luke 4:18–19; Isaiah 61:1–2). In the Temple (Mark 11:17; Isaiah 56:7). On why I spoke in parables (Mark 4:12; Isaiah 6:9–10). On empty worship (Mark 7:6–7; Isaiah 29:13). My vineyard parable (Mark 12:1; Isaiah 5:1–2). My answer to John (Matthew 11:5; Isaiah 35:5–6; 61:1). The night before I died (Luke 22:37; Isaiah 53:12). The undying worm (Mark 9:48; Isaiah 66:24).

If you only read three chapters: Isaiah 1, Isaiah 53 and Isaiah 61.

Words to Know

Servant — a mysterious figure in chapters 42 to 53, called by God to suffer and to bring justice to the nations.

Immanuel — *God with us*, the name of a child promised as a sign to King Ahaz.

Zion — the hill of Jerusalem where the Temple stood, and so a name for Jerusalem itself.

Remnant — the few who survive a disaster, from whom the people will be rebuilt.

Great Isaiah Scroll — the complete scroll of Isaiah found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, copied about a century before I was born.

The Book in Brief

Isaiah is a long scroll of poems, sermons and warnings, with a few stories. It has three main parts, and each speaks to a different time.

Chapters 1 to 39 are set in Jerusalem, in the days of four kings of Judah, while Assyria swallows its neighbors. The book opens with a charge against Judah: the people offer sacrifices, but they cheat the poor, and God has had enough. A vision follows of nations coming to Jerusalem to learn God's ways and beat their swords into plowshares. In chapter 6, Isaiah sees God on a throne in the Temple and is sent to people who will not listen. In chapters 7 to 12, King Ahaz is terrified of an attack by Syria and northern Israel, and Isaiah offers him a sign, a child to be named Immanuel. Chapters 13 to 35 are messages to other nations, to the whole earth, and to Judah's leaders, who trust Egypt's horses instead of God. In chapters 36 to 39, an Assyrian army surrounds Jerusalem, King Hezekiah prays, and the Assyrian camp is found full of dead men. Hezekiah falls sick and recovers, then shows envoys from Babylon all his treasures. Isaiah tells him that one day all of it will be carried off to Babylon.

Chapters 40 to 55 jump ahead. The people are now in exile in Babylon, and the section begins with a call to comfort them. God made everything, and the idols are made by workmen. Cyrus, king of Persia, is named as the man who will let God's people go home. A servant of God appears in several poems. In the last, in chapters 52 and 53, he is despised and killed for the wrongs of others, and then honored. Babylon is brought low, and the exiles are told to leave. Chapter 55 invites everyone who is thirsty, even without money, to come and eat.

Chapters 56 to 66 speak to a Jerusalem still waiting for God to set things right. Foreigners and eunuchs who keep God's covenant are welcomed into his house, but the leaders are blind watchmen who care only for themselves. Chapter 58 says the fast God wants is to free the oppressed and feed the hungry. In chapter 60, Jerusalem is told to rise and shine, for nations are coming to its light. In chapter 61, someone anointed by God's Spirit brings good news to the poor. After a prayer for God to tear open the heavens, God answers in chapters 65 and 66 with new heavens and a new earth. The scroll ends with all nations gathered to see God's glory, and a last look at the bodies of those who rebelled.

When I stood up to say what I had come to do, I read from this book.

At the start of my work, I went home to Nazareth and went to the synagogue on the Sabbath, as I always did. I stood up to read. The attendant handed me the scroll of Isaiah. I unrolled it and found this:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to heal the broken hearted, to proclaim release to the captives, recovering of sight to the blind, to deliver those who are crushed, and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord (Luke 4:18–19).

I rolled up the scroll, gave it back and sat down. Every eye in the room was on me. And I said, *Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing* (Luke 4:21).

If you want to know what I thought I was doing, that is the passage I chose.

Two honest notes about it. The line *to deliver those who are crushed* is not in Isaiah 61. It comes from Isaiah 58:6, where it reads *to let the oppressed go free*, and Luke's account joins the two. And in Isaiah, the sentence goes on: *the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God* (Isaiah 61:2). In Luke, the reading stops before the vengeance.[1]

A scroll like mine

In 1947, a shepherd boy found clay jars in a cave near the Dead Sea. In one of them was a complete scroll of Isaiah, all sixty-six chapters, written on leather sewn into one long roll more than seven meters long. It was copied about a century before I was born.[2]

Before that, the oldest complete copy of Isaiah in Hebrew was about a thousand years younger. When scholars compared them, they found spelling differences and many small variations, but the book was recognizably the same.

That scroll is the closest thing you can see today to the one the attendant handed me.

One scroll, three times

Isaiah son of Amoz preached in Jerusalem from around 740 to 700 BC, while the Assyrian Empire swallowed the northern kingdom and threatened Judah.

Then, at chapter 40, the world changes. Jerusalem has already fallen. The people are in exile in Babylon. A voice says, *Comfort, comfort my people* (Isaiah 40:1). And a few chapters later, the Persian king **Cyrus** is named, the man who would conquer Babylon in 539 BC (Isaiah 44:28; 45:1).

Since the late 1700s, scholars have argued that chapters 40 onward were written by a prophet living in that later time, in Isaiah's tradition. Since the 1890s, most have also treated chapters 56 to 66 as coming from after the return.[3] Some scholars still argue for one author. Either way, the scroll carries a tradition that kept speaking for two hundred years.

Wash yourselves

Isaiah's first chapter goes straight at the Temple. He calls the rulers of Jerusalem *you rulers of Sodom* (Isaiah 1:10). Then God speaks:

What are the multitude of your sacrifices to me? ... I have had enough of the burnt offerings ... When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you. Yes, when you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves. Make yourself clean ... Cease to do evil. Learn to do well. Seek justice. Relieve the oppressed. Defend the fatherless. Plead for the widow (Isaiah 1:11–17).

That was the first page of the scroll I was handed.

The vineyard

In **Isaiah 5**, the prophet sings a love song about a vineyard. His friend digs it, clears the stones, plants the best vines, builds a watchtower and cuts out a wine press. And it yields only wild grapes.

Then the song says what the vineyard is. It is Israel. *He looked for justice, but, behold, oppression; for righteousness, but, behold, a cry of distress* (Isaiah 5:7). In Hebrew it is a pun. *Justice* is *mishpat*; *oppression* is *mispach*. *Righteousness* is *tsedaqah*; *a cry of distress* is *tse'aqah*. God looked for one word and found another that sounded almost the same.

The next verse says who did it: *Woe to those who join house to house, who lay field to field, until there is no room, and you are made to dwell alone in the middle of the land!* (Isaiah 5:8). The rich were buying up the land.

When I told my parable in the Temple about the tenants who killed the owner's son, I began with Isaiah's vineyard, in nearly the same words: a man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the wine press and built a watchtower (Mark 12:1). The chief priests knew the song. They knew who the tenants were.

Here I am

In **Isaiah 6**, the prophet sees God in the Temple, enthroned, with heavenly beings calling *Holy, holy, holy*. He cries out that he is a man of unclean lips. A coal from the altar touches his mouth. And God asks, *Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?*

Here I am. Send me! (Isaiah 6:8).

Then God tells him something terrible. Go and speak to this people, but they will not understand. *You hear indeed, but don't understand. You see indeed, but don't perceive* (Isaiah 6:9).

When my friends asked me why I spoke in parables, I gave them this verse (Mark 4:11–12). It is one of the hardest things I said. Isaiah found that a message could be spoken plainly and still not be heard. So did I.

The young woman

In **Isaiah 7**, the kings of Aram and northern Israel are marching on Jerusalem, and King Ahaz is shaking with fear. Isaiah tells him not to be afraid and offers a sign:

Behold, the virgin will conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14). Before the child is old enough to know right from wrong, Isaiah says, the two kings Ahaz fears will be gone.

In Isaiah, it is a sign for Ahaz, in his own time. The Hebrew word, *almah*, means a young woman. The Greek translation used *parthenos*, which usually means a virgin. Matthew read the Greek and saw my birth in it (Matthew 1:23). Many English Bibles, including the one quoted in this book, print *virgin* in Isaiah as well.

When an American Bible translation printed *young woman* in 1952, a pastor in North Carolina publicly burned it.[4] People have strong feelings about this verse. You should know what both languages say.

Swords into plowshares

Isaiah also gives you the most famous promise of peace ever written:

They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more (Isaiah 2:4).

The same words are in Micah (Micah 4:3). They are carved on a wall across from the United Nations in New York, and the Soviet Union gave the United Nations a statue of a man beating a sword into a plow.[5]

A child is born

Isaiah 9 says, *For a child is born to us. A son is given to us; and the government will be on his shoulders. His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace* (Isaiah 9:6).

It was probably written for the birth or crowning of a king of Judah. Christians have heard me in it ever since, and you have heard it in Handel.

Read the next verse too. That king's kingdom will be upheld *with justice and with righteousness* (Isaiah 9:7). And in chapter 11, when the shoot grows from the stump of Jesse, *he will judge the poor with righteousness, and decide with equity for the humble of the earth* (Isaiah 11:4).

Laws that rob the poor

Here is a verse every lawmaker should have on his wall:

Woe to those who decree unrighteous decrees, and to the writers who write oppressive decrees; to deprive the needy from justice, and to rob the poor among my people of their rights, that widows may be their plunder, and that they may make the fatherless their prey! (Isaiah 10:1–2).

Isaiah saw that the robbing was being done legally. The law itself was the weapon.

The servant

In the second part of the book, a figure appears called **the servant**.

Behold, my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights: I have put my Spirit on him. He will bring justice to the nations ... He won't break a bruised reed. He won't quench a dimly burning wick (Isaiah 42:1–3).

When I came up out of the Jordan, the voice from heaven said, *You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased* (Mark 1:11). Many readers hear this servant in it. Matthew quotes the passage outright about me (Matthew 12:18–21).

Then comes **Isaiah 53**:

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of suffering and acquainted with disease ... Surely he has borne our sickness and carried our suffering ... But he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities ... As a lamb that is led to the slaughter ... so he didn't open his mouth (Isaiah 53:3–7).

Who is the servant? In some places Isaiah says plainly: *You are my servant, Israel* (Isaiah 49:3). Many Jewish readers have understood the suffering servant as Israel in exile, suffering for the nations. My followers saw me.[6]

On the night I was arrested, I said one line from that chapter: *I tell you that this which is written must still be fulfilled in me: 'He was counted with transgressors.'* (Luke 22:37; Isaiah 53:12). The next day I was crucified between two criminals.

Come without money

Hey! Come, everyone who thirsts, to the waters! Come, he who has no money, buy, and eat! Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price (Isaiah 55:1).

A feast that costs nothing, for people who have nothing. I fed crowds on a hillside. I told stories of a banquet where the host sends his servants into the streets to bring in the poor and the lame. Isaiah had already laid that table.

The eunuch and the foreigner

The last part of Isaiah opens a door the Law had closed.

Deuteronomy says that a man whose body has been mutilated may not enter the assembly of the LORD (Deuteronomy 23:1). Isaiah says that the eunuchs who keep God's covenant will be given *a memorial and a name better than of sons and of daughters* (Isaiah 56:4–5).

And foreigners who join themselves to the LORD will be brought to God's holy mountain, *for my house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples* (Isaiah 56:7).

When I overturned the tables of the money-changers in the Temple, those were the words I used: *Isn't it written, 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all the nations?' But you have made it a den of robbers!* (Mark 11:17). The first part was Isaiah. The second was Jeremiah.

In the book of Acts, one of the first foreigners baptized by my followers is a eunuch from Ethiopia, and he is sitting in his chariot reading Isaiah when Philip meets him (Acts 8:26–39).

The fast God chooses

Isaiah 58 may be the finest chapter on religion in the scriptures. The people complain that God ignores their fasting. God answers:

Isn't this the fast that I have chosen: to release the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke? Isn't it to distribute your bread to the hungry, and that you bring the poor who are cast out to your house? When you see the naked, that you cover him (Isaiah 58:6–7).

That is the line Luke wove into my reading at Nazareth, where it reads *to deliver those who are crushed*.

My answer to John

When my kinsman John was in prison, he sent his followers to ask me whether I was the one, or whether they should wait for another.

I did not say yes or no. I told them to tell John what they saw: *the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them* (Matthew 11:4–5).

That is Isaiah: *the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. Then the lame man will leap like a deer* (Isaiah 35:5–6), and *good news to the humble* (Isaiah 61:1).

Among the Dead Sea Scrolls there is a text, written before me, that speaks of God's messiah and says that in those days the Lord *will heal the wounded, give life to the dead, and preach good news to the poor*.[7] Even raising the dead, which is not in Isaiah's lists in chapters 35 and 61, was on that list. John knew what I meant.

The last verse

Isaiah ends with a terrible picture. The faithful go out of Jerusalem and look at the bodies of the rebels: *for their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched* (Isaiah 66:24).

I used those words when I warned about Gehenna (Mark 9:48). In Isaiah, the worm and the fire are working on dead bodies outside the city. It is a picture of shame and ruin.

My people found that last verse so hard that, when they read Isaiah aloud in the synagogue, they repeated the verse before it so the reading would not end there. That verse says that all flesh shall come to worship before God.[8]

They chose to end on the promise.

> **Check It Yourself**
>
> **Look up:** Isaiah 61:1–2, then Luke 4:16–21.
>
> **You will find:** the passage I chose at Nazareth, and where Luke's reading stops.
>
> **Then read Isaiah 58:1–9.** It is the fast God chooses.
>
> **Go deeper:** the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/isaiah**.

The Short Version

- Isaiah is the **scroll I was handed at Nazareth**. I read **good news to the poor** and **release to the captives** from it.
- The **Great Isaiah Scroll**, copied a century before me, shows the book almost as I knew it.
- The scroll grew over **two centuries**. Chapters 40 and on speak to the **exile** and name **Cyrus**.
- It attacks **worship without justice**, **land-grabbing** and **laws that rob the poor**, and promises **swords into plowshares**.
- Its **suffering servant** was read by my followers as me. On my last night I quoted one line: **"counted with transgressors."**

24. Jeremiah: The Prophet They Thought I Was

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Jeremiah, a priest's son from the village of Anathoth, dictated much of it to his scribe Baruch. Later editors arranged and expanded it.

When: Jeremiah prophesied from about 627 BC until after Jerusalem fell in 586 BC. The book was edited during and after the exile.

Where it fits: Jeremiah lived through the last forty years of the kingdom of Judah, the years told in 2 Kings 22 to 25, and saw Jerusalem fall in 586 BC.

Where I quote it: "A den of robbers" (Mark 11:17; Jeremiah 7:11). The new covenant (Luke 22:20; Jeremiah 31:31). When I asked who people said I was, some said Jeremiah (Matthew 16:14).

If you only read three chapters: Jeremiah 7, Jeremiah 22 and Jeremiah 31.

Words to Know

Temple sermon — the speech Jeremiah gave at the Temple gate, in chapter 7, that nearly got him killed.

Baruch — Jeremiah's scribe, who wrote his words down, twice.

Yoke — the wooden bar on an ox's neck. Jeremiah wore one through the streets.

New covenant — the promise in chapter 31 that God would write the law on people's hearts.

The Book in Brief

Jeremiah gathers sermons, poems and stories from Jeremiah's forty years as a prophet, from the reign of King Josiah until after Jerusalem fell. The chapters are not in time order.

In chapter 1, God calls Jeremiah, a priest's son from the village of Anathoth. He says he is only a child and cannot speak. God touches his mouth and sends him anyway, with a warning of disaster coming from the north.

Chapters 2 to 20 are mostly sermons to Judah. God charges the people with leaving him for idols, like a wife who has gone off with other men, and warns that an enemy army is coming. In the Temple sermon of chapter 7, Jeremiah says the Temple will not save people who rob the poor. He is told never to marry. He watches a potter reshape spoiled clay, and he smashes a clay jar to show what will happen to Jerusalem. The priest Pashhur has him beaten and locked in the stocks, and the men of his own town plot to kill him. He complains to God, but he cannot stop speaking.

Chapters 21 to 29 are aimed at Judah's kings and false prophets. Jeremiah condemns King Jehoiakim for building a palace with forced labor, and promises a righteous king to come. He wears a wooden yoke to tell the nations to serve Babylon, and the prophet Hananiah breaks it. After the first Judeans are marched off to Babylon, Jeremiah writes to them to build houses, plant gardens and seek the city's peace.

Chapters 30 to 33 are full of hope. The exiles will come home, and God will make a new covenant and write his law on their hearts. Jeremiah, in prison while the Babylonians besiege Jerusalem, buys a field to show that people will again buy fields in the land.

Chapters 34 to 45 go back over the last years. The people free their slaves during the siege, then take them back. King Jehoiakim burns Jeremiah's scroll, and Jeremiah has his scribe Baruch write it again. King Zedekiah asks Jeremiah's advice in secret but will not follow it. Officials throw Jeremiah into a muddy cistern, and Ebed-melech, a court official from Ethiopia, pulls him out. In chapter 39, Jerusalem falls, and the Babylonians set Jeremiah free. The governor they appoint is murdered, and the survivors flee to Egypt, taking Jeremiah with them, though he told them not to go.

Chapters 46 to 51 are messages against foreign nations, from Egypt to Babylon, whose fall is foretold last. Chapter 52 ends the book by retelling the fall of Jerusalem and the burning of the Temple, and the release of Judah's exiled king from prison in Babylon.

I did what he did, in the same place, and it got me arrested, as it did him.

When I asked my friends who people said I was, they told me: some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, *and others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets* (Matthew 16:14).

I understand why. Jeremiah stood in the Temple and told the people it would be destroyed. He wept over Jerusalem. He was arrested, beaten, and called a traitor. I did all of those things, and I quoted him while I did them.

The Temple sermon

In **Jeremiah 7**, God tells Jeremiah to stand at the gate of the Temple and speak to everyone coming in to worship.

Don't trust in lying words, saying, 'The LORD's temple, the LORD's temple, the LORD's temple, are these.' (Jeremiah 7:4).

The people believed that as long as the Temple stood, they were safe. Jeremiah told them the Temple would not save them. Then he told them what would:

If you thoroughly execute justice between a man and his neighbor; if you don't oppress the foreigner, the fatherless, and the widow, and don't shed innocent blood in this place ... then I will cause you to dwell in this place (Jeremiah 7:5–7).

And then: *Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely ... then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are delivered,' ... Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?* (Jeremiah 7:9–11).

Think about what a robbers' den is. It is not where robbers rob. It is where they hide afterward, safe, before they go out and do it again. Jeremiah was saying that people were robbing the poor all week and then hiding in the Temple on the holy day.

When I overturned the tables in the Temple courts, I said, *You have made it a den of robbers* (Mark 11:17). Everyone who knew Jeremiah knew what came next in his sermon. God had destroyed the old shrine at Shiloh, and would do the same to this house (Jeremiah 7:12–14).

What it cost him

Jeremiah 26 tells what happened after that sermon. The priests and prophets seized him and said, *You shall surely die!* They brought him before the officials: *This man is worthy of death; for he has prophesied against this city* (Jeremiah 26:8, 11).

The officials refused to condemn him, and some of the elders spoke up for him. They remembered that a hundred years earlier, the prophet Micah had said the same thing about Jerusalem, and the king had listened instead of killing him (Jeremiah 26:17–19).

But the same chapter tells of another prophet, **Uriah**, who preached the same message. He fled to Egypt. The king sent men after him, brought him back and killed him with the sword (Jeremiah 26:20–23).

I preached in the Temple that week, and by the end of the week I was dead. Jeremiah lived. Uriah did not. Both stories were in my scriptures, and I knew them.

To know God

Jeremiah 22 has the clearest definition of knowing God that I know of.

Jeremiah attacks King Jehoiakim for building himself a grand palace with forced labor: *Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness ... who uses his neighbor's service without wages, and doesn't give him his hire* (Jeremiah 22:13).

Then he compares him to his father, the good king Josiah: *Didn't your father eat and drink, and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; so it was well, then. Wasn't this to know me? says the LORD* (Jeremiah 22:15–16).

To know God is to judge the cause of the poor. That is not my idea. It is Jeremiah's.

The slaves who were freed and taken back

Jeremiah 34 is one of the bitterest stories in the scriptures.

While the Babylonians are besieging Jerusalem, King Zedekiah and the rich make a covenant to free their Hebrew slaves, as the Law required. They proclaim *liberty*, the Jubilee word. The slaves go free.

Then the Babylonian army pulls back for a while. And the owners take the slaves back (Jeremiah 34:8–11, 21–22; 37:5).

God's answer through Jeremiah: *You have not listened to me, to proclaim liberty, every man to his brother, and every man to his neighbor. Behold, I proclaim to you a liberty ... to the sword, to the pestilence, and to the famine* (Jeremiah 34:17).

They freed the slaves when they were frightened and took them back when they felt safe. The liberty they would not give, they received.

The yoke

Jeremiah told Judah to submit to Babylon. To prove his point, he made a wooden yoke and wore it on his neck through the streets (Jeremiah 27:2). Another prophet, Hananiah, snatched it off and broke it, and prophesied that Babylon would fall within two years. Jeremiah came back with God's answer: Hananiah had broken a wooden yoke only to forge an iron one in its place (Jeremiah 28:12–14).

He was called a traitor for this. He was beaten, put in the stocks, and thrown into a muddy cistern to die (Jeremiah 20:2; 38:6).

And the man who pulled him out of the cistern was **Ebed-melech**, an Ethiopian, a eunuch in the king's house. He went to the king, pleaded for Jeremiah, and lowered old rags down so the ropes would not cut his arms (Jeremiah 38:7–13). A foreigner and a eunuch saved the prophet.

Fire in my bones

Jeremiah complains to God more than any other prophet. He tells the LORD, *You have persuaded me, and I was persuaded* (Jeremiah 20:7). He curses the day he was born (Jeremiah 20:14).

But he cannot stop. *If I say, I will not make mention of him, or speak any more in his name, then there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones. I*

am weary with holding it in. I can't (Jeremiah 20:9).

The scroll in the fire

In **Jeremiah 36**, Jeremiah dictates his prophecies to Baruch, and Baruch reads them aloud in the Temple. The scroll is brought to King Jehoiakim, who is sitting by a fire in his winter house.

As each few columns are read, the king cuts them off with a knife and throws them into the fire, until the whole scroll is gone (Jeremiah 36:23).

So Jeremiah dictates it all again, and *many similar words were added to them* (Jeremiah 36:32).

That tells you something about how my scriptures were made. Prophecy was spoken, written down, burned, rewritten and added to.

Two Jeremiahs

In fact, my people had two versions of this book. The Greek translation is about one-seventh shorter than the Hebrew, and its chapters are in a different order. Among the Dead Sea Scrolls, both forms were found, in the same caves.[1]

In my lifetime, both versions were being read. Nobody thought the word of God had been lost because there were two.

Seek the peace of the city

After the first deportation to Babylon, Jeremiah writes a letter to the exiles.

He does not tell them to resist. He tells them to settle. *Build houses and dwell in them. Plant gardens and eat their fruit ... Seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the LORD for it; for in its peace you will have peace* (Jeremiah 29:5–7).

Pray for Babylon. The city that had carried you off, and would soon burn your Temple. That was hard to hear.

You may know a verse from this letter on a graduation card: *For I know the thoughts that I think toward you ... thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you hope and a future* (Jeremiah 29:11). It was said to a whole nation of refugees,

and the verse just before it says they would wait **seventy years** (Jeremiah 29:10). Most of the people who first heard it would die in Babylon.

Buying a field in a war

While Jerusalem is under siege and Jeremiah is in prison, his cousin comes to him and offers to sell him the family field in Anathoth, which the Babylonian army is standing on.

Jeremiah buys it. He weighs out the silver, signs the deed in front of witnesses and has it sealed in a clay jar, *that they may last many days* (Jeremiah 32:14). Because, he says, *Houses and fields and vineyards will yet again be bought in this land* (Jeremiah 32:15).

That is what hope looked like for Jeremiah. Not a feeling. A deed in a jar, for land you cannot stand on.

The new covenant

Then, in **Jeremiah 31**, comes the promise my followers built on.

Behold, the days come ... that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah ... I will put my law in their inward parts, and I will write it in their heart. I will be their God, and they shall be my people. They will no longer each teach his neighbor, and every man teach his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD;' for they will all know me, from their least to their greatest (Jeremiah 31:31–34).

From their least to their greatest. No experts needed. No one standing between the people and God.

On the night before I died, I took the cup and said, *This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you* (Luke 22:20). The letter to the Hebrews later quotes Jeremiah's whole promise, the longest quotation from my scriptures anywhere in the New Testament (Hebrews 8:8–12).

A mistaken name

One more thing, for honesty. When Matthew tells how Judas's thirty pieces of silver were used to buy a potter's field, he says it fulfilled *that which was spoken*

through Jeremiah the prophet (Matthew 27:9). The words he quotes are mostly from **Zechariah** (Zechariah 11:12–13), perhaps blended with Jeremiah's stories of the potter and the field.[2]

Check It Yourself

Look up: Jeremiah 7:1–15, then Mark 11:15–18.

You will find: the Temple sermon, and my use of it on the same Temple mount six hundred years later.

Then read Jeremiah 22:13–16. See what it means to know God.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/jeremiah**.

The Short Version

- Jeremiah preached **against trusting the Temple** and called it a **den of robbers**. I said the same in the same place.
- He was **nearly killed for it**. Another prophet who said the same was **killed**.
- He said that **to know God is to judge the cause of the poor**.
- He told the exiles to **seek the peace of Babylon**, and bought a field in a war as an act of hope.
- His **new covenant**, written on the heart, is what I named over **the cup** on my last night.

25. Lamentations: Five Poems for a Burned City

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Unknown. The book never names its author. Tradition, beginning with the Greek translation, gave it to Jeremiah. In the Hebrew Bible it is one of the Writings, not among the Prophets.

When: Soon after the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC.

Where it fits: The poems mourn the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC, told in 2 Kings 25 and Jeremiah 39. They belong to the first years of the exile, after the kingdom of Judah was gone.

Where I quote it: Never. But when I wept over Jerusalem and spoke of its coming destruction, I was standing where this book stands (Luke 19:41–44).

If you only read three chapters: It has five. Read 1, 3 and 5.

Words to Know

Lament — a poem of grief, often sung at funerals.

Acrostic — a poem in which each verse begins with the next letter of the alphabet. Four of these five poems are built that way.

Daughter of Zion — a name for Jerusalem, pictured as a grieving woman.

The Book in Brief

Lamentations is a book of five poems, one in each chapter, grieving the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. It tells no story. Several voices speak in turn, and four of the five poems are acrostics.

In chapter 1, Jerusalem is a widow sitting alone, weeping in the night, with no one to comfort her. She asks God to look at her misery and admits that she

rebelled. Chapter 2 is the angriest. The poet says God himself has torn down the city and its Temple, and he describes children fainting from hunger in the streets.

In chapter 3, one man speaks for himself. He has been shut in darkness and struck down by God's anger. Then he remembers God's mercy, new every morning, and urges everyone to wait quietly, to examine their ways and to turn back to God. Then he cries out against his enemies.

Chapter 4 looks back at the siege: starving children, and women who have boiled their own children for food. It blames the sins of prophets and priests, and ends by saying that Zion's punishment is over and Edom's is coming.

Chapter 5 is a prayer in the people's own voice. They list what they have lost: their land, their fathers, their freedom, with foxes walking on Mount Zion. They ask God to bring them back, and the book ends with the fear that he has rejected them for good.

My scriptures include a book of grief with no easy answer at the end.

When Jerusalem fell to Babylon, the city was starved for months, broken open, looted and burned. The Temple was destroyed. The king was blinded. Thousands were killed or marched into exile.

Somebody sat in the ruins and wrote five poems.

How the city sits solitary, that was full of people! She has become as a widow, who was great among the nations! (Lamentations 1:1).

The alphabet of grief

Four of the five poems are **acrostics**. Each verse begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet, from the first letter to the last. The third poem goes through the alphabet once, but gives each letter three verses in a row.[1]

Why write grief in such a strict form? Perhaps because when everything has fallen apart, a pattern is something to hold on to. Perhaps because the poet wanted to say everything, from A to Z, and leave nothing out.

The fifth poem has twenty-two lines, the number of letters in the alphabet, but it does not follow the letters. At the very end, the pattern breaks.

What the poet saw

The poet does not look away.

The tongue of the nursing child clings to the roof of his mouth for thirst. The young children ask bread, and no one breaks it for them (Lamentations 4:4).

The hands of the pitiful women have boiled their own children. They were their food in the destruction of the daughter of my people (Lamentations 4:10).

That is what a siege does. The poet tells you so you will not pretend war is anything else.

Great is your faithfulness

In the middle of the book, in the middle of the third poem, there is a turn.

It is because of the LORD's loving kindnesses that we are not consumed, because his compassion doesn't fail. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness (Lamentations 3:22–23).

You may know that from a hymn. It is lovely in a church. Now think of it where it was written: in a burned city, among starving children, by a man who had just said that God had *walled me about, so that I can't go out* (Lamentations 3:7).

He did not say it because things were fine. He said it in the ashes.

No answer

The book does not end with the turn. It ends with a plea, and then a bitter word.

Turn us to yourself, LORD, and we will be turned. Renew our days as of old. But you have utterly rejected us. You are very angry against us (Lamentations 5:21–22).

The book ends on those words, and leaves them hanging.

When my people read Lamentations aloud in the synagogue, they repeat the second-to-last verse after the last one, so as not to end on rejection.[2] But the book itself ends there. My scriptures allowed a book to end without being sure.

The day of mourning

My people read Lamentations on **the ninth of Av**, the summer fast day that mourns the destruction of the Temple.[3] In time, that day came to mourn the second Temple too, the one I walked in, which the Romans burned in the year 70.

What I saw

As I came down the Mount of Olives toward Jerusalem for the last time, I saw the city and wept over it. *If you, even you, had known today the things which belong to your peace! ... The days will come on you, when your enemies will throw up a barricade against you ... and will dash you and your children within you to the ground. They will not leave in you one stone on another* (Luke 19:41–44).

I was looking at the city and seeing what this book saw. It had happened once. I knew it would happen again.

On the way to the cross, women followed me, weeping. I turned and said, *Daughters of Jerusalem, don't weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children* (Luke 23:28).

Lamentations taught my people that there is a time to weep for a city, and to say so to God, out loud, letter by letter, without pretending to understand.

> Check It Yourself
>
> **Look up:** Lamentations 3:19–24.
>
> **You will find:** "great is your faithfulness," written in the middle of a destroyed city.
>
> **Then read Lamentations 5:19–22.** See how the book ends.
>
> **Go deeper:** the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/lamentations**.

The Short Version

- Lamentations is **five poems of grief** for Jerusalem, written after the **Babylonians burned it in 586 BC**.
- Four are **alphabet poems**, A to Z of grief. The last one **breaks the pattern**.
- **"Great is your faithfulness"** was written **in the ruins**, not in good times.
- The book **ends with "you have utterly rejected us"**, and doesn't settle it.
- I **wept over Jerusalem** and foresaw it destroyed again, as this book had seen it the first time.

26. Ezekiel: Son of Man

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Ezekiel son of Buzi, a priest taken to Babylon in the first deportation of 597 BC. The book is mostly his, arranged and expanded by his followers.

When: His dated prophecies run from 593 to 571 BC. Some of my people's teachers were uneasy with the book, because its rules for a future Temple clash with the Law of Moses.

Where it fits: Ezekiel prophesied among the exiles in Babylon. He was taken there in 597 BC, before Jerusalem fell in 586 BC (2 Kings 24:10–25:21), and the book follows him through the fall and beyond.

Where I quote it: Not directly. But God calls Ezekiel *son of man* over ninety times, the phrase I used most for myself. My picture of the good shepherd who seeks the lost is Ezekiel's (Ezekiel 34; Luke 19:10; John 10:11).

If you only read three chapters: Ezekiel 1, Ezekiel 34 and Ezekiel 37.

Words to Know

Son of man — in Hebrew *ben adam*, literally *son of Adam*, meaning a human being. Your Bible may translate it *mortal*.

Glory — in Hebrew *kavod*, the visible, blazing presence of God.

Sign-act — a prophecy acted out instead of spoken, like a piece of street theater.

Gog of Magog — the mysterious invader in chapters 38 and 39, a favorite of end-times preachers.

The Book in Brief

Ezekiel is a priest. He was taken to Babylon in 597 BC with the first group of exiles from Judah, and he speaks to them there. Most of the book is in his own voice, and many of its messages are dated.

Chapters 1 to 3 tell how he is called. By the Chebar canal the heavens open. He sees a storm cloud, four winged living creatures, great wheels with rims full of eyes, and a throne with a figure like a man on it. God gives him a scroll to eat, calls him son of man, and makes him a watchman who must warn a rebellious people. He is also struck silent, able to speak only when God gives him a message.

Chapters 4 to 24 are warnings that Jerusalem will fall. Ezekiel acts them out. He lies beside a model of the besieged city, eats siege rations, and shaves his head. In a vision he is carried to the Temple in Jerusalem, where he sees idols and false worship, and he watches the glory of God leave. He tells stories of an unfaithful wife and two wicked sisters, rejects the saying that children pay for their parents' sins, and condemns the city's leaders and false prophets. In chapter 24 the siege begins, and Ezekiel's wife dies. He is told not to mourn her in public.

Chapters 25 to 32 are messages against the nations around Judah, among them Ammon, Edom, Tyre and Egypt.

Chapters 33 to 39 turn to hope. A survivor from Jerusalem arrives with the news that the city has fallen, and Ezekiel can speak freely again. God condemns the selfish shepherds of Israel and promises to be the shepherd himself. The people are promised a new heart and a new spirit. In a valley of dry bones, Ezekiel watches the bones come together and live as an army. Two sticks joined in his hand picture Israel and Judah made one nation again. Chapters 38 and 39 describe an attack on Israel by Gog, from the land of Magog, who is defeated.

Chapters 40 to 48 are the last vision, dated twenty-five years into the exile. Ezekiel is taken to a high mountain and shown a new Temple, measured out room by room. God's glory returns to it by the east gate. A river flows from beneath its threshold, grows deeper as it goes, and heals the sea it flows into. The land is divided among the tribes, and the book ends with a new name for the city, which says that the LORD is there.

God called him "son of man," and so did I.

In this book, God never addresses Ezekiel by his name. God calls him *ben adam*, *son of man*, over and over, more than ninety times.[1] It simply means *human being*. Your modern Bible may translate it *mortal*. It is a reminder of how small the prophet is beside the glory he sees.

The Son of Man was the phrase I used most often for myself. People still argue about what I meant by it. In Ezekiel it means a frail human being. In the book of Daniel, it means a heavenly figure *like a son of man* who comes with the clouds and is given a kingdom (Daniel 7:13–14). I used it both ways. I said the Son of Man had nowhere to lay his head (Luke 9:58), and I said the Son of Man would come with the clouds (Mark 14:62). Both meanings were in my scriptures.

Wheels within wheels

Ezekiel's book opens in Babylon, by a canal called the Chebar, among the exiles. The heavens open, and he sees a storm cloud with fire flashing, four living creatures with four faces and four wings, wheels gleaming, *as it were a wheel within a wheel*, their rims full of eyes, and above them a throne, and on the throne *a likeness as the appearance of a man* (Ezekiel 1:4–26).

Ezekiel can barely describe it. He keeps saying *as it were* and *the appearance of the likeness of*.

The important thing is where he saw it. Not in the Temple in Jerusalem. In Babylon, among the exiles. The God of Israel was not stuck in a building. God went with the exiles.

In the 1960s and 70s, writers claimed that Ezekiel had seen a spaceship. One of them was a NASA engineer who drew up plans for it.[2] It made a good paperback. It is not what Ezekiel was describing. He was trying to say that God's glory was bigger than anything he had words for, and that it had come to the people in exile.

The vision frightened my people's teachers. They ruled that this chapter should not be taught to just anyone.[3]

Street theater

Ezekiel acts out his prophecies.

He builds a model of Jerusalem under siege out of a brick and lies beside it on his left side for 390 days and on his right side for forty (Ezekiel 4:1–6). He eats siege rations, measured by weight, cooked over dung. He shaves his head and

beard, and burns a third of the hair, strikes a third with a sword and scatters a third to the wind (Ezekiel 5:1–2).

When his wife dies, *the desire of your eyes*, God tells him not to mourn in public, as a sign of the grief that will be too great for mourning when Jerusalem falls (Ezekiel 24:15–24).

I did sign-acts too. I rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. I overturned tables. I cursed a fig tree. I broke bread and said it was my body. My people knew how to read a prophet who acted things out.

The glory leaves

In chapters 8 to 11, Ezekiel is carried in a vision to the Temple in Jerusalem. He sees idols in its walls and women weeping for a foreign god at its gate. And he sees the glory of God rise from the Temple and leave.

It goes out the east gate and stops on *the mountain which is on the east side of the city* (Ezekiel 11:23).

That is the Mount of Olives. In Ezekiel's vision, God's glory left the Temple and waited on that hill. I wept over the city from that hill, and I prayed there on my last night, and I was arrested there.

The sin of Sodom

Ezekiel 16 is hard to read. It pictures Jerusalem as an unfaithful wife, in language so graphic and violent that many readers today are disturbed by it, and should be.[4]

But in the middle of it is a verse you need to know. Jerusalem is compared to her sister Sodom:

Behold, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: pride, fullness of bread, and prosperous ease was in her and in her daughters. She also didn't strengthen the hand of the poor and needy (Ezekiel 16:49).

Pride, too much food, comfort, and no help for the poor. That was a prophet's summary of the sin of Sodom.

Sour grapes

My people had a proverb. *The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.* It meant: we are suffering for our parents' sins.

Ezekiel says God has had enough of that proverb. *The soul who sins, he shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father* (Ezekiel 18:2–4, 20).

Then he describes a righteous man: he does not oppress anyone, he gives back the pledge a debtor gave him, he does not rob, he *has given his bread to the hungry, and has covered the naked with a garment*, and he does not take interest (Ezekiel 18:7–8).

And then the heart of it: *Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked?* says the Lord GOD; *and not rather that he should return from his way, and live? ... Therefore turn yourselves, and live!* (Ezekiel 18:23, 32).

The shepherds who fed themselves

Ezekiel 34 is the chapter I lived by.

Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Shouldn't the shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat. You clothe yourself with the wool. You kill the fatlings, but you don't feed the sheep. You haven't strengthened the diseased. You haven't healed that which was sick. You haven't bound up that which was broken. You haven't brought back that which was driven away. You haven't sought that which was lost (Ezekiel 34:2–4).

The shepherds are the kings and the rulers. They fed on the flock.

So God says, *I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep ... I will seek that which was lost, and will bring back that which was driven away, and will bind up that which was broken, and will strengthen that which was sick* (Ezekiel 34:15–16).

Then God says something more. *Behold, I, even I, will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep*, he tells the fat ones, *because you thrust with side and with shoulder, and push all the diseased with your horns, until you have scattered them abroad* (Ezekiel 34:20–21).

When I said that *the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost* (Luke 19:10), I was saying Ezekiel 34. When I told the story of the shepherd who leaves ninety-nine sheep to find one, I was saying Ezekiel 34. When John remembers me saying, *I am the good shepherd* (John 10:11), I was claiming the job God had taken back from the kings. And when I spoke of the Son of Man separating the sheep from the goats, by what they had done for the hungry and the sick (Matthew 25:31–46), I was standing in that chapter.

A heart of flesh

I will also give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit within you. I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26).

It is close to Jeremiah's new covenant. A law written on the heart. A heart that can feel.

Can these bones live?

Then **Ezekiel 37**. The prophet is set down in a valley full of dry bones. God asks him, *Son of man, can these bones live?* He answers, *Lord GOD, you know.*

He prophesies, and the bones rattle together, and sinews and flesh come on them. But there is no breath in them. So he prophesies to the breath, the wind, the spirit, all one word in Hebrew, *ruach*. And the breath comes into them, and they live and stand on their feet, *an exceedingly great army* (Ezekiel 37:1–10).

Then God tells him what the bones are. *These bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost. We are completely cut off"* (Ezekiel 37:11).

It is a vision about a nation in exile that had given up. God would bring them home. Black churches in America have sung about these bones for generations, and I understand why.

Gog of Magog

Chapters 38 and 39 describe an invasion by **Gog, of the land of Magog**, who comes from the far north with a great army and is destroyed on the mountains

of Israel.

This is a favorite of people with end-times charts. They have claimed that one of the names in it, *Rosh*, means Russia, and that *Meshech* is Moscow. In the Hebrew, *rosh* most likely just means *chief*, making Gog the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal (Ezekiel 38:2), and Meshech and Tubal were peoples in what is now Turkey.[5] The book of Revelation borrowed Gog and Magog for its own vision (Revelation 20:8).

The river from the Temple

Ezekiel ends with a vision of a new Temple, measured out in detail over nine chapters. Then water starts trickling out from under its threshold, flowing east.

It gets deeper as it goes, ankle-deep, knee-deep, waist-deep, then a river too deep to cross. It flows down into the Dead Sea and makes its water fresh. Fishermen spread their nets along the shore. On both banks grow trees whose fruit never fails, each with *its leaf for healing* (Ezekiel 47:1–12).

Revelation took that river and those trees for the last page of the Bible (Revelation 22:1–2). And John remembers me standing up at a festival and saying, *He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, from within him will flow rivers of living water* (John 7:38). No single verse says exactly that. Ezekiel's river is one of the likeliest sources.[6]

The last words of the book are the new name of the city: *The LORD is there* (Ezekiel 48:35).

> **Check It Yourself**
>
> **Look up:** Ezekiel 34:1–16, then Luke 15:3–7 and Luke 19:10.
>
> **You will find:** the shepherds who fed themselves, the God who seeks the lost, and my stories built on it.
>
> **Then read Ezekiel 16:49.** See how a prophet summed up the sin of Sodom.
>
> **Go deeper:** the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/ezekiel**.

The Short Version

- God calls Ezekiel **"son of man,"** meaning a **human being**. I used that phrase most often for myself.
- He saw **God's glory in Babylon**, among the exiles, and saw it **leave the Temple** for the **Mount of Olives**.
- He said **Sodom's sin** was **pride, excess and failing the poor**, and that **children do not pay for their parents' sins**.
- **Ezekiel 34**, the **shepherds who fed themselves** and the God who **seeks the lost**, is the chapter I lived by.
- **Gog and Magog** is not about Russia. Ezekiel's **river of healing** became the last page of Revelation.

27. Daniel: The Last Thing I Said to the Council

At a Glance

Who wrote it: The stories in chapters 1 to 6 are older tales about a Jew at the courts of Babylon and Persia. The visions in chapters 7 to 12 were written by an unknown writer during the persecution under the Greek king Antiochus IV.

When: It is set from the late 600s to the 530s BC. Most scholars date its final form to about 165 BC, which makes it the latest book of the Hebrew Bible. In my day people called Daniel a prophet (Matthew 24:15), though later Jewish Bibles place his book among the Writings.

Where it fits: Set in the exile told at the end of 2 Kings, in Babylon and then Persia, from the late 600s to the 530s BC. Written about 165 BC, during the persecution under Antiochus IV (1 Maccabees 1).

Where I quote it: The Son of Man coming with the clouds, at my trial (Mark 14:62; Daniel 7:13). "The abomination of desolation" (Mark 13:14; Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11).

If you only read three chapters: Daniel 3, Daniel 7 and Daniel 12.

Words to Know

Apocalyptic — a kind of writing that reveals hidden things through visions, beasts and numbers, usually written to people suffering under an empire.

Antiochus IV Epiphanes — the Greek king of Syria who tried to stamp out the Jewish religion in 167 BC.

Abomination of desolation — the pagan altar Antiochus set up in the Temple. Your Bible may say *desolating sacrilege*.

Son of man — in Daniel's Aramaic, *bar enash*, a human figure in a vision, given an everlasting kingdom.

Resurrection — the rising of the dead. Daniel 12 is its clearest promise in the Hebrew scriptures.

The Book in Brief

Daniel is written in two languages. From the middle of chapter 2 to the end of chapter 7 it is in Aramaic. The rest is in Hebrew. It also falls into two halves.

Chapters 1 to 6 are stories about Daniel and his three friends, young Jews taken from Jerusalem to Babylon and trained to serve the king. They refuse the king's rich food and stay healthy on vegetables and water. In chapter 2 Nebuchadnezzar dreams of a statue of gold, silver, bronze, and iron mixed with clay, and Daniel tells him what it means. In chapter 3 the three friends refuse to worship a golden statue and are thrown into a furnace, and they come out alive. In chapter 4 the king is struck down and lives like an animal until he honors God. In chapter 5 King Belshazzar holds a feast, a hand writes on the wall, and Babylon falls that night. In chapter 6, under King Darius, Daniel keeps praying to God in spite of a ban and is thrown to the lions, who do not touch him.

Chapters 7 to 12 are visions that Daniel tells in the first person. In chapter 7 four beasts rise from the sea, and then one like a son of man is given an everlasting kingdom. Chapter 8 shows a ram and a goat in battle, and a small horn that desecrates the Temple. In chapter 9 Daniel reads that Jerusalem's ruin will last seventy years and prays for his people, and the angel Gabriel tells him of seventy weeks set for them. Chapters 10 to 12 are one long vision, in which an angel foretells the wars of a king of the north and a king of the south, and a ruler who sets up an abomination in the Temple. The book ends with a time of great

> trouble, the dead waking, some to everlasting life and some to shame, and Daniel told to seal up the book.

When the high priest asked me who I was, I answered him with Daniel.

At my trial, the high priest asked me directly: *Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?*

I said, *I am. You will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of the sky* (Mark 14:61–62).

The first half of that was from Psalm 110. The second half was from Daniel 7. The high priest tore his clothes. That was the end of the trial.

So this book was in my mouth at the most dangerous moment of my life. Here is what it is.

When it was written

Daniel is set in Babylon from the late 600s to the 530s BC. A young Jewish exile named Daniel serves at the courts of Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Darius and Cyrus, and receives visions of the future.

Most scholars think the book reached its final form around 165 BC, nearly four hundred years later. Here is why.

Daniel 11 describes the wars between the Greek kings of Syria and Egypt in remarkable detail, battle by battle, marriage by marriage, up to the persecution by **Antiochus IV** in 167 BC. Then, at verse 40, it predicts how Antiochus will die: in the land of Israel, *between the sea and the glorious holy mountain* (Daniel 11:45). In fact, he died in Persia, in 164 BC.[1]

The book is precise about everything up to about 165 BC and wrong about what happened next. That is how you can tell when a book like this was written.

The stories also get the 500s wrong. Daniel calls Belshazzar the son of Nebuchadnezzar and the king of Babylon. Babylonian records show that Belshazzar was the son of a later king, Nabonidus, and ruled for his father but

was never king himself. And *Darius the Mede*, who takes Babylon in Daniel 5:31, is unknown to history. Babylon fell to Cyrus the Persian.[2]

Some scholars defend the traditional date. But a pagan philosopher named Porphyry made this argument about Daniel 11 in the 200s AD, and most modern scholars agree with him.[1]

None of this makes Daniel less important. It tells you who the book was for. It was written for people being tortured for their faith, to tell them that the empire would not last.

But if not

The stories in the first half are about refusing to bow.

In **Daniel 3**, King Nebuchadnezzar sets up a golden statue ninety feet high and orders everyone to fall down and worship it when the music plays. Three young Jews, **Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego**, refuse. The king threatens to throw them into a blazing furnace.

Their answer is one of the bravest things in the scriptures:

If it happens, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace; and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up (Daniel 3:17–18).

But if not. They did not know whether God would save them. They refused anyway.

They are thrown in, and the king looks into the fire and sees four men walking, unharmed, and *the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods* (Daniel 3:25).

Mercy to the poor

In **Daniel 4**, Nebuchadnezzar dreams of a great tree cut down. Daniel interprets it: the king will be driven out to live like an animal until he learns who really rules. Then Daniel gives the most powerful man in the world some advice:

Break off your sins by righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor. Perhaps there may be a lengthening of your tranquility (Daniel 4:27).

The prophet tells the emperor that the way to make up for his sins is to show mercy to the poor. The emperor does not listen, and ends up eating grass like an ox.

Weighed and found wanting

In **Daniel 5**, King Belshazzar throws a feast and drinks from the gold cups looted from the Temple in Jerusalem. A hand appears and writes on the wall: *MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN*.

Daniel reads it. *You are weighed in the balances, and are found wanting* (Daniel 5:25–27). That night, the kingdom falls.

The lions

In **Daniel 6**, the king's officials trick him into signing a law that no one may pray to anyone but the king for thirty days. Daniel goes home, opens his windows toward Jerusalem and prays three times a day, as he always had (Daniel 6:10). He is thrown to the lions, and the lions do not touch him.

The stone

In **Daniel 2**, Nebuchadnezzar dreams of a huge statue: a head of gold, chest of silver, belly of bronze, legs of iron and feet of iron mixed with clay. Then *a stone was cut out without hands*, and it struck the statue on its feet and smashed it. The stone became a mountain that filled the whole earth (Daniel 2:31–35).

The metals are four empires, one after another. The stone is a kingdom that God sets up, which will never be destroyed (Daniel 2:44–45).

When I quoted *the stone which the builders rejected* in the Temple, Luke remembers me adding, *Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but it will crush whomever it falls on to dust* (Luke 20:18). That is Daniel's stone, rolled together with the Psalm.

One like a son of man

Daniel 7 is the vision I quoted at my trial.

Four beasts rise from the sea, each more terrible than the last. The fourth has iron teeth and ten horns, and a little horn that speaks arrogantly. Then thrones are set, and the **Ancient of Days** takes his seat, with hair like wool and a throne of fire. The beast is killed.

And then:

I saw in the night visions, and behold, there came with the clouds of the sky one like a son of man, and he came even to the ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. Dominion was given him, and glory, and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and languages should serve him (Daniel 7:13–14).

In Aramaic, *one like a son of man* means one like a human being. After a parade of beasts, which are empires, comes a human figure, and the kingdom is given to him.

Who is he? Later in the chapter, the kingdom is given to *the people of the saints of the Most High* (Daniel 7:27). Many readers take the human figure to stand for the faithful people as a whole. Others think he is their heavenly champion, the angel Michael.[3] By my time, many people read him as a single figure to come.

At my trial, I claimed that figure. The beasts were the empires. I was saying that the human one would outlast them.

The abomination of desolation

In 167 BC, **Antiochus IV** outlawed the Jewish religion. He banned circumcision and the Sabbath, burned scrolls of the Law, and set up a pagan altar in the Temple in Jerusalem, where pigs were sacrificed (1 Maccabees 1:41–64; Josephus, *Antiquities* 12.253).

The book of Daniel calls that altar *the abomination that makes desolate* (Daniel 11:31; 12:11). It was the worst thing my people could imagine.

The Maccabees fought back with swords and won. They cleansed the Temple in 164 BC, and that is what the festival of Hanukkah remembers. Daniel speaks of

a little help for the faithful (Daniel 11:34), but the heroes of Daniel are not soldiers. They are the wise, who teach and suffer and die without bowing.

When I sat on the Mount of Olives and spoke about the Temple's future, I said, *When you see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing where it ought not*, then let those in Judea flee to the mountains. And Mark added, in his own voice, *let the reader understand* (Mark 13:14). Mark was writing around the time the Romans were besieging Jerusalem. His readers did understand.

The seventy weeks

Daniel 9 reinterprets Jeremiah's seventy years of exile as *seventy weeks* of years, 490 years, with *the Anointed One* cut off near the end (Daniel 9:24–27). Many scholars think that anointed one was the high priest Onias III, murdered in 171 BC.[4]

Few passages in the Bible have fed more date-setting. Christians have used Daniel's numbers, these weeks among them, to land on my death, on the year 1844 and much else. Isaac Newton, the greatest scientist of his age, spent years on Daniel and wrote a book about its prophecies. In his private papers he reckoned that Daniel's 1,260 prophetic days would not run out before the year 2060.[5]

When my friends asked me for a date, I told them no one knows the day or the hour, not even me (Mark 13:32).

Those who sleep in the dust

The book ends with the clearest promise of resurrection in the Hebrew scriptures.

Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine as the brightness of the expanse (Daniel 12:2–3).

It was written for people who were being killed for keeping the Law. What about them? Would they just be gone? Daniel says no. They will wake.

In my day, the Pharisees believed this and the Sadducees did not. I sided with the Pharisees on it. And I said, *Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father* (Matthew 13:43).

Your Catholic or Orthodox Bible has more of Daniel than a Protestant one: a prayer and a hymn sung in the furnace, and two more stories, *Susanna* and *Bel and the Dragon*. They come from the Greek translation.[6]

Check It Yourself

Look up: Daniel 7:13–14, then Mark 14:61–64.

You will find: the vision of one like a son of man, and my use of it at my trial.

Then read Daniel 3:16–18. Find the words *but if not*.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/daniel**.

The Short Version

- Daniel is set in the **late 600s and 500s BC** but most scholars date it to **about 165 BC**, during **Antiochus IV's persecution**. It is accurate up to then and wrong about Antiochus's death.
- Its stories are about **refusing to bow**: **"But if not, ... we will not serve your gods."**
- Daniel told the emperor to **break off his sins by showing mercy to the poor**.
- At my trial I claimed the **one like a son of man coming with the clouds**, who outlasts the beasts.
- Daniel 12 is the clearest promise of **resurrection** in the Hebrew scriptures, written for martyrs.

PART FIVE — THE TWELVE

In my day, the twelve short prophets from Hosea to Malachi were written together on a single scroll, called simply the Twelve. Your Bible calls them the Minor Prophets. They are minor only in length. They span about three hundred years, from Amos and Hosea in the 700s BC to Malachi after the return from exile, and they are not printed in the order in which they lived. Each chapter's At a Glance box tells you where its prophet fits.

28. Hosea: Mercy, Not Sacrifice

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Hosea son of Beeri, a prophet in the northern kingdom of Israel. His words were later collected and edited in Judah.

When: About 750 to 725 BC, in the last years before Assyria destroyed the north.

Where it fits: Hosea preached in the northern kingdom in its last decades, from the end of Jeroboam II's reign (2 Kings 14:23–29) through the short, violent reigns after it (2 Kings 15), until Assyria destroyed it in 722 BC.

Where I quote it: "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice," twice (Matthew 9:13; 12:7; Hosea 6:6). "Cover us," on the road to the cross (Luke 23:30; Hosea 10:8). Matthew applies "out of Egypt I called my son" to me (Matthew 2:15; Hosea 11:1).

If you only read three chapters: Hosea 2, Hosea 6 and Hosea 11.

Words to Know

Mercy — in Hebrew *hesed*, loyal love that keeps faith. The Greek translation, which Matthew quotes, renders it *mercy*.

Baal — the Canaanite storm god. The word also means *master*, *owner* or *husband*.

Ephraim — the leading northern tribe, and Hosea's name for the northern kingdom.

Jezreel — a valley and a town in the north where a king's dynasty was founded with a massacre.

The Book in Brief

Hosea is a book, mostly of poetry, from a prophet of the northern kingdom of Israel, which the book also calls Ephraim. It speaks to the north, with some words for Judah. It falls into two parts.

Chapters 1 to 3 tell of Hosea's marriage. God tells him to marry a woman of prostitution, and he marries Gomer. They have three children, and God gives

each a name that is a message: Jezreel, Lo-Ruhamah, which means not shown mercy, and Lo-Ammi, which means not my people. In chapter 2, God accuses Israel of being an unfaithful wife who ran after other lovers. God threatens her, then promises to win her back and betroth her to himself forever, and the children's names are turned around. In chapter 3, Hosea is told to love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress. He buys her for silver and barley and tells her to stay with him many days.

Chapters 4 to 14 are a collection of messages. God brings a charge against the people: no faithfulness, no kindness and no knowledge of God in the land, with lying, murder and stealing, and priests who lead the people astray. The prophet condemns the worship of Baal, the calf idol of Samaria, the kings who rise and fall by plots, and the leaders who run to Egypt and Assyria for help instead of to God. Judgment is coming, and Assyria will take the people into exile. Chapter 11 pictures God as a father who taught a child to walk and cannot give him up. Chapter 12 looks back to Jacob. The book ends in chapter 14 with a call to return to the LORD and a promise to heal the people.

I told the Pharisees to go and learn what one line of this book means.

The Pharisees saw me eating with tax collectors and sinners, and they asked my friends why I did it.

I answered them: *Those who are healthy have no need for a physician, but those who are sick do. But you go and learn what this means: "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice," for I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance* (Matthew 9:12–13).

Later, when they attacked my friends for picking grain on the Sabbath, I said it again: *If you had known what this means, "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice," you wouldn't have condemned the guiltless* (Matthew 12:7).

That line is Hosea 6:6. *For I desire mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.* Of everything in this book, it is the line I told people to go and study.

The prophet's marriage

Hosea's book begins with a command that has disturbed readers ever since. God tells him to marry *a wife of prostitution* (Hosea 1:2). He marries a woman named **Gomer**, and she is unfaithful to him.

The marriage becomes the message. Israel is the unfaithful wife. God is the husband who keeps loving her.

Their children are given names that are prophecies. The first son is **Jezreel**. A daughter is *Lo-Ruhamah*, *not shown mercy*. Another son is *Lo-Ammi*, *not my people* (Hosea 1:4–9).

Then the names are turned around. *I will have mercy on her who had not obtained mercy; and I will tell those who were not my people, "You are my people;' and they will say, "My God!"* (Hosea 2:23). My follower Paul used this verse to say that people who were once outsiders had become God's people (Romans 9:25–26).

You should know that this marriage picture also contains words that are hard to read. In chapter 2, the husband threatens to strip his wife naked and shame her. Many readers today are troubled by a picture of God's love that includes that, and they are right to be troubled.[1]

A prophet who argued with the history books

The name of Hosea's first son, **Jezreel**, points to a massacre. In 2 Kings, a commander named Jehu seized the throne of Israel by killing the king, the queen mother and the whole royal family, and piling the heads of seventy princes at the gate of Jezreel. The book of Kings says God praised him for it (2 Kings 10:30).

Hosea says the opposite. God says, *I will avenge the blood of Jezreel on the house of Jehu* (Hosea 1:4).

So one book of my scriptures praises a bloodbath, and another book says God will punish it. The prophets were allowed to argue with the history books, and both were kept.

No knowledge of God in the land

Hosea's charge against Israel is not only that they worshiped Baal. It is how they lived.

There is no truth, nor goodness, nor knowledge of God in the land. There is cursing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery; they break boundaries, and bloodshed causes bloodshed. Therefore the land will mourn, and everyone who dwells in it will waste away, with all living things in her, even the animals of the field and the birds of the sky, yes, the fish of the sea also die (Hosea 4:1–3).

When people stop keeping faith with each other, even the land and the animals suffer. Hosea saw that the earth itself pays for what people do.

My husband, not my master

There is a pun in Hosea 2 that you lose in translation. The word *baal* means *master*, *owner*, and also *husband*. A wife called her husband *my baal*.

God says that one day, *you will call me "my husband," and no longer call me "my master"* (Hosea 2:16). The Hebrew for *my master* there is *baali*, *my baal*. The Hebrew for *my husband* is *ishi*, a word that means *my man*, without the sense of an owner.

God does not want to be Israel's owner. God wants to be loved.

And in the same chapter God promises a covenant *with the animals of the field, and with the birds of the sky, and with the creeping things of the ground*, and to *break the bow, the sword, and the battle out of the land* (Hosea 2:18).

Out of Egypt

Hosea 11 opens with God remembering Israel as a little child.

When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt. They called to them, so they went from them (Hosea 11:1–2). God taught Ephraim to walk, took them up in his arms, lifted them like an infant to his cheek, and bent down to feed them.

Matthew tells how my family fled to Egypt from Herod and came back, and he says it fulfilled *out of Egypt I called my son* (Matthew 2:15). In Hosea, the son is Israel, and the very next verse says the son ran away. Matthew saw my life as Israel's story lived again. You should know what the verse meant first.

How can I give you up?

Then comes the most moving passage in the prophets.

God has every reason to destroy Ephraim. And God cannot do it.

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? … My heart is turned within me, my compassion is aroused. I will not execute the fierceness of my anger. I will not return to destroy Ephraim: for I am God, and not man; the Holy One among you; and I will not come in wrath (Hosea 11:8–9).

Notice the reason. *For I am God, and not man.* A human being would take revenge. God will not, because God is holy. In Hosea, God's holiness is the reason for mercy, not the reason for anger.

Cover us

Hosea also saw the destruction coming. Assyria would sweep through, and the people would beg the earth to hide them: *They will tell the mountains, "Cover us!" and the hills, "Fall on us!"* (Hosea 10:8).

On the road to the cross, women followed me weeping. I turned and told them not to weep for me but for themselves and their children, because days were coming when people *will begin to tell the mountains, "Fall on us!" and tell the hills, "Cover us"* (Luke 23:30). Hosea's words were what I had to give them.

> Check It Yourself
>
> **Look up:** Hosea 6:6, then Matthew 9:10–13 and Matthew 12:1–8.
>
> **You will find:** the line I told the Pharisees to go and learn, used twice.
>
> **Then read Hosea 11:1–9.** See why God will not destroy Ephraim.
>
> **Go deeper:** the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/hosea**.

The Short Version

- Hosea preached in the **northern kingdom** before Assyria destroyed it.
- His **marriage to an unfaithful wife** became a picture of **God's faithful love**. Parts of that picture are hard to read.
- He **condemned a massacre** that the book of Kings praised.
- **"I desire mercy, and not sacrifice"** is the line I told the Pharisees to **go and learn**.
- God says, **"How can I give you up?"** and refuses to destroy, **because God is God, and not man**.

29. Joel: Your Sons and Your Daughters

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Joel son of Pethuel. Nothing else is known about him.

When: Unknown. Guesses range from the 800s to the 300s BC. Many scholars place it after the exile.

Where it fits: Joel names no king, so the history books cannot place him. If, as many scholars think, he wrote after the exile, he belongs with Ezra and Nehemiah, when the rebuilt Temple was in use again (Ezra 6:15–18).

Where I quote it: Never directly. Peter quoted it at Pentecost, about fifty days after I died (Acts 2:17–21).

If you only read three chapters: It has only three. Read all of it.

Words to Know

Locusts — grasshoppers that swarm in the millions and strip every green thing.

Day of the LORD — the coming day when God acts to judge and to set things right.

Spirit — God's breath and power, poured out like water.

The Book in Brief

Joel is a short poem in three chapters. The book names the prophet only as the son of Pethuel. He speaks to the priests, the elders and everyone in the land.

Chapter 1 describes a plague of locusts that strips the fields bare, followed by drought. Joel calls the priests, the elders and all the people to fast and cry out to God, because the disaster is a sign that the day of the LORD is near.

In chapter 2 Joel describes a vast army, like the locusts, advancing on the city. He calls everyone to come back to God with all their heart. God answers with pity and promises to restore the harvest. Then God promises to pour out his Spirit on

all people, sons and daughters, old men and young men, servants and handmaids. Signs will appear in the sky, and all who call on the LORD's name will be saved.

Chapter 3 is a vision of God gathering the nations in the valley of Jehoshaphat to judge them for what they did to his people. It ends with Judah restored, a spring flowing from the LORD's house, and the LORD living in Zion.

A plague of locusts, and then a promise for servants.

Joel begins with a disaster you can still see in parts of the world. Locusts come, wave after wave, and eat everything. *What the swarming locust has left, the great locust has eaten. What the great locust has left, the grasshopper has eaten* (Joel 1:4). Then drought. The grain offerings stop because there is no grain.

Joel sees the locusts as an army, and the army as a warning of the **day of the LORD**.

Tear your heart

Then he calls the people back, and he gives them a line many churches read every year on Ash Wednesday:

Yet even now, says the LORD, *turn to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning. Tear your heart, and not your garments, and turn to the LORD, your God; for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abundant in loving kindness* (Joel 2:12–13).

Tearing your clothes was how my people showed grief. Joel says God does not want the gesture. God wants the heart. And the reason to come back is the description of God that God gave Moses in Exodus: *a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger, and abundant in loving kindness and truth* (Exodus 34:6).

All flesh

Then comes the passage this book is known for.

I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; and your sons and your daughters will prophesy. Your old men will dream dreams. Your young men will see visions. And

also on the servants and on the handmaids in those days, I will pour out my Spirit (Joel 2:28–29).

Look at who is on that list. Daughters. Old men. And servants, male and female. In a world where prophecy usually belonged to a few men, Joel said God's spirit would fall on everyone, starting with the people at the bottom.

About fifty days after I died, my friends were gathered in Jerusalem at the festival of Pentecost, and something happened to them that they could only describe as wind and fire. Peter stood up and explained it with Joel: *This is what has been spoken through the prophet Joel* (Acts 2:16–18). The servants were included in his quotation, though in Acts they became God's own: *on my servants and on my handmaidens* (Acts 2:18).

Swords, again

Joel has one line that turns another prophet upside down.

Isaiah and Micah both promised that the nations would *beat their swords into plowshares* (Isaiah 2:4; Micah 4:3). Joel, calling the nations to a final battle, says: *Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears* (Joel 3:10).

Same words, reversed. My scriptures held both. There are times people are called to war and times they are called to peace, and the prophets did not always agree about which time it was. I knew which one I was preaching.

The moon turned into blood

Joel also says that before the great day, *the sun will be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood* (Joel 2:31).

When I spoke on the Mount of Olives about the end of the Temple, I used pictures like these, drawn from Isaiah and Joel: the sun darkened, the moon not giving its light, the stars falling (Mark 13:24–25). They were the language prophets used for the fall of empires.

In 2014 and 2015, a series of total lunar eclipses made the moon look red four times, and a popular preacher sold a bestselling book claiming it was a sign from

Joel.[1] Nothing happened. Red moons come and go. The prophets were not giving you an astronomy calendar.

Check It Yourself

Look up: Joel 2:28–29, then Acts 2:14–18.

You will find: God's spirit promised to daughters and servants, and Peter quoting it at Pentecost.

Then compare Joel 3:10 with Isaiah 2:4.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/joel**.

The Short Version

- Joel saw a **locust plague** as a warning of the **day of the LORD**.
- **"Tear your heart, and not your garments"**: God wants the heart, not the gesture.
- God promises to pour out the spirit on **all flesh**, including **daughters and servants**. Peter quoted it at **Pentecost**.
- Joel **reverses** Isaiah: **plowshares into swords**.
- A **moon turned into blood** is the prophets' language, not an eclipse schedule.

30. Amos: Let Justice Roll On

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Amos, a herdsman and a tender of fig trees from Tekoa, a village in Judah, who went north to preach. His words were collected by others, and the hopeful ending may have been added later.

When: About 760 to 750 BC, under King Jeroboam II, *two years before the earthquake* (Amos 1:1). He is the earliest prophet whose words survive as a book.

Where it fits: Amos preached in the northern kingdom under King Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:23–29), less than forty years before Assyria destroyed it in 722 BC.

Where I quote it: Never directly. James, my brother, quoted it to argue that foreigners should be welcomed into my movement (Acts 15:16–17).

If you only read three chapters: Amos 2, Amos 5 and Amos 8.

Words to Know

Bethel — the royal sanctuary of the northern kingdom, where Amos preached.

Ephah and shekel — a measure of grain and a weight for silver. Cheating merchants made the ephah small and the shekel heavy.

Clothes taken in pledge — cloaks the poor handed over as security for loans.

Cows of Bashan — Amos's name for the rich women of Samaria. Bashan was famous for fat cattle.

The Book in Brief

The book opens with a heading. These are the words of Amos, one of the herdsmen of Tekoa, from the days of King Uzziah of Judah and King Jeroboam of Israel, two years before the earthquake.

Chapters 1 and 2 are a chain of judgments. Amos condemns Israel's neighbors one by one for their crimes in war: Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon and

Moab. Then he condemns Judah. Then, at the greatest length, Israel itself, for selling the poor and trampling on the weak.

Chapters 3 to 6 are speeches against the northern kingdom and its capital, Samaria. Amos attacks the rich women he calls the cows of Bashan, the crowds bringing sacrifices to the shrines at Bethel and Gilgal, the judges who take bribes, and the men who lie on beds of ivory and drink wine by the bowl. God has sent hunger, drought, blight and plague, and still they have not come back. The day of the LORD they long for will be darkness, not light. God hates their feasts and wants justice instead.

Chapters 7 to 9 tell of five visions. In the first two, a swarm of locusts and a fire, Amos begs God to spare the people, and God relents. In the third, God holds a plumb line against a wall, and this time there is no reprieve. Between the visions comes the only story in the book. Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, reports Amos to the king and orders him back to Judah. Amos answers that he is no prophet, only a herdsman God took from the flock. In the fourth vision, a basket of summer fruit means the end has come, and Amos turns on the merchants who cannot wait for the Sabbath to be over. In the fifth, he sees the Lord beside the altar, ordering the pillars struck so the building falls on the people.

The last verses turn to hope. God will raise up the fallen tent of David, bring the people home from captivity, and plant them in their land for good.

The first prophet whose words became a book was a farmer who would not be bought.

Amos was not a professional prophet. When the king's priest told him to go home and earn his living somewhere else, he said, *I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet's son; but I was a herdsman, and a farmer of sycamore figs; and the LORD took me from following the flock* (Amos 7:14–15).

He came from the south, from Judah, and preached in the north, at the king's own sanctuary at Bethel, while the northern kingdom was rich and at peace. It was the wrong place and the wrong time to say what he said.

The trap

Amos begins with a trick. He condemns the nations around Israel one by one: Damascus for its cruelty, Gaza for selling whole populations as slaves, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab (Amos 1:3–2:3). You can imagine the crowd at Bethel nodding along.

Then he condemns Judah. Still fine, for a northern crowd.

Then he turns on Israel:

They have sold the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals; they trample on the dust of the earth on the head of the poor, and deny justice to the oppressed … they lay themselves down beside every altar on clothes taken in pledge (Amos 2:6–8).

Clothes taken in pledge. The Law said a poor man's cloak, taken as security, had to be returned before sunset, because it was his blanket (Exodus 22:26–27). In Amos's day, the rich were keeping those cloaks and spreading them out to lie on at the altar while they worshiped.

The cows of Bashan

Listen to this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who tell their husbands, "Bring us drinks!' (Amos 4:1).

Amos attacks the rich of Samaria for their *houses of ivory* and their *beds of ivory* (Amos 3:15; 6:4). When archaeologists excavated the royal quarter of Samaria, they found hundreds of carved ivory pieces that had once decorated furniture.[1]

You have built houses of cut stone, but you will not dwell in them. You have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine (Amos 5:11). Forty years later, Assyria destroyed Samaria.

I hate your feasts

Then Amos says the thing that made him unforgettable.

I hate, I despise your feasts, and I can't stand your solemn assemblies … Take away from me the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like rivers, and righteousness like a mighty stream (Amos 5:21–24).

God does not want the worship of people who are crushing the poor. God wants justice, not as a trickle, but rolling on like rivers.

In 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. used this verse in Washington, in front of a quarter of a million people, in an older translation's wording: "let justice roll down like waters." His words are carved on the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama, with water running over them.[2]

Waiting for the Sabbath to end

Amos 8 describes the merchants of his day. They are impatient for the holy days to be over so they can get back to business.

When will the new moon be gone, that we may sell grain? And the Sabbath, that we may market wheat, making the ephah small, and the shekel large, and dealing falsely with balances of deceit; that we may buy the poor for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals, and sell the sweepings with the wheat? (Amos 8:5–6).

They kept the Sabbath. They just could not wait for it to be over. They rigged the scales, sold the floor sweepings as grain and bought people as slaves for the price of a pair of shoes.

The king's sanctuary

The priest of Bethel, Amaziah, reported Amos to the king: *Amos has conspired against you … The land is not able to bear all his words* (Amos 7:10). Then he told Amos to get out. *Don't prophesy again any more at Bethel; for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a royal house!* (Amos 7:13).

There it is in one sentence. The king's religion, in the king's building, serving the king. Not God's. And the man paid to run it wanted the prophet gone.

I preached in a temple run by priests who answered to Rome. They had a word for me too.

Like the Ethiopians

One more verse, because it is astonishing.

Are you not like the children of the Ethiopians to me, children of Israel? says the LORD. *Haven't I brought up Israel out of the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Syrians from Kir?* (Amos 9:7).

Israel's great story was the exodus. Amos says God gave other peoples their exoduses too, even Israel's enemies. Being chosen did not mean other nations did not matter to God.

The fallen tent

The book ends with hope: God will raise up *the tent of David who is fallen* (Amos 9:11). Some scholars think this ending was added after Jerusalem fell.[3]

When my followers argued over whether foreigners who joined us had to become Jews first, my brother James stood up and quoted this passage, in its Greek form, which says that the rest of humanity will seek the Lord, *all the Gentiles who are called by my name* (Acts 15:16–17). Amos, the prophet who said God cared about the Ethiopians, helped open the door.

> Check It Yourself
>
> **Look up:** Amos 5:21–24.
>
> **You will find:** God rejecting worship without justice, and "let justice roll on like rivers."
>
> **Then read Amos 8:4–6** and Exodus 22:26–27, then Amos 2:8.
>
> **Go deeper:** the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/amos**.

The Short Version

- Amos was a **farmer from Judah** who preached at the **king's sanctuary** in the north. He is the **earliest prophet with a book**.
- He condemned those who **sell the needy for a pair of sandals** and lie on **cloaks taken from the poor**.
- **"Let justice roll on like rivers"**: God rejects worship from people crushing the poor.
- He exposed **rigged scales** and merchants **waiting for the Sabbath to end**.
- The king's priest told him to leave, because Bethel was **the king's sanctuary**.

31. Obadiah: The Brother Who Stood and Watched

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Obadiah, which means *servant of the LORD*. Nothing else is known about him.

When: Most likely soon after Jerusalem fell in 586 BC.

Where it fits: Most likely just after the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC (2 Kings 25:1–21), when Judah's neighbor Edom joined in the plunder.

Where I quote it: Never.

If you only read three chapters: It has one chapter of twenty-one verses, the shortest book in your Old Testament. Read it.

Words to Know

Edom — the kingdom south of the Dead Sea, descended in my scriptures from Esau, Jacob's twin brother.

Idumea — the Greek name for the land of the Edomites in my time, in the south of Judea.

The Book in Brief

Obadiah is a single chapter of twenty-one verses, a vision about the nation of Edom.

It opens with news that the nations are rising up to fight Edom. Edom lives high among the rocks and thinks no one can bring it down, but God will. Even its own allies will turn on it.

In the middle comes the reason. When strangers carried off Jerusalem's wealth and cast lots for the city, Edom, the brother of Jacob, stood by like one of them. It gloated, joined the looting and handed over those who escaped.

> The last part looks to the day of the LORD for all the nations. What Edom has done will be done to it. The people of Jacob will burn up Esau like stubble, the exiles will come home and take back the land, and the kingdom will be the LORD's.

The king who tried to kill me as a baby came from the people this book condemns.

Obadiah is twenty-one verses long. It is a single furious poem against **Edom**.

In my scriptures, the Edomites were family. They descended from **Esau**, the twin brother of Jacob, who was Israel. So when Obadiah condemns Edom, he calls Israel *your brother Jacob* (Obadiah 10).

What Edom did

When the Babylonians broke into Jerusalem in 586 BC, Edom did not fight. Edom watched, and then joined in.

In the day that you stood on the other side, in the day that strangers carried away his substance, and foreigners entered into his gates, and cast lots for Jerusalem, even you were like one of them (Obadiah 11).

Then Obadiah lists, one by one, what the brother should not have done. *Don't look down on your brother in the day of his disaster … neither seize their wealth on the day of their calamity. Don't stand in the crossroads to cut off those of his who escape. Don't deliver up those of his who remain in the day of distress* (Obadiah 12–14).

People running for their lives from a burning city reached the crossroads, and their own kin were waiting there to catch them and hand them over.

The psalm of the exiles remembers it too: *Remember, LORD, against the children of Edom in the day of Jerusalem, who said, "Raze it! Raze it even to its foundation!"* (Psalm 137:7).

As you have done

Obadiah's judgment has one rule: *As you have done, it will be done to you. Your deeds will return upon your own head* (Obadiah 15).

I said something like it in the Sermon on the Mount: *For with whatever judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with whatever measure you measure, it will be measured to you* (Matthew 7:2). But I used it to warn people against judging their brother, not to call down judgment on him.

What became of Edom

After the exile, Arab peoples pushed the Edomites out of their old land, and they moved west into the south of Judea. In my time that region was called **Idumea**. About a century before I was born, a Jewish ruler, the high priest John Hyrcanus, conquered Idumea and forced its people to be circumcised and follow the Law.[1]

The family of **Herod the Great** came from Idumea. His father was an Idumean.[2]

Herod was king when I was born. Matthew says he tried to kill me as a baby. His son Herod Antipas beheaded my kinsman John, and later mocked me in a robe before sending me back to Pilate (Luke 23:11).

Obadiah wrote against the brother who stood at the crossroads and handed over the fugitives. Six centuries later, that brother's descendants were sitting on the throne.

The kingdom will be the LORD's

The last line of Obadiah is the last line worth keeping from any book of anger: *and the kingdom will be the LORD's* (Obadiah 21).

Not Edom's. Not Herod's. Not even Israel's. The LORD's.

Check It Yourself

Look up: Obadiah 10–15.

You will find: the list of what a brother should not do on the day of his brother's disaster.

Then read Psalm 137:7.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/obadiah**.

The Short Version

- Obadiah is the **shortest book** in your Old Testament, **twenty-one verses** against **Edom**.
- Edom was **Israel's brother**, and it **gloated, looted and handed over fugitives** when Jerusalem fell.
- Its rule is **"As you have done, it will be done to you."**
- The Edomites became the **Idumeans**, and **Herod's family** came from them.
- It ends with **"the kingdom will be the LORD's."**

32. Jonah: The Prophet From My Own Hills

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Unknown. It is a story *about* Jonah son of Amittai, a real prophet of the 700s BC. It was not written by him.

When: Most scholars date it after the exile, between the 500s and 300s BC. It speaks of Nineveh as a city of the past.

Where it fits: Set in the 700s BC, under King Jeroboam II, when the real Jonah prophesied (2 Kings 14:25), a few decades before Assyria destroyed the northern kingdom; written centuries later, most likely after the exile.

Where I quote it: The sign of Jonah (Matthew 12:39–41; Luke 11:29–32). The people of Nineveh will rise at the judgment (Luke 11:32).

If you only read three chapters: It has four. Read all of it, and do not stop before the last verse.

Words to Know

Nineveh — the great city of Assyria, and later its capital. Assyria destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel, and Nineveh became a byword for cruelty.

Tarshish — a port at the far western end of the known world, perhaps in Spain. As far from Nineveh as a man could get.

Great fish — the book never says *whale*.

Sackcloth — rough cloth worn as a sign of grief and repentance.

The Book in Brief

The LORD tells Jonah son of Amittai to preach against Nineveh, the great city. Jonah boards a ship going the other way, to Tarshish.

God sends a storm. The sailors pray to their gods while Jonah sleeps below. They cast lots, and the lot falls on Jonah. He tells them to throw him into the sea. They row hard for land instead, but in the end they throw him in. The sea grows calm,

and a great fish swallows Jonah. There, in chapter 2, he prays, and after three days and three nights the fish spits him out on dry land.

In chapter 3 God sends him again, and this time he goes. He walks into Nineveh calling out that in forty days it will be overthrown. The people believe God and fast in sackcloth, and the king orders even the animals to fast. God sees them turn from their evil ways and spares the city.

In chapter 4 Jonah is angry enough to ask to die. God grows a vine to shade him, then sends a worm to kill it. The book ends with God's question: should he not care about Nineveh, that great city? Jonah never answers.

The prophet came from a village near mine, and he was angry that God forgave his enemies.

Jonah son of Amittai was a real prophet. The book of Kings mentions him, in the 700s BC, and says he came from **Gath-hepher** (2 Kings 14:25).

Gath-hepher is in Galilee, on the hills a short walk from Nazareth.[1]

Once, when Nicodemus spoke up for me, the other Pharisees answered him, *Search, and see that no prophet has arisen out of Galilee* (John 7:52). They forgot Jonah. He came from my own hills.

Running the other way

God tells Jonah to go to **Nineveh**, the great city of Assyria, and preach against it.

Assyria was the empire that would soon destroy the northern kingdom and carry off its people. Its kings decorated their palace walls with pictures of the prisoners they had skinned and impaled. Asking an Israelite prophet to go and preach to Nineveh was like asking him to walk into the enemy's capital and offer them a chance.

So Jonah gets up and runs the other way. He takes a ship to **Tarshish**, at the far western edge of the world (Jonah 1:3).

The sailors

A storm hits the ship. The sailors, who are pagans, each pray to their own gods and throw the cargo overboard. Jonah is asleep below deck.

When they find out the storm is his fault, Jonah tells them to throw him into the sea. And the sailors refuse. They row hard to get back to land and save him. Only when they cannot do it do they throw him over, and even then they pray first that God will not hold his death against them (Jonah 1:13–14).

The pagan sailors are kinder to the prophet than the prophet is willing to be to Nineveh. That is the first joke in the book. There are more.

The fish

God sends *a great fish* to swallow Jonah, and he is in its belly three days and three nights (Jonah 1:17). He prays, and the fish spits him out on dry land.

People have spent a great deal of energy arguing about whether a man could survive inside a fish. That is not the point of the story. The fish is how God gets a runaway prophet back on the road.

The shortest sermon

Jonah finally goes to Nineveh. He walks a day into the city and preaches a sermon that is five words long in Hebrew: *In forty days, Nineveh will be overthrown!* (Jonah 3:4).

No call to repent. No mention of God's mercy. Just doom.

And the whole city repents. The people fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least. The king comes down from his throne and sits in ashes. He orders that even the animals fast and wear sackcloth (Jonah 3:5–8). Picture the cows in sackcloth. The book is laughing, and also deadly serious.

God sees, and God does not destroy the city.

Why Jonah ran

Now we find out why Jonah ran in the first place. It was not fear. It was this:

Therefore I hurried to flee to Tarshish, for I knew that you are a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and abundant in loving kindness, and you relent of doing harm (Jonah 4:2).

He quotes God's own description of himself, from Exodus, back at God as a complaint. He knew God would forgive them. He did not want them forgiven. He would rather die than see it, and he says so (Jonah 4:3).

The plant and the question

Jonah sits outside the city, hoping it will be destroyed anyway. God makes a plant grow up to shade him, and Jonah is happy. Then God sends a worm to kill the plant, and a hot wind, and Jonah is angry enough to die over the plant.

Then God asks the question the whole book was written to ask:

You have been concerned for the vine, for which you have not labored, neither made it grow ... Shouldn't I be concerned for Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred twenty thousand persons who can't discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much livestock? (Jonah 4:10–11).

And the book ends. Jonah never answers.

The question is left for you.

The sign of Jonah

People kept asking me for a sign, some proof from heaven. I told them they would get only one.

This is an evil generation. It seeks after a sign. No sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah, the prophet. For even as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so the Son of Man will also be to this generation ... The men of Nineveh will stand up in the judgment with this generation, and will condemn it: for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, one greater than Jonah is here (Luke 11:29–32).

The sign was a preacher, and a city that listened. The people of Assyria, the enemy, repented at five words. My own people had heard far more from me.

Matthew adds a line comparing Jonah's three days in the fish to the Son of Man's three days in the earth (Matthew 12:40). Luke does not have it.[2] The King James translates the sea creature in Matthew as a *whale*. The Greek word means a sea monster.

On the Day of Atonement

In later centuries my people came to read the whole book of Jonah in the synagogue every year on the afternoon of **the Day of Atonement**, the holiest day of the year.[3]

On the day they asked God to forgive them, they read a story about God forgiving their enemies, and about a prophet who could not stand it.

> **Check It Yourself**
>
> **Look up:** Jonah 4:1–11.
>
> **You will find:** why Jonah really ran away, and the question the book ends with.
>
> **Then read Luke 11:29–32.**
>
> **Go deeper:** the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/jonah**.

> **The Short Version**
>
> - Jonah came from **Gath-hepher in Galilee**, near Nazareth, though people said **no prophet comes from Galilee**.
> - He ran from preaching to **Nineveh**, the great city of Israel's **cruelest enemy**.
> - The **pagan sailors** and the **whole city of Nineveh** behave better than the prophet.
> - Jonah was angry because he **knew God would forgive them**. The book ends with God's question, **unanswered**.
> - The **sign of Jonah** was a preacher and a city that **repented**.

33. Micah: Act Justly, Love Mercy

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Micah, from the farming village of Moresheth in the Judean foothills. Some of the later chapters may come from his followers after the exile.

When: About 740 to 700 BC, at the same time as Isaiah.

Where it fits: Micah preached in Judah under Kings Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah (2 Kings 15:32–20:21), in the years when Assyria destroyed the northern kingdom (722 BC) and then invaded Judah (701 BC).

Where I quote it: "A man's foes will be those of his own household" (Matthew 10:35–36; Micah 7:6). In Matthew, the chief priests quote Micah's Bethlehem prophecy to Herod (Matthew 2:5–6; Micah 5:2).

If you only read three chapters: Micah 2, Micah 4 and Micah 6.

Words to Know

Moresheth — Micah's village, out in the countryside southwest of Jerusalem.

Heritage — the family land each household was supposed to keep for good.

Ephrathah — the clan around Bethlehem, David's hometown.

Mercy — in Hebrew *hesed*, loyal, faithful love.

The Book in Brief

The heading names Micah of Moresheth, who spoke in the days of Kings Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah of Judah, about the two capitals, Samaria and Jerusalem. The book swings back and forth between doom and hope.

Chapters 1 to 3 are mostly warnings. God comes down to judge, and Samaria will become a heap of rubble. Micah mourns as the disaster spreads through the towns of his own countryside to the gate of Jerusalem. He condemns the men who lie awake planning to seize fields and houses, and the rulers who devour the

people like meat in a pot. Judges take bribes, priests teach for pay and prophets tell fortunes for money. So Jerusalem will be plowed like a field.

Chapters 4 and 5 turn to hope. In days to come, the nations will stream to the LORD's mountain to learn his ways. They will beat their swords into plowshares, and everyone will sit under his own vine and fig tree with no one to make him afraid. The daughter of Zion will go into exile in Babylon and be rescued there. A ruler will come from little Bethlehem to shepherd his people, and God will cut off the horses, chariots and idols they trusted.

Chapters 6 and 7 open like a trial. God calls on the mountains to hear his case against his people and reminds them how he brought them out of Egypt. Someone asks what sacrifice would please God, and the answer is to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God. Then come the dishonest scales and the violent rich, and a lament that no one can be trusted, not even in one's own household. The book ends with a prayer of trust in a God like no other, who pardons sin and will throw it into the depths of the sea.

A country prophet who watched the city men take the farms.

Isaiah was a man of Jerusalem who spoke to kings. Micah, preaching at the same time, was from a village out in the country. He saw the same things from the other end.

Woe to those who devise iniquity and work evil on their beds! When the morning is light, they practice it, because it is in the power of their hand. They covet fields, and seize them; and houses, and take them away: and they oppress a man and his house, even a man and his heritage (Micah 2:1–2).

The rich lay awake at night planning how to take the small farms. In the morning they did it, legally, because they had the power. *You drive the women of my people out from their pleasant houses* (Micah 2:9).

Eating the people

Micah's language about the rulers is the most violent in the prophets.

Please listen, you heads of Jacob, and rulers of the house of Israel: Isn't it for you to know justice? You who hate the good, and love the evil; who tear off their skin, and

their flesh from off their bones; who also eat the flesh of my people ... and chop them in pieces, as for the pot, and as meat within the cauldron (Micah 3:1–3).

Then he names the whole system. *Her leaders judge for bribes, and her priests teach for a price, and her prophets of it tell fortunes for money: yet they lean on the LORD, and say, "Isn't the LORD among us? No disaster will come on us"* (Micah 3:11).

And then the verdict: *Therefore Zion for your sake will be plowed like a field, and Jerusalem will become heaps of rubble* (Micah 3:12).

The prophecy that helped save a life

A hundred years later, Jeremiah stood in the Temple and said the same thing, and the priests wanted him killed. Some of the elders stood up and quoted Micah, by name: *Micah the Morashtite prophesied in the days of Hezekiah king of Judah; and he spoke to all the people of Judah, saying ... "Zion will be plowed as a field"* (Jeremiah 26:18). King Hezekiah had not killed Micah for it. He had listened.

A country prophet's words from a century before helped save Jeremiah's life. It is one of the very few places in my scriptures where one prophet quotes another by name.

Vine and fig tree

Micah has the same promise as Isaiah, that nations will beat their swords into plowshares. Then he adds a line Isaiah does not have:

But they will sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and no one will make them afraid (Micah 4:4).

Not a palace. A family on its own land, with a vine and a fig tree, and nobody coming to take it. That was the dream of a farmer from Moresheth.

George Washington loved that verse. He quoted it again and again in his letters, including a famous one to the Jewish congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1790, hoping that in America everyone would sit safely under his own vine and fig tree.[1] The musical *Hamilton* gave his words a song.

Little Bethlehem

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, being small among the clans of Judah, out of you one will come out to me that is to be ruler in Israel (Micah 5:2).

Micah was not looking to Jerusalem, the royal city, for the next ruler. He was looking to Bethlehem, the small town where David had been a shepherd boy. A ruler from the countryside, like Micah.

Matthew tells how the chief priests quoted this verse to Herod when the wise men came asking where the king was to be born (Matthew 2:4–6). John remembers people doubting me because I came from Galilee and the scriptures said the Messiah would come from Bethlehem (John 7:41–42).

Matthew and Luke both say I was born in Bethlehem, but they tell very different stories of how I came to be born there. Mark and John do not mention it.[2]

What does the LORD require?

Then comes **Micah 6:8**, perhaps the most famous single verse in the prophets.

It starts with a person asking how to make things right with God. *How shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams? … Shall I give my firstborn for my disobedience?* (Micah 6:6–7).

More sacrifices. Bigger sacrifices. Even a child.

And the answer:

He has shown you, O man, what is good. What does the LORD require of you, but to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8).

Three things. No ritual in any of them. An American president read that verse aloud when he took his oath of office.[3]

The next verses go right back to the market: *Shall I be pure with dishonest scales, and with a bag of deceitful weights? Her rich men are full of violence* (Micah 6:11–12). Acting justly meant honest weights.

The sword in the family

Micah also saw a time when society would come apart: *For the son dishonors the father, the daughter rises up against her mother … a man's enemies are the men of his own house* (Micah 7:6).

I used this verse in one of the hardest things I said. *Don't think that I came to send peace on the earth. I didn't come to send peace, but a sword. For I came to set a man at odds against his father, and a daughter against her mother … A man's foes will be those of his own household* (Matthew 10:34–36).

I was not telling people to fight their families. I was warning them that following me would divide families, as it did. Micah had already described what a household looks like when truth comes into it.

Who is a God like you?

Micah's name means *Who is like the LORD?* The book ends by asking that question:

Who is a God like you, who pardons iniquity, and passes over the disobedience of the remnant of his heritage? … you will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:18–19).

To this day, on the Jewish New Year, many of my people go to a river or the sea and throw in crumbs, as a sign of their sins being cast away, with these words.[4]

> Check It Yourself
>
> **Look up:** Micah 6:6–8.
>
> **You will find:** every kind of sacrifice offered, and three things required instead.
>
> **Then read Micah 3:12 and Jeremiah 26:16–19.** See a prophet's words help save another prophet's life.
>
> **Go deeper:** the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/micah**.

The Short Version

- Micah was a **country prophet** who watched the powerful **seize farms and houses**.
- His warning that **Zion would be plowed** was quoted a century later and **helped save Jeremiah's life**.
- He dreamed of everyone under their **own vine and fig tree**, with **no one to make them afraid**.
- **"Act justly, love mercy, walk humbly with your God"** is the answer to how to please God.
- He named **Bethlehem**, and gave me the words about **enemies in one's own household**.

34. Nahum: The Other Book About Nineveh

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Nahum *the Elkoshite*, from Elkosh, a village whose location is unknown.

When: Between 663 BC, when Assyria sacked the Egyptian city of Thebes, which the book mentions, and 612 BC, when Nineveh fell.

Where it fits: In the last years of Assyria's power, while Manasseh or Josiah ruled Judah (2 Kings 21–23), between sixty and a hundred years after Assyria destroyed the northern kingdom.

Where I quote it: Never.

If you only read three chapters: It has three. Read Nahum 1 and 3, then read Jonah 4 again.

Words to Know

Nineveh — the capital of Assyria, destroyed in 612 BC by the Babylonians and Medes.

Thebes — the great city of Egypt, called *No-amon* in Hebrew, sacked by Assyria in 663 BC.

Avenging — paying back wrong for wrong.

The Book in Brief

Nahum is a poem in three chapters about the fall of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. The heading calls it the vision of Nahum of Elkosh.

Chapter 1 opens with a hymn to the LORD as a jealous God who takes vengeance, slow to anger but great in power, a God before whom the mountains quake. He is a stronghold for those who trust him and a flood to his enemies. Then the poem speaks by turns to Nineveh and to Judah. The enemy will be cut

off, and Judah's yoke will be broken. A messenger comes over the mountains with good news.

Chapter 2 describes the attack as if it were happening: red shields, chariots racing through the streets, the river gates thrown open, the palace melting away, the treasure carried off. The lions' den, where Assyria fed on its prey, stands empty.

Chapter 3 pronounces woe on the bloody city. Nineveh will be shamed like Thebes in Egypt, which fell in spite of its rivers and its allies. Its fortresses will drop like ripe figs, and its officials will vanish like locusts. The book ends by telling the king of Assyria that his wound is fatal, and that everyone who hears the news claps.

Two books in my scriptures are about the same enemy city. In one, God spares it and the prophet sulks. The other cheers when it burns.

Jonah ends with God asking, *Shouldn't I be concerned for Nineveh, that great city …?*

A few pages later on the same scroll, **Nahum** answers with three chapters of joy that Nineveh is gone.

Woe to the bloody city! It is all full of lies and robbery. The prey doesn't depart (Nahum 3:1). The poet describes the attack on the city as if he is watching it: *The noise of the whip, the noise of the rattling of wheels, prancing horses, and bounding chariots, the horseman mounting, and the flashing sword, the glittering spear, and a multitude of slain, and a great heap of corpses* (Nahum 3:2–3).

Why people cheered

You have to understand what Assyria was.

For two centuries, Assyria had crushed the peoples around it. It destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel and scattered its people. It besieged Jerusalem. Its kings boasted, in their own inscriptions, of skinning rebels alive and stacking their heads in piles. Their palace walls showed it in stone.[1]

When Nineveh fell in 612 BC, the whole region celebrated. Nahum ends with a question, just as Jonah does, but a very different one:

All who hear the report of you clap their hands over you; for who hasn't felt your endless cruelty? (Nahum 3:19).

The same verse, cut in half

Here is something remarkable. Jonah and Nahum both quote the same passage about God, from Exodus. They lean on different halves of it.

The passage says God is *a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger, and abundant in loving kindness and truth ... who will by no means clear the guilty* (Exodus 34:6–7).

Jonah quotes the first half, angrily: God is *a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and abundant in loving kindness* (Jonah 4:2). That is why Jonah ran.

Nahum keeps *slow to anger*, then turns to the second half: *The LORD is slow to anger, and great in power, and will by no means leave the guilty unpunished* (Nahum 1:3).

My people put both books on the same scroll. A God who spares the enemy who repents, and a God who brings down the empire that does not. They kept both halves of the verse.

Good news on the mountains

In the middle of the gloating there is one beautiful line: *Behold, on the mountains the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace!* (Nahum 1:15). Isaiah has nearly the same words (Isaiah 52:7).

For the people Assyria had crushed, the fall of the empire was good news. The messenger running over the hills with the report meant they could breathe.

The village of Nahum

When I left Nazareth, I made my home in a fishing town on the Sea of Galilee called **Capernaum** (Matthew 4:13). In Hebrew it is *Kefar Nahum*, the village of Nahum.

Nobody knows whether it was named after this prophet. One early Christian scholar thought Nahum's home, Elkosh, was in Galilee.[2] It is possible that the

prophet who celebrated the fall of Nineveh came from my lake.

What I make of Nahum

I understand Nahum. People who have been crushed by an empire are allowed to rejoice when it falls. The book of Revelation does the same over Rome.

But I did not preach Nahum. I told people to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them (Matthew 5:44). And I told them that the people of Nineveh, who repented at Jonah's preaching, would rise at the judgment and condemn my own generation (Luke 11:32).

When I chose which of the two books about Nineveh to point to, I chose Jonah.

> #### Check It Yourself
>
> **Look up:** Exodus 34:6–7, then Jonah 4:2 and Nahum 1:2–3.
>
> **You will find:** one passage about God, with Jonah leaning on one half and Nahum on the other.
>
> **Then compare the last verse of Jonah with the last verse of Nahum.**
>
> **Go deeper:** the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/nahum**.

> #### The Short Version
>
> - Nahum celebrates the **fall of Nineveh** in 612 BC, the capital of **Assyria**, the empire that crushed Israel.
> - In **Jonah**, God spares Nineveh. **Nahum** cheers its destruction. Both are on the same scroll.
> - They lean on **opposite halves** of the same passage from **Exodus 34**.
> - My home base, **Capernaum**, means **the village of Nahum**.
> - When I pointed to Nineveh, I pointed to **Jonah**.

35. Habakkuk: How Long?

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Habakkuk. Nothing is known about him except his book.

When: About 605 to 597 BC, as Babylon rose to power.

Where it fits: Habakkuk spoke in the last years of the kingdom of Judah, probably under King Jehoiakim (2 Kings 23:36–24:7), as Babylon rose to power. Babylon destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC.

Where I quote it: Never directly. Paul built his letters to the Romans and the Galatians on one of its lines (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Habakkuk 2:4).

If you only read three chapters: It has three. Read all of it.

Words to Know

Chaldeans — the Babylonians, the new empire that would destroy Jerusalem.

Faith — in Hebrew *emunah*, which means *faithfulness*, holding steady, as much as believing.

Woe — a cry of grief and warning, *Alas for you*.

Pesher — a kind of commentary found among the Dead Sea Scrolls that reads a prophet's words as being about the reader's own day.

The Book in Brief

Habakkuk is a short book of prophecy in three chapters. Most of it is a conversation between the prophet and God, not a message to the people. The book tells nothing about Habakkuk's life except that he was a prophet.

In chapter 1, Habakkuk complains that he cries out about violence and injustice, and God does not answer. God replies that he is raising up the Chaldeans, the Babylonians, a fierce nation that sweeps up whole peoples. Habakkuk complains

again. How can a holy God stay silent while the wicked swallow up people more righteous than they are?

In chapter 2, he stands at his watchpost and waits. God tells him to write the vision plainly on tablets, because it will come at its appointed time. The proud will not last, but the righteous will live by staying faithful. Five woes follow, against those who grab what is not theirs, build by bloodshed, shame their neighbors and trust in idols.

Chapter 3 is a prayer set to music. Habakkuk pictures God coming in power to save his people, trembles as he waits for the invaders, and ends by rejoicing in God even if crops and flocks fail.

A prophet who argued with God, and a line at the heart of the Reformation.

Habakkuk does not start by speaking for God. He starts by complaining to God.

LORD, how long will I cry, and you will not hear? I cry out to you "Violence!" and will you not save? ... Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails; for the wicked surround the righteous; therefore justice comes out perverted (Habakkuk 1:2–4).

That is a prayer. It is in my scriptures. You are allowed to pray it.

The answer is worse

God answers: I am raising up the **Chaldeans**, the Babylonians, *that bitter and hasty nation*, to punish Judah (Habakkuk 1:6).

That is no comfort. Habakkuk protests again. *You who have purer eyes than to see evil ... why do you tolerate those who deal treacherously, and keep silent when the wicked swallows up the man who is more righteous than he?* (Habakkuk 1:13). How can God use a nation worse than Judah to punish Judah?

Then he climbs his watchtower to wait for an answer (Habakkuk 2:1).

Write it plainly

The answer comes: *Write the vision, and make it plain on tablets, that he who runs may read it. For the vision is yet for the appointed time ... Though it takes time, wait for it; because it will surely come* (Habakkuk 2:2–3).

Then this:

Behold, his soul is puffed up. It is not upright in him, but the righteous will live by his faith (Habakkuk 2:4).

The Hebrew word is *emunah*, *faithfulness*. The proud swell up and fall. The righteous hold steady and live.

One line, two thousand years later

My follower Paul quoted that line as the center of his letter to the Romans: *But the righteous shall live by faith* (Romans 1:17).

Fifteen hundred years after Paul, a monk named **Martin Luther** was struggling with that verse in Romans. When he finally understood it, he said, it was as if the gates of paradise opened.[1] That insight became the heart of the Protestant Reformation.

A line from a three-chapter book, written by a prophet nobody knows anything about, while waiting on a watchtower for God to answer him, became the center of the argument that split the Western church in two.

The woes

Then Habakkuk pronounces five woes against the empire. Here is the first:

Woe to him who increases that which is not his, and who enriches himself by extortion! ... Won't your debtors rise up suddenly, and wake up those who make you tremble, and you will be their victim? (Habakkuk 2:6–7).

Woe to him who gets an evil gain for his house (Habakkuk 2:9).

Woe to him who builds a town with blood (Habakkuk 2:12).

And in the middle of them: *For the stone will cry out of the wall* (Habakkuk 2:11).

When I rode into Jerusalem and the crowd was shouting, some Pharisees told me to make them stop. I said, *I tell you that if these were silent, the stones would cry out* (Luke 19:40).

Read as the news

Among the Dead Sea Scrolls is a commentary on the first two chapters of Habakkuk, written by the community at Qumran in the century before me. It goes line by line and explains each one as being about their own day: the *Kittim*, who are almost certainly the Romans, a *Wicked Priest* in Jerusalem, and their own *Teacher of Righteousness*.[2]

That is how many of my people read the prophets in my time. Not as ancient history but as the news. Remember that when you read how my followers read the prophets about me.

Though the fig tree doesn't flourish

Habakkuk ends with a song, complete with notes for the choir leader. Its last lines are some of the bravest in the scriptures:

For though the fig tree doesn't flourish, nor fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive fails, the fields yield no food; the flocks are cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls: yet I will rejoice in the LORD. I will be joyful in the God of my salvation! (Habakkuk 3:17–18).

He has not gotten his answer. The Babylonians are still coming. Everything may fail. He will hold steady anyway.

That is what *the righteous will live by his faith* means.

Check It Yourself

Look up: Habakkuk 1:2–4, then Habakkuk 3:17–18.

You will find: a prophet who begins by accusing God of not listening, and ends rejoicing with nothing in the fields.

Then read Romans 1:17.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/habakkuk**.

The Short Version

- Habakkuk begins by **complaining to God**: **how long?**
- God's answer is that **Babylon is coming**, which makes the question worse.
- **"The righteous will live by his faith"** became the center of **Paul's letters** and of **Luther's Reformation**.
- He cries woe on those who **increase that which is not theirs**. **The stone will cry out of the wall.**
- He ends: **though the fig tree doesn't flourish, yet I will rejoice**.

36. Zephaniah: The Day of Wrath, and the Humble

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Zephaniah, whose family tree goes back four generations to a man named Hezekiah, perhaps the king. His father's name was Cushi.

When: In the reign of King Josiah, about 640 to 609 BC.

Where it fits: Zephaniah spoke under King Josiah, the years told in 2 Kings 22 and 23, a generation before Babylon destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC. Many scholars think he spoke before Josiah's reform of 622 BC.

Where I quote it: Never.

If you only read three chapters: It has three. Read Zephaniah 1 and 3.

Words to Know

Day of the LORD — the day God comes to judge. Zephaniah describes it more fiercely than anyone.

The humble — in Hebrew *anawim*, the poor and lowly who depend on God.

Remnant — those who are left after the disaster.

The Book in Brief

Zephaniah is a short book of prophecy in three chapters, spoken to Judah and Jerusalem. Its first line traces the prophet's family back four generations and places him in the reign of King Josiah. It tells nothing else about his life.

Chapter 1 announces the day of the LORD. God will sweep away everything from the earth, and above all will punish Jerusalem: those who worship Baal and the stars, the court that copies foreign ways, the merchants, and the comfortable who think God will do nothing. The day is near, a day of wrath and darkness.

> Chapter 2 calls the humble to seek the LORD. Then it turns to the nations around Judah: the Philistines on the coast, Moab and Ammon to the east, Cush in the far south, and Assyria and its capital, Nineveh, in the north.
>
> Chapter 3 turns back to Jerusalem, a city that will not listen, with rulers like lions and wolves. Then the tone changes. God promises to purify the speech of the peoples, to leave a humble and poor people in the city, and to gather the scattered. The book ends with a song of joy, and God rejoicing over his people.

The poem behind a medieval hymn, a requiem and a horror film, and a promise for the poor.

Zephaniah's first chapter is the most frightening description of the day of the LORD in the scriptures.

That day is a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness (Zephaniah 1:15).

In the Latin Bible, the first words of that verse are *Dies irae, dies illa*, "the day of wrath, that day." In the 1200s, a hymn was written that begins with them, the **Dies Irae**. It was sung at funerals for centuries. Mozart and Verdi set it in their Requiems.[1] Its old chant melody turns up in film scores, including *Star Wars* and *The Shining*, whenever a composer wants you to feel doom coming.

All of that began with a prophet in Jerusalem in the reign of King Josiah.

The comfortable

Who is the day of wrath for? Zephaniah tells you.

I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the men who are settled on their dregs, who say in their heart, "The LORD will not do good, neither will he do evil" (Zephaniah 1:12).

These are not atheists. They would never say God does not exist. They have simply decided God does not matter. God will not help, God will not hurt, so they can do as they like. Wine left too long on its dregs goes thick and stale. So had they.

Their wealth will become a plunder, and their houses a desolation. Yes, they will build houses, but won't inhabit them (Zephaniah 1:13).

And the rulers: *Her princes within her are roaring lions. Her judges are evening wolves. They leave nothing until the next day* (Zephaniah 3:3).

Seek humility

Then Zephaniah turns to a different group.

Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, who have kept his ordinances. Seek righteousness. Seek humility. It may be that you will be hidden in the day of the LORD's anger (Zephaniah 2:3).

The humble of the land. In Hebrew, the *anawim*, the poor and lowly. The day of wrath is for the complacent and the powerful. The humble are told to keep seeking.

And at the end, God says who will be left: *I will leave among you an afflicted and poor people, and they will take refuge in the LORD's name* (Zephaniah 3:12).

The people God keeps are the poor.

When I began my sermon on the mountain, I said, *Blessed are the poor in spirit … Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth* (Matthew 5:3, 5). Zephaniah had already said who would be left standing.

Purified lips

Zephaniah also has a promise that undoes the tower of Babel: *For then I will purify the lips of the peoples, that they may all call on the LORD's name, to serve him shoulder to shoulder* (Zephaniah 3:9).

At Babel, God scattered the nations by confusing their language. Many readers hear the reverse here: God gathers them by purifying their lips, their speech. At Pentecost, my followers spoke and people from every nation heard them in their own language (Acts 2:5–11).

God sings

And then the book ends in a way you would never expect from its first chapter.

The LORD, your God, is among you, a mighty one who will save. He will rejoice over you with joy. He will calm you in his love. He will rejoice over you with singing (Zephaniah 3:17).

God, singing. Over the people.

I will save those who are lame, and gather those who were driven away. I will give them praise and honor, whose shame has been in all the earth (Zephaniah 3:19).

The book that gave the world the *Dies Irae* ends with God singing over the lame and those who were driven away.

Check It Yourself

Look up: Zephaniah 1:12, then Zephaniah 3:11–13.

You will find: who the day of wrath is for, and who will be left.

Then read Zephaniah 3:17–19.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/zephaniah**.

The Short Version

- Zephaniah's **"day of wrath"** gave the world the hymn **Dies Irae**.
- The wrath falls on **the complacent**, who think **God will do neither good nor evil**, and on **rulers like wolves**.
- The **humble of the land** are told to keep seeking. The **remnant** God keeps is **afflicted and poor**.
- It promises to **purify the lips** of the peoples, which many read as the reverse of Babel.
- It ends with **God singing** over the **lame** and **those who were driven away**.

37. Haggai: The Temple I Walked In

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Haggai the prophet, or an editor who recorded his words with exact dates.

When: Four messages, all in 520 BC, over less than four months, in the second year of the Persian king Darius I.

Where it fits: After the exile. Haggai spoke in Jerusalem about eighteen years after the first exiles came home from Babylon, the years told in Ezra 1 to 6. Ezra names him (Ezra 5:1; 6:14). The Temple was finished in 515 BC.

Where I quote it: Never. But the governor it names, Zerubbabel, appears in both of my family trees (Matthew 1:12–13; Luke 3:27).

If you only read three chapters: It has two. Read both.

Words to Know

Zerubbabel — the governor of Judah under Persia, a grandson of King Jehoiachin, from David's line.

Joshua the high priest — the chief priest at the time. In Hebrew, his name is the same as mine.

Signet — a king's seal ring, pressed into wax to make a document official. A sign of authority.

The Book in Brief

Haggai is a short book of prophecy in two chapters. It holds four messages, each dated to the day in the second year of the Persian king Darius. Haggai speaks to Zerubbabel the governor, to Joshua the high priest and to the people who have come back from exile to Jerusalem. The book tells nothing about his life except that he was a prophet.

In chapter 1, Haggai tells them that their harvests fail and their wages vanish because they live in their own houses while God's house lies in ruins. The leaders and the people obey, and about three weeks later they begin work on the Temple.

Chapter 2 holds the other three messages. To those who remember the old Temple and find the new one poor, God promises to shake the nations and fill this house with a glory greater than before. Next Haggai asks the priests two questions about what is holy and what is unclean, and promises that from that day God will bless the harvest. The last message is for Zerubbabel alone. God will overthrow the thrones of kingdoms and make him like a signet ring.

The Temple Haggai begged them to build was the Temple I taught in.

Haggai is a short, practical book. The exiles had come home from Babylon almost twenty years earlier, laid the Temple's foundation and then stopped. Times were hard. People were busy rebuilding their own lives.

Haggai asks them a question: *Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies waste?* (Haggai 1:4).

A bag with holes

Then he describes their economy, and it may sound familiar:

You have sown much, and bring in little. You eat, but you don't have enough. You drink, but you aren't filled with drink. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm, and he who earns wages earns wages to put them into a bag with holes in it (Haggai 1:6).

A bag with holes. You work and work, and the money disappears before you can use it.

Haggai's answer is that they had their priorities wrong. They were looking after their own houses and neglecting what they shared. The people listen, and they start building.

The old men's tears

When the new Temple begins to rise, it is small and plain. Haggai asks the old people a painful question: *Who is left among you who saw this house in its former*

glory? How do you see it now? Isn't it in your eyes as nothing? (Haggai 2:3). When its foundation was laid, Ezra remembers, the old men who had seen the first Temple wept aloud (Ezra 3:12).

Then he promises: *The latter glory of this house will be greater than the former* (Haggai 2:9).

The signet ring

Haggai's last message is to **Zerubbabel**, the governor, who was a grandson of King Jehoiachin, the king of David's line who was carried off to Babylon.

Jeremiah had said of Jehoiachin that even if he were *the signet on my right hand*, God would tear him off (Jeremiah 22:24). Haggai reverses it for the grandson: *I will take you, Zerubbabel, my servant ... and will make you as a signet, for I have chosen you* (Haggai 2:23).

Haggai hoped that David's line was about to rule again. Then Zerubbabel disappears from history. We do not know what happened to him. The hope moved on to someone else.[1]

Both Matthew and Luke include Zerubbabel in my family tree, though the two lists meet only at Zerubbabel and his father Shealtiel, and go completely different ways before and after them.

The Temple I knew

The Temple Haggai urged them to build was finished around 515 BC. It was small.

Five hundred years later, King Herod rebuilt and enlarged it on a scale the ancient world talked about, with huge white stones and gold. When I was in Jerusalem, it was still being worked on. Someone told me, *It took forty-six years to build this temple!* (John 2:20).[2]

As we walked out of it one day, one of my friends said, *Teacher, see what kind of stones and what kind of buildings!*

I told him, *Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone on another, which will not be thrown down* (Mark 13:1–2).

In the year 70, the Romans burned it. Haggai's Temple, made splendid by Herod, lasted about five hundred and eighty years.

Haggai was right that the people should not neglect the house of God for their own houses. I loved that Temple. I called it my Father's house. But I also knew that God's presence was never something a building could hold.

Check It Yourself

Look up: Haggai 1:3–6.

You will find: wages put into a bag with holes.

Then read Haggai 2:3, then Mark 13:1–2. The same Temple, five centuries apart.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/haggai**.

The Short Version

- Haggai urged the returned exiles to **rebuild the Temple** in **520 BC**, while they were busy with **their own houses**.
- He described wages that went into **a bag with holes**.
- The new Temple was **small**, and the old people wept (Ezra 3:12).
- He hoped **Zerubbabel**, of David's line, would rule. Zerubbabel **vanished from history**, but he is in **my family tree**.
- **Herod rebuilt that Temple** on a grand scale. I said **not one stone would be left**, and in **AD 70** the Romans destroyed it.

38. Zechariah: The King on a Donkey

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Chapters 1 to 8 are the visions of Zechariah son of Berechiah, a prophet in Jerusalem at the same time as Haggai. Chapters 9 to 14 are in a different style, with no dates, and most scholars think they come from one or more later prophets.

When: Chapters 1 to 8, 520 to 518 BC. Chapters 9 to 14, probably later, perhaps the 400s or 300s BC.

Where it fits: After the exile. Zechariah spoke in Jerusalem alongside Haggai while the Temple was rebuilt, the years told in Ezra 5 and 6, which name them both. The Temple was finished in 515 BC.

Where I quote it: "Strike the shepherd" (Mark 14:27; Zechariah 13:7). The gospels tell my entry into Jerusalem with its king on a donkey (Matthew 21:5; John 12:15; Zechariah 9:9). Matthew uses its thirty pieces of silver (Matthew 27:9–10; Zechariah 11:12–13), and John its line *They will look on him whom they pierced* (John 19:37; Zechariah 12:10).

If you only read three chapters: Zechariah 4, Zechariah 7 and Zechariah 9.

Words to Know

The Branch — a name for a coming ruler from David's line, a new shoot from an old stump.

The satan — in this book, as in Job, *the accuser* in God's court.

Joshua the high priest — the chief priest in Zechariah's day. His name is the same as mine.

Mount of Olives — the hill east of Jerusalem, across the Kidron Valley.

The Book in Brief

Zechariah is a book of prophecy in two very different halves. The prophet speaks to the people who have come back from Babylon and are rebuilding the Temple, and to their leaders, Zerubbabel the governor and Joshua the high priest. The book gives his family and the dates of his messages, and little else about his life.

Chapter 1 opens with a call to return to God, as the people's ancestors refused to do. Then come eight visions in the night, each explained by an angel. Horsemen report that the whole earth is at rest. Four horns, the powers that scattered Judah, are thrown down. A man sets out to measure Jerusalem and is told it will spread beyond any walls. Joshua the high priest is accused by the satan and given clean clothes. A golden lampstand stands between two olive trees. A huge scroll flies over the land, bringing a curse on thieves. A woman in a basket, called Wickedness, is carried off to Babylon. Four chariots go out to the four winds. Then Zechariah is told to make crowns and set them on Joshua's head.

In chapters 7 and 8, people ask whether they should keep fasting for the fallen Temple. The answer recalls what the earlier prophets demanded, justice and mercy, and promises a city at peace, full of old people and children, where foreigners come to seek God.

Chapters 9 to 14 have no dates and no visions. They announce judgment on Judah's neighbors and a humble king riding a donkey. The prophet plays a shepherd who is paid thirty pieces of silver and breaks his two staffs. The people mourn for one they pierced, a spring opens to wash away sin, and the shepherd is struck and the sheep scattered. The book ends with the nations attacking Jerusalem, God standing on the Mount of Olives, living water flowing from the city, and the nations coming every year to worship.

Apart from the Psalms, no book in my scriptures was woven into my last week more than this one.

I rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. I said, on the way to the garden, that the shepherd would be struck and the sheep scattered. I was betrayed for thirty pieces of silver. My side was pierced. And I sat on the Mount of Olives and spoke of the end.

Each of those is in the gospels with Zechariah behind it.

Not by might

The first half of the book is a series of night visions, given to Zechariah while the Temple was being rebuilt.

He sees horsemen patrolling the earth. He sees a golden lampstand between two olive trees. He sees a flying scroll, thirty feet long, carrying a curse on thieves and on those who swear falsely (Zechariah 5:1–4). He sees a woman called Wickedness stuffed into a basket and flown off to Babylon (Zechariah 5:5–11).

And to the governor, Zerubbabel, who has to finish the Temple with very little, God says: *Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of Armies* (Zechariah 4:6).

A man named Joshua

In **Zechariah 3**, the high priest **Joshua** stands before the angel of the LORD in filthy clothes, and *the satan*, the accuser, stands at his right hand to accuse him. God says, *The LORD rebuke you, Satan!* Joshua's filthy clothes are taken off, and he is dressed in clean robes (Zechariah 3:1–5).

In chapter 6, Zechariah is told to make a crown and set it on Joshua's head, and to say: *Behold, the man whose name is the Branch* (Zechariah 6:11–12).

A man named Yeshua, accused, cleaned and crowned. You can see why my followers read this book closely.

What the fasting was for

In **Zechariah 7**, people come to ask whether they should keep fasting to mourn the Temple's destruction, as they had for seventy years.

God answers with a question. *When you fasted and mourned ... did you at all fast to me, really to me?* Then God tells them what he wanted all along:

Execute true judgment, and show kindness and compassion every man to his brother. Don't oppress the widow, nor the fatherless, the foreigner, nor the poor; and let none of you devise evil against his brother in your heart (Zechariah 7:9–10).

The prophets keep giving the same answer to every question about religion.

Old people and children in the streets

Zechariah 8 has the loveliest picture of a healed city in the scriptures: *Old men and old women will again dwell in the streets of Jerusalem, every man with his staff in his hand for very age. The streets of the city will be full of boys and girls playing in its streets* (Zechariah 8:4–5).

No armies. No gold. Old people sitting in the sun and children playing safely. That is what peace looks like.

The chapter ends with foreigners coming: *In those days, ten men will take hold, out of all the languages of the nations, they will take hold of the skirt of him who is a Jew, saying, "We will go with you, for we have heard that God is with you"* (Zechariah 8:23).

The king on a donkey

Then comes the second half of the book, and the verse every Christian knows on Palm Sunday:

Rejoice greatly, daughter of Zion! Shout, daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King comes to you! He is righteous, and having salvation; lowly, and riding on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a donkey (Zechariah 9:9).

Now read the next verse, because it tells you what kind of king this is: *I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim, and the horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow will be cut off; and he will speak peace to the nations* (Zechariah 9:10).

Conquerors rode war horses. This king rides a donkey. The chariot and the horse are cut off, and he speaks peace.

I sent two of my friends to fetch a colt, and I rode it into Jerusalem, and the crowds spread their cloaks on the road (Mark 11:1–10). Everyone who knew Zechariah knew what I was saying.

Matthew quotes the verse, and in his telling my friends bring two animals, a donkey *and* a colt, and I sit on them (Matthew 21:2–7). Hebrew poetry says things twice in different words: *on a donkey, even on a colt*. It is one animal. Matthew seems to have read it as two.[1]

Thirty pieces of silver

In **Zechariah 11**, the prophet acts out a parable as a shepherd hired to tend a flock doomed to slaughter. When he asks for his wages, they weigh out *thirty pieces of silver*. God tells him, sarcastically, to throw *the handsome price that I was valued at by them* to the potter in the house of the LORD (Zechariah 11:12–13). The Hebrew says *potter*; some translations, following an old Syriac translation, have *treasury*.

Matthew tells how Judas was paid thirty pieces of silver, threw the money into the Temple, and how the priests used it to buy a potter's field. He says it fulfilled what Jeremiah said (Matthew 27:3–10). Most of the words are Zechariah's, but the field comes from Jeremiah.[2]

Strike the shepherd

Zechariah 13:7: *Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.*

On the way to the Mount of Olives after supper, I told my friends, *All of you will be made to stumble because of me tonight, for it is written, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered"* (Mark 14:27).

Peter said he never would. That night, they all ran.

The one they pierced

God says, *they will look to me whom they have pierced; and they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for his only son* (Zechariah 12:10).

John tells how a soldier pierced my side with a spear after I died, and quotes this verse (John 19:34, 37).

On the Mount of Olives

The book ends with a great battle for Jerusalem, and God standing on the Mount of Olives, which splits in two (Zechariah 14:4). Living waters flow out from Jerusalem, east and west (Zechariah 14:8).

I sat on the Mount of Olives, facing the Temple, when my friends asked me about the end (Mark 13:3).

No more traders

Then the last verse of the book. On that day, even the cooking pots in Jerusalem will be as holy as the Temple's vessels. *In that day there will no longer be a Canaanite in the house of the LORD of Armies* (Zechariah 14:21).

The Hebrew word can mean *Canaanite* or *trader*.[3]

When I drove out the people selling animals in the Temple courts, John remembers me saying, *Don't make my Father's house a marketplace!* (John 2:16).

Check It Yourself

Look up: Zechariah 9:9–10, then Mark 11:1–10.

You will find: a lowly king on a donkey who speaks peace, with the chariot and the horse cut off, and how I entered Jerusalem.

Then read Zechariah 7:8–10. It is the prophets' answer to a question about fasting.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/zechariah**.

The Short Version

- Zechariah's visions encouraged the rebuilding of the Temple: **"Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit."**
- A **high priest named Joshua**, my name, is accused by the satan, cleaned and **crowned**.
- When asked about fasting, God answers: **don't oppress the widow, nor the fatherless, the foreigner, nor the poor**.
- Its **lowly king on a donkey**, who **speaks peace to the nations**, is the picture I acted out entering Jerusalem.
- **Strike the shepherd**, **thirty pieces of silver** and **the one they pierced** all run through my last week.

39. Malachi: My Messenger

At a Glance

Who wrote it: Unknown. *Malachi* means *my messenger*, and it may be a title taken from Malachi 3:1 rather than a name.

When: After the Temple was rebuilt, probably around 500 to 450 BC. It was the last book on the scroll of the Twelve.

Where it fits: After the exile, a generation or more after the Temple was rebuilt in 515 BC. It deals with the same troubles as Nehemiah 13: unpaid tithes, careless priests, and marriages to worshipers of other gods.

Where I quote it: I said its messenger who prepares the way was John the Baptist (Matthew 11:10; Luke 7:27; Malachi 3:1), and that John was the Elijah it promised (Matthew 11:14; 17:12–13; Malachi 4:5).

If you only read three chapters: It has four in your Bible, three in Hebrew. Read Malachi 2, 3 and 4.

Words to Know

Tithe — a tenth of the harvest, given to support the Levites and to feed the poor.

Storehouse — the Temple's storerooms, where the tithes were kept.

Elijah — the prophet taken up in a whirlwind, expected to return before the great day.

Hireling — a hired worker, a day laborer, who depended on being paid that evening.

The Book in Brief

Malachi is a short book of prophecy, four chapters in most Bibles and three in Hebrew ones. It speaks to the people of Judah, and above all to the priests, some time after the Temple was rebuilt. It tells nothing about the prophet's life. Even his name may be a title.

Most of the book is a series of arguments. God makes a charge, the people ask how, and God answers.

Chapter 1 begins with God's love for Israel, then accuses the priests of offering blind, lame and sick animals. In chapter 2, God warns the priests that they have broken the covenant with Levi by teaching falsely. Then he accuses the people of marrying women who worship other gods and of betraying the wives of their youth.

In chapter 3, God promises to send a messenger to prepare the way, and then to come to his Temple, to refine the priests like silver and to judge those who oppress workers, widows and orphans. The people are told they are robbing God of the tithe. Those who fear God are written in a book of remembrance.

Chapter 4 promises a day that burns like a furnace for the arrogant, while for those who fear God the sun of righteousness will rise. The book ends by telling the people to remember the law of Moses, and by promising to send Elijah before the great day.

Your Old Testament ends with this book, and it points straight at my kinsman John.

In the order your Bible uses, Malachi is the last page before Matthew. It ends with a promise: *Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes* (Malachi 4:5).

Turn the page into the gospels, and the first prophet you meet is a man in the wilderness dressed like Elijah.

The messenger

Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me; and the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to his temple (Malachi 3:1).

When John was in prison, I spoke to the crowds about him. *But why did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and much more than a prophet. For this is he, of whom it is written, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you"* (Matthew 11:9–10).

And I said, *If you are willing to receive it, this is Elijah, who is to come* (Matthew 11:14).

Mark's gospel opens with that same verse from Malachi, followed by Isaiah's voice in the wilderness, and in the oldest copies calls them both the words of Isaiah the prophet (Mark 1:2–3). Later copyists changed it to *the prophets*.[1]

Leftovers for God

Malachi is written as a set of arguments. God says something, the people answer back, *How have we done that?*, and God tells them.

The priests are offering blind, lame and sick animals on the altar. God says, *Present it now to your governor! Will he be pleased with you?* (Malachi 1:8). They were giving God what they would never dare give a Persian official.

And in the middle of that complaint, a startling line: *For from the rising of the sun even to its going down, my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name* (Malachi 1:11). Some translations read it as saying that even among the nations, God is already being honored better than in his own Temple. Others, as here, read it as a promise for the future.

One father

Don't we all have one father? Hasn't one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously every man against his brother, profaning the covenant of our fathers? (Malachi 2:10).

Malachi says the men of Judah have dealt treacherously with *the wife of your youth*, divorcing them, and that God was a witness to those marriages (Malachi 2:14). Two verses later comes a line famous in many Bibles as *For I hate divorce, says the LORD* (Malachi 2:16). The Hebrew is very difficult, and some newer translations read it differently: *One who hates and divorces ... covers his garment with violence!*[2]

Against the oppressors of workers

Malachi 3:5 is a list of who God will testify against:

I will come near to you to judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers, and against the perjurers, and against those who oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow, and the fatherless, and who deprive the foreigner of justice, and don't fear me.

Cheating workers out of their wages is on the same list as sorcery and adultery. When I told a rich man the commandments and added *Do not defraud* (Mark 10:19), I was standing with Malachi.

The windows of heaven

Then come the verses that are preached more than any others in this book, usually just before the offering.

Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me! But you say, "How have we robbed you?" In tithes and offerings. ... Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house, and test me now in this ... if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there will not be room enough for (Malachi 3:8–10).

Here is what you need to know about the tithe. In the Law, every third year the tithe was stored up in each town so that *the Levite, because he has no portion nor inheritance with you, as well as the foreigner living among you, the fatherless, and the widow who are within your gates shall come, and shall eat and be satisfied* (Deuteronomy 14:28–29). The storehouse in Malachi was at the Temple, and it fed the Levites, who had no land of their own (Nehemiah 13:10–12). The tithe was how the landless and the poor were fed.

And remember that five verses earlier, God was testifying against people who cheat workers, oppress the widow and deprive the foreigner of justice (Malachi 3:5).

Malachi was not promising that God would make you rich if you gave money to a preacher. He was saying that a people who starved the storehouse were starving the people the tithe was meant to feed, and robbing God by doing it.

I told the Pharisees: *For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have left undone the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faith. But you ought to have done*

these, and not to have left the other undone (Matthew 23:23). Keep the tithe. But do not think the tithe is the point.

Healing in its wings

But to you who fear my name shall the sun of righteousness arise with healing in its wings (Malachi 4:2).

You may know that line from a Christmas carol: *Risen with healing in his wings*.[3]

The last words

The book ends:

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse (Malachi 4:5–6).

When the angel announced John's birth to his father, he used those same words. John would go before the Lord *in the spirit and power of Elijah, "to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children"* (Luke 1:17).

Elijah's job, when he came back, would not be fire from heaven. It would be to bring families back together.

My people found the last word, *curse*, too hard to end on. When they read Malachi aloud, they repeat the verse before it, about Elijah.[4] At the Passover table, many still pour a cup for Elijah and open the door to see if he has come.

In your Bible, the next page is the gospel.

Check It Yourself

Look up: Malachi 3:5, then Malachi 3:8–10, then Deuteronomy 14:28–29.

You will find: who the tithe was for, five verses after God condemns those who cheat workers.

Then read Malachi 4:5–6 and Luke 1:17.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at **LessonsOfJesus.com/malachi**.

The Short Version

- Malachi means **"my messenger."** I said the messenger was **John the Baptist**, and that **John was Elijah**.
- The priests were offering God **blind and lame animals**, leftovers they would never give a governor.
- God testifies against those who **cheat hired workers**, the **widow** and the **foreigner**.
- The **tithe** fed **the Levites**, and every third year **the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow**. It is not a promise of riches for giving.
- The book ends with **Elijah turning the hearts of the fathers to the children**, and in your Bible, the next page is the gospel.

AFTER THE LAST PAGE

You have read through every book of the scriptures I grew up on.

You may have noticed how often they argue with each other. Joshua says the whole land was taken, and Joshua says it was not. Kings praises a massacre, and Hosea condemns it. Deuteronomy shuts the Moabite out forever, and Ruth makes a Moabite the great-grandmother of David. Proverbs says the good prosper, and Job and Ecclesiastes say look around you. Isaiah beats swords into plowshares, and Joel beats them back into swords. The book of Jonah pleads for Nineveh, and Nahum dances on its grave.

My people kept all of it. They did not throw out the books that disagreed. They put them on the same shelf, sometimes on the same scroll, and read them aloud side by side. That was not a weakness in my scriptures. It was a way of teaching. Truth was something you argued your way toward together, not something handed down without question.

You may also have noticed the things that never change, from the first book to the last. God hears the slave. God defends the widow, the orphan and the stranger. God wants the worker paid before sunset and the poor man's cloak given back before night. God would rather have justice than sacrifice and mercy than ritual. God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abundant in loving kindness.

That is what I learned from these books. When I stood up in the synagogue at Nazareth, I did not bring anything new. I unrolled an old scroll, found my place and read it. Good news to the poor. Release to the captives. The year of the Lord's favor.

My Bible, in the order my people came to keep it, ended with a foreign king saying *go up*. Yours ends with a promise that Elijah would come and turn the hearts of the fathers to the children. Either way, the last page was not an ending. It was a door left open.

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BACK OF THE BOOK

A Simple Timeline

Read down the left column only, if that is easier. The dates are there so you can check them.

The stories before history

- **no dates possible** — God makes the world, the flood comes, and the nations are scattered at Babel. (Genesis 1–11)
- **no dates possible** — God calls Abraham, and the story follows Isaac, Jacob and Joseph down to Egypt. (Genesis 12–50)

Slaves, and set free

- **unknown; often placed in the 1200s BC** — Moses leads Israel out of slavery in Egypt, and they cross the sea on dry ground. (Exodus 1–14)
- **unknown; the same years** — At Mount Sinai, God gives the Law, and Leviticus tells the priests how to worship. (Exodus 19–20; Leviticus 1)
- **unknown; the same years** — Israel wanders forty years in the wilderness, because the first generation is afraid to enter the land. (Numbers 14)
- **unknown; the same years** — Moses gives his farewell speech and dies looking across the Jordan. (Deuteronomy 1; 34)

The land

- **unknown; often placed in the 1200s BC** — Joshua leads Israel across the Jordan, and Jericho falls in the story. (Joshua 3–6)
- **about 1208 BC** — An Egyptian stone set up by King Merneptah names Israel as a people living in Canaan.
- **about 1200–1000 BC** — Israel takes shape in the hill country, and judges such as Deborah, Gideon and Samson rescue the tribes. (Judges 4–16)

- **the time of the judges** — Ruth, a foreign widow, becomes the great-grandmother of King David. (Ruth 4)

Kings

- **the 1000s BC** — The tribes ask for a king, and Samuel anoints Saul. (1 Samuel 8–10)
- **about 1000 BC** — David takes Jerusalem and makes it his capital. (2 Samuel 5)
- **about 970–930 BC** — Solomon rules and builds the Temple in Jerusalem. (1 Kings 6)

Two kingdoms

- **about 930 BC** — Solomon dies, and the kingdom splits into Israel in the north and Judah in the south. (1 Kings 12)
- **about 880–850 BC** — Omri builds Samaria, and his son Ahab rules Israel with Queen Jezebel. (1 Kings 16)
- **about 850 BC** — The prophet Elijah stands up to Ahab and Jezebel. (1 Kings 17–19)
- **841 BC** — Jehu, who took Israel's throne by killing Ahab's family, bows to the king of Assyria on the Black Obelisk. (2 Kings 9–10)
- **about 840 BC** — Mesha, king of Moab, sets up a stone that names Omri and boasts of beating Israel. (2 Kings 3)
- **about 760–750 BC** — Amos, a herdsman from Judah, preaches in the north under King Jeroboam II. (Amos 1; 2 Kings 14)
- **about 750–725 BC** — Hosea preaches in the north in the last years before Assyria destroys it. (Hosea 1)
- **about 740–700 BC** — Isaiah and Micah preach in Judah. (Isaiah 6; Micah 1)

Assyria

- **722 BC** — Assyria destroys the northern kingdom of Israel and takes Samaria. (2 Kings 17)

- **701 BC** — Sennacherib of Assyria shuts King Hezekiah up in Jerusalem "like a bird in a cage," but the city survives. (2 Kings 18–19)
- **about 695–640 BC** — Manasseh, the worst king of Judah, rules for fifty-five years. (2 Kings 21)

The last kings of Judah

- **about 640–609 BC** — Josiah is king of Judah, and Zephaniah preaches in his reign. (2 Kings 22; Zephaniah 1)
- **about 627 BC** — Jeremiah begins to preach, and for forty years he warns that Babylon will take the city. (Jeremiah 1)
- **622 BC** — A scroll of the law is found in the Temple, and Josiah uses it to purge the land of other gods. (2 Kings 22–23)
- **612 BC** — Babylon and the Medes destroy Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, and the poem of Nahum cheers its fall. (Nahum 3)
- **609 BC** — Josiah is killed in battle at Megiddo, and Babylon rises as the new empire. (2 Kings 23)
- **about 605–597 BC** — Habakkuk asks why God would use a nation as cruel as Babylon. (Habakkuk 1)
- **597 BC** — Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon takes Jerusalem and carries off the young king and thousands of leaders, among them the priest Ezekiel. (2 Kings 24; Ezekiel 1:1–3)
- **593–571 BC** — In Babylon, Ezekiel sees God's glory leave the Temple and a valley of dry bones come back to life. (Ezekiel 10; Ezekiel 37)
- **586 BC** — Babylon breaks into Jerusalem, burns the Temple and takes most of the survivors to Babylon. (2 Kings 25)
- **soon after 586 BC** — Lamentations mourns the ruined city, and Obadiah condemns Edom for joining in the looting. (Lamentations 1; Obadiah 1)

Exile

- **586–539 BC** — In exile in Babylon, the people gather their scrolls and ask why it happened, and a later prophet in Isaiah 40 to 55 promises that it will end. (Psalm 137; Isaiah 40)

- **the late 600s to the 530s BC** — The stories of Daniel are set at the courts of Babylon and Persia. (Daniel 1)
- **561 BC** — The king of Babylon lets King Jehoiachin out of prison, the last event told in the books of Kings. (2 Kings 25)

Coming home

- **539–538 BC** — Cyrus of Persia takes Babylon and lets the exiles go home to rebuild their Temple. (Ezra 1)
- **520 BC** — Haggai and Zechariah urge the returned exiles to finish the Temple. (Haggai 1; Zechariah 1)
- **515 BC** — The Second Temple is finished. (Ezra 6)
- **486–465 BC** — Esther is set at the court of King Ahasuerus, usually identified with the Persian king Xerxes. (Esther 1)
- **the 400s BC** — Ezra, a priest and scribe, comes from Persia to teach the Law. (Ezra 7)
- **445 BC** — Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem as governor and rebuilds the city's walls. (Nehemiah 2–6)
- **the 400s BC** — Malachi scolds the priests of the rebuilt Temple. (Malachi 1)
- **the 500s–400s BC** — Most scholars think the five books of the Law reach their final form in the Persian years.
- **the 400s–200s BC** — The Psalms, many of them headed with David's name, are gathered into something close to the collection you have now. (Psalm 1)
- **perhaps the 500s–300s BC** — Many scholars place Joel, Job and the book of Jonah in the years after the exile. (Joel 1; Job 1; Jonah 1)
- **the 400s–300s BC** — Proverbs reaches its final form after growing for centuries. (Proverbs 1)
- **the 400s–200s BC** — Many scholars date the Song of Songs to these years, though some of its poems may be older. (Song of Songs 1)
- **probably the 300s BC** — Chronicles retells the whole history, from Adam to Cyrus, for the people who have come back. (1 Chronicles 1; 2 Chronicles

36)

The Greeks

- **332 BC** — Alexander the Great sweeps through, and the land passes from the Persians to the Greeks.
- **about 300–200 BC** — The Greek kings of Egypt, the Ptolemies, rule the land.
- **from the 200s BC** — Jews in Alexandria begin to translate the scriptures into Greek, in the translation called the Septuagint.
- **about 200 BC** — The Greek kings of Syria, the Seleucids, take over the land.
- **the 300s–200s BC** — Ecclesiastes is probably written in the Greek age, scholars think. (Ecclesiastes 1)

The Maccabees

- **167 BC** — Antiochus IV bans circumcision and the Sabbath and puts an altar to a Greek god in the Temple. (1 Maccabees 1)
- **about 165 BC** — Most scholars think the book of Daniel was finished to give hope to people who are being tortured for their faith. (Daniel 7–12)
- **164 BC** — The Maccabees take back the Temple and dedicate it again, which is remembered as Hanukkah. (1 Maccabees 4; John 10)
- **about 140–63 BC** — The Hasmoneans, the family of the Maccabees, rule as high priests and, from about 104 BC, as kings.

Rome

- **63 BC** — The Roman general Pompey takes Jerusalem and walks into the Holy of Holies.
- **40 BC** — The Roman Senate names Herod king of Judea.
- **37 BC** — Herod takes Jerusalem.
- **4 BC** — Herod dies.
- **about 4 BC** — Jesus is born near the end of Herod's reign. (Matthew 2; Luke 2)

How the scrolls reached you

- **the 200s BC to the first century AD** — Scribes copy the scrolls later called the Dead Sea Scrolls, which include every book of the Old Testament except Esther and Nehemiah.
- **AD 70** — The Romans burn the Temple in Jerusalem, as I said they would. (Mark 13:1–2)
- **AD 1008** — The Leningrad Codex, the oldest complete copy of the Hebrew Bible, is written out.
- **about AD 1200** — Stephen Langton adds chapter numbers to the Bible.
- **the 1550s** — Robert Estienne adds verse numbers to the Bible.
- **from 1947** — A shepherd boy finds the first of the Dead Sea Scrolls in a cave near the Dead Sea, and more are found in the years after.

Who's Who

The people this book names, in one place. If you have forgotten anyone, look here.

The first families

Aaron — the brother of Moses, whom Moses ordains as a priest along with his sons. While Moses is on Mount Sinai, the people demand gods, and Aaron makes them a golden calf.

Abel — the brother whom Cain kills in Genesis, the first death in the scriptures. Jesus named him at the start of the list of righteous blood shed on earth.

Abraham — the father of the people in Genesis. God calls him to leave Mesopotamia for Canaan, and promises him land, children and a blessing for every family on earth.

Adam — the first human being. 1 Chronicles opens its family trees with his name, and Luke traces Jesus's family back to him.

Balaam — a seer from the east whom the king of Moab hires to curse Israel, but who can only bless it. His donkey sees an angel that he cannot, and speaks to him.

Cain — the son of the first man and woman in Genesis. He kills his brother Abel in a field.

Esau — Jacob's twin brother, who loses his rights as the firstborn and his father's blessing to Jacob. The Edomites, the people Obadiah condemns, descend from him.

Isaac — Abraham's son and Jacob's father. God tells Abraham to sacrifice him on a mountain, and stops it at the last moment.

Jacob — Isaac's son, whom God renames Israel. His twelve sons become the twelve tribes.

Job — the hero of the book that bears his name, a good man who loses everything and puts God on trial. The book sets him in a land outside Israel, in a world like Genesis, but it was written much later.

Joseph — Jacob's son, sold into slavery by his brothers, who rises to run Egypt for Pharaoh. At the end of Genesis he forgives them.

Miriam — Aaron's sister, who leads the women in dancing after Israel crosses the sea. In Numbers she is struck with a skin disease for a week after she and Aaron challenge Moses, and later she dies.

Moses — the leader who brings Israel out of slavery in Egypt, receives the Law at Mount Sinai, and dies on a mountain looking across the Jordan. Tradition says he wrote the first five books of the Bible.

Noah — the man who survives the flood in a great boat, with his family and the animals. God promises never to flood the earth again.

Phinehas — a priest who kills an Israelite man and a Midianite woman with a spear in Numbers, and whom God praises. The book says he became the model for people who thought killing for God was holy.

Judges and kings

Ahab — Omri's son and king of Israel, married to Jezebel. The prophet Elijah stood up to him, and an Assyrian record names him at the battle of Qarqar in 853 BC.

Ahaz — a king of Judah in Isaiah's day. When the kings of Aram and northern Israel marched on Jerusalem, Isaiah gave him the sign of a child named Immanuel, and he sent Assyria silver and gold from the Temple.

Bathsheba — the wife of Uriah, whom David takes as his own. She becomes the mother of Solomon.

Boaz — a wealthy relative of Naomi's dead husband in the book of Ruth. He lets Ruth gather grain in his fields, buys the family land and marries her.

David — the shepherd from Bethlehem who became Israel's second king, taking Jerusalem around 1000 BC and making it his capital. People remembered his reign as a golden age and called Jesus the son of David.

Deborah — a prophet and judge who sends Barak against the Canaanite commander Sisera. A woman named Jael kills Sisera, and the Song of Deborah in Judges 5 may be among the oldest Hebrew poetry.

Gideon — the judge who tears down his father's altar to Baal and beats the Midianites with three hundred men. He refuses to be king, but his son Abimelech murders his brothers and makes himself king.

Goliath — the Philistine giant whom David kills with one stone in 1 Samuel 17. The Hebrew text makes him nearly ten feet tall, while the oldest copy and the Greek make him about six feet nine.

Hezekiah — a king of Judah in the years of Isaiah and Micah. In 701 BC the Assyrian king Sennacherib shut him up in Jerusalem, but the city survived.

Jehoiachin — the young king of Judah whom Nebuchadnezzar carried off to Babylon in 597 BC. Babylonian tablets list oil for him, and the last event told in the books of Kings is his release from prison in 561 BC.

Jehu — the army commander who seized Israel's throne by killing Ahab's family and Queen Jezebel. He bows to the Assyrian king on the Black Obelisk in 841 BC, and Hosea says God will punish the bloodshed.

Jephthah — an outcast who became a judge, beat the Ammonites, and sacrificed his daughter to keep a vow. Readers have argued about her story for two thousand years.

Jeroboam — the first king of the northern kingdom, after Solomon's death around 930 BC. He set up golden calves at Bethel and Dan, and Kings judges every later northern king by his sins.

Jeroboam II — the king of Israel under whom Amos preached, about 760–750 BC. Jonah son of Amittai also prophesied in his reign.

Jezebel — Ahab's queen, who has Naboth killed so that Ahab can take his vineyard. Elijah confronted her, and Jehu later has her thrown from a window.

Joshua — Moses's successor, who leads Israel across the Jordan around 1200 BC. His Hebrew name, Yehoshua, is the same name as Jesus.

Josiah — king of Judah from about 640 to 609 BC, in whose reign a scroll of the law was found in the Temple in 622 BC. He used it to purge the land of other gods, and he was killed at Megiddo in 609 BC.

Manasseh — king of Judah for fifty-five years, about 695–640 BC. Kings calls him the worst king of Judah, and Chronicles adds that he was taken captive, humbled himself, and was brought home.

Naomi — the widow from Bethlehem in the book of Ruth, who loses her husband and both sons in Moab. She goes home with her daughter-in-law Ruth.

Omri — the king of Israel who built Samaria, and Ahab's father. Assyria called Israel the land of Omri, and a Moabite king's stone names him.

Philistines — a people who settled on the coast of Canaan in the 1100s BC. They fight Samson and Saul, and David kills their giant Goliath.

Rahab — a prostitute of Jericho who hides two Israelite spies and is spared when the walls fall. Matthew lists her in Jesus's family tree.

Rehoboam — Solomon's son, who refused to lighten the people's heavy load. The kingdom split in two around 930 BC.

Ruth — a Moabite widow who stays with Naomi, marries Boaz, and becomes the great-grandmother of King David. Matthew names her in Jesus's family tree.

Samson — a judge dedicated as a Nazirite before his birth, strong as long as his hair was uncut. Delilah betrays him to the Philistines, and he dies pulling down their temple.

Samuel — the last of the judges, and a prophet. He warns the people what a king will cost, then anoints Saul as the first king, and later David.

Saul — the first king of Israel, a tall young man from the tribe of Benjamin whom Samuel anoints. He grows jealous of David, and he dies after the

Philistines defeat Israel on Mount Gilboa.

Solomon — David's son by Bathsheba, who ruled about 970–930 BC and built the Temple in Jerusalem. The scriptures remember his wisdom and his forced labor, and link Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs to his name.

Uriah — Bathsheba's husband, a faithful foreign soldier. David has him killed to cover up his adultery.

Prophets

Amos — a herdsman and fig-tree tender from Tekoa in Judah, who went north to preach under Jeroboam II, about 760–750 BC. His is the earliest prophet's book that survives, and he condemns those who cheat the poor.

Baruch — Jeremiah's scribe, who wrote down the prophet's words. He wrote them out a second time after King Jehoiakim burned the first scroll.

Daniel — the young Jewish exile at the courts of Babylon and Persia in the book that bears his name. He keeps praying in spite of a ban and is thrown to the lions, though most scholars think the book was finished about 165 BC.

Elijah — a prophet of the northern kingdom, about 850 BC, who stood up to King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. In 2 Kings he is carried up to heaven in a whirlwind, and Malachi promises that he will return.

Elisha — Elijah's successor, who takes up his cloak. In 2 Kings he feeds a hundred men with twenty loaves, and heals the Aramean general Naaman of his skin disease.

Ezekiel — a priest carried off to Babylon in 597 BC, whose dated prophecies run from 593 to 571 BC. In exile he sees God's glory leave the Temple, and a valley of dry bones come back to life.

Habakkuk — a prophet of Judah, about 605–597 BC, who asks why God would use a nation as cruel as Babylon. Nothing else is known about him.

Haggai — the prophet who urged the returned exiles in 520 BC to finish the Temple. His four messages are all dated to the second year of the Persian king Darius I.

Hosea — a prophet in the northern kingdom, about 750–725 BC, in the last years before Assyria destroyed it. His marriage to Gomer becomes a picture of God's love for unfaithful Israel.

Isaiah — a prophet in Jerusalem from about 740 BC, in the years Assyria threatened Judah. His scroll runs on into the exile and after, and most scholars think later prophets added chapters 40 to 66.

Jeremiah — a priest's son from Anathoth who prophesied from about 627 BC until after Jerusalem fell in 586 BC. He warned that Babylon would take the city, and he was beaten and imprisoned for saying so.

Joel — the son of Pethuel, a prophet about whom nothing else is known. The book names no king, and many scholars place it after the exile.

Jonah — a prophet from Gath-hepher in Galilee, the son of Amittai, who prophesied under Jeroboam II in the 700s BC. The book that tells how he is sent to Nineveh was written much later, most likely after the exile.

Malachi — the name on the last book of the Twelve, which means "my messenger" and may be a title and not a name. The book scolds the priests of the rebuilt Temple, probably about 500–450 BC.

Micah — a prophet from the farming village of Moresheth in Judah, who preached about 740–700 BC in the same years as Isaiah. His book names Bethlehem as the birthplace of a coming ruler.

Nahum — a prophet from Elkosh, whose poem cheers the fall of Nineveh. His book dates between 663 BC, when Assyria sacked Thebes, and 612 BC, when Nineveh fell.

Nathan — the prophet who confronts David over Bathsheba with a parable about a rich man and a poor man's one little ewe. He later helps put Solomon on the throne.

Obadiah — the prophet of the shortest book in the Old Testament, one chapter against Edom for joining in the looting after Jerusalem fell in 586 BC. Nothing else is known about him.

Zechariah — the son of Berechiah, a prophet in Jerusalem in 520–518 BC alongside Haggai, while the Temple was rebuilt. Most scholars think chapters 9 to 14 of his book come from later prophets.

Zechariah son of Jehoiada — the priest's son stoned in the Temple courtyard by order of King Joash, told in 2 Chronicles 24. Jesus named him with Abel as the last of the righteous blood shed, though Matthew's gospel calls him son of Barachiah.

Zephaniah — a prophet in the reign of King Josiah, about 640–609 BC, whose family goes back four generations to a Hezekiah, perhaps the king. Many scholars think he spoke before Josiah's reform of 622 BC.

After the exile

Esther — a Jewish orphan raised by her cousin Mordecai, who becomes queen of Persia and saves her people from Haman. The book never mentions God, and most scholars read it as a historical novel.

Ezra — a priest and scribe who came from Persia to Jerusalem in the 400s BC to teach the Law of Moses. King Artaxerxes sent him.

Haman — the villain of Esther, a Persian official and a descendant of Agag, who plots to destroy the Jews. He is hanged on the gallows he built for Mordecai.

Judah Maccabee — the most famous son of Mattathias, nicknamed Maccabee, which probably means the Hammer. In 164 BC he and his family took back the Temple and dedicated it again.

Maccabees — the family of the priest Mattathias, who revolted against Antiochus IV in 167 BC and won back the Temple in 164 BC. Their descendants, the Hasmoneans, ruled as kings and high priests for about eighty years.

Mattathias — the priest who began the revolt against Antiochus IV in 167 BC, with his sons.

Mordecai — Esther's cousin, who raised her and uncovered a plot against the king. The book ends with him second only to the king.

Nehemiah — a Jew who served the Persian king as cupbearer, and came to Jerusalem as governor in 445 BC. He rebuilt the city's walls in fifty-two days and cancelled the debts of the poor.

Sanballat — the governor of Samaria, who with Tobiah and Geshem mocked and plotted against Nehemiah's builders. A letter of 407 BC from the Jews of Elephantine in Egypt mentions his sons.

Vashti — the Persian queen who refuses to show herself to King Ahasuerus's guests, and is removed. The king then chooses Esther.

Zerubbabel — the governor named in Haggai, whom Haggai hoped would rule as a king of David's line. He vanishes from history, but both gospels list him in Jesus's family tree.

Rulers of the empires

Ahasuerus — the Persian king in the book of Esther, usually identified with Xerxes I, who ruled 486–465 BC. He removes Queen Vashti and makes Esther queen.

Alexander the Great — the Greek conqueror who swept through the land in 332 BC on his way to Egypt, so that it passed from the Persians to the Greeks. When he died young, his generals divided his empire.

Antiochus IV — the Greek king of Syria who in 167 BC banned circumcision and the Sabbath and set up an altar to a Greek god in the Temple. The Maccabees revolted against him, and the book of Daniel was finished during his persecution.

Artaxerxes — the Persian king who sent Ezra to Jerusalem to teach the Law. Nehemiah served him as cupbearer.

Belshazzar — the king in Daniel 5 whose feast ends with a hand writing on the wall. Babylonian records show he was the son of Nabonidus and ruled for his father, but was never king himself.

Cyrus — the Persian king who took Babylon in 539 BC and let the exiles go home to rebuild the Temple the next year. Isaiah even gives this foreign king the

title messiah.

Darius I — the Persian king in whose second year, 520 BC, Haggai gave his messages. When the Temple work was challenged, he had the archives searched, found Cyrus's decree, and ordered the work to go on.

Hammurabi — a king of Babylon, about 1792–1750 BC, whose laws are carved on a black stone pillar. They contain the same limit on revenge, an eye for an eye, that Exodus does.

Herod the Great — the king of Judea whom the Roman Senate named in 40 BC. He ruled by fear, rebuilt the Temple on a vast scale, and died in 4 BC. Jesus was born near the end of his reign.

Merneptah — an Egyptian king whose stone monument, set up about 1208 BC, is the earliest mention of Israel outside the Bible. It speaks of Israel as a people already living in Canaan.

Nabonidus — the last king of Babylon, who left the capital for about ten years and lived at Tayma in Arabia while his son ruled. Cyrus says he had offended the gods.

Nebuchadnezzar — the Babylonian king who took Jerusalem in 597 BC and carried off King Jehoiachin and thousands of leaders, among them the priest Ezekiel. He is also the king in the early stories of Daniel.

Neco — the Pharaoh who killed King Josiah at Megiddo in 609 BC.

Pompey — the Roman general who took Jerusalem in 63 BC and walked into the Holy of Holies. From then on, the Jews lived under Rome.

Sargon II — the Assyrian king the Bible names only once, in Isaiah 20:1. His own records boast that he conquered Samaria and carried off 27,290 of its people, and his palace at Khorsabad was dug up in 1843.

Sennacherib — the Assyrian king who invaded Judah in 701 BC and shut King Hezekiah up in Jerusalem. His own record boasts that he trapped Hezekiah like a bird in a cage, but never claims he took the city.

Shalmaneser III — the Assyrian king whose monument names Ahab at the battle of Qarqar in 853 BC. The Black Obelisk shows Jehu bowing before him in 841 BC.

Tiglath-pileser III — the Assyrian king from 745 to 727 BC, called Pul in 2 Kings. He crushed Damascus and attacked Israel, and King Ahaz of Judah sent him silver and gold from the Temple.

Writers, scholars and finders

Akiva — a great Jewish teacher in the generations after Jesus, who defended the Song of Songs as holy. He also hailed the rebel Simon, called Bar Kokhba, who led a war against Rome about a hundred years after Jesus.

Avraham Biran — the archaeologist whose team at Tel Dan found, in 1993, a broken stone that names the house of David.

Baruch Spinoza — the philosopher who argued openly, in 1670, that Moses did not write the five books of the Law.

Chronicler — the unknown writer of 1 and 2 Chronicles, probably connected with the Temple and perhaps a Levite. He wrote, probably in the 300s BC, for the people who had come home from exile.

Flinders Petrie — the British archaeologist who found the Merneptah stone, the earliest mention of Israel outside the Bible, at Thebes in 1896.

George Smith — a young engraver turned scholar at the British Museum, who in 1872 found a broken tablet from Nineveh with a flood story. It was the eleventh tablet of the Epic of Gilgamesh.

Hillel — a famous Jewish teacher who lived shortly before Jesus's time. He approved the prosbul, a legal device that let lenders keep lending as the seventh year of release came near.

Israel Finkelstein — an Israeli archaeologist who argued in 1996 that the gates once called Solomon's belong to the 800s BC, about a century later. The book also cites his estimate that only 400 to 500 people lived in Jerusalem after the exile.

Jerome — the scholar who translated the Bible into Latin around the year 400. He said that seven or eight hundred lines were missing from the Greek book of Job.

Josephus — a Jewish historian of the first century, from a priestly family. The book draws on his histories for the Temple, Herod and the war with Rome.

Julius Wellhausen — the German scholar who by 1878 had set out the theory of four sources, called J, E, D and P, woven together in the first five books. Universities taught it for the next hundred years.

Martin Luther — the monk whose new understanding of a line from Habakkuk, as Paul quotes it in Romans, became the heart of the Protestant Reformation.

Martin Noth — the German scholar who argued in 1943 that Deuteronomy through 2 Kings is one long history, written by someone steeped in Deuteronomy to explain why Israel lost its land.

Origen — a Christian scholar of the 200s, who preached a series of sermons on Joshua and filled gaps in the Greek book of Job from other Greek translations.

Porphyry — a pagan philosopher of the 200s AD who argued that Daniel 11 was written after the events it describes. Most modern scholars agree with him.

Qohelet — the name the writer of Ecclesiastes gives himself, which means something like the one who gathers an assembly. He speaks as if he were Solomon, but lived long after him.

Robert Estienne — a French printer working in Geneva, who added the verse numbers to the Bible in the 1550s.

Stephen Langton — an English churchman who added the chapter numbers to the Bible around the year 1200, and later became archbishop of Canterbury.

William Tyndale — the English translator who spread the form Jehovah in the 1500s, and who coined the word scapegoat in 1530.

Notes

The Bible references are in the text itself. These notes give the sources for the history, and the details behind anything that is debated. Tap a note number in the text to come here, and tap ↩ to go back.

Before We Start: My Bible

1. Josephus, Against Apion 1.37–41, written about AD 95, counts twenty-two books. 4 Ezra (2 Esdras) 14:44–46, about AD 100, speaks of twenty-four books to be made public. The difference is usually explained by Josephus counting Ruth with Judges and Lamentations with Jeremiah. ↩
2. The earliest surviving statement of the order of the Prophets and the Writings is a baraita in the Babylonian Talmud, Bava Batra 14b, which ends the Writings with Chronicles but begins them with Ruth, not Psalms. Medieval manuscripts vary: the Leningrad Codex (AD 1008) puts Chronicles first among the Writings. Printed Hebrew Bibles end with Chronicles. ↩
3. The Zechariah stoned in the Temple court is the son of Jehoiada (2 Chronicles 24:20–22). Matthew 23:35 calls him "son of Barachiah," apparently confusing him with the prophet Zechariah son of Berechiah (Zechariah 1:1). Since Zechariah son of Jehoiada is not the last martyr in chronological order (Uriah, in Jeremiah 26:20–23, is later), the saying is usually read as running from the first book of the scriptures to the last. This is an inference, not a certainty. ↩
4. Mishnah Yadayim 3:5 (compiled about AD 200) records disagreement over whether the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes "render the hands unclean," the rabbinic way of saying a book is holy scripture, and Rabbi Akiva's defense of the Song. See also Mishnah Eduyot 5:3. ↩
5. No fragment of Esther has been identified among the Dead Sea Scrolls. The identification of a small fragment of Nehemiah is debated, but Ezra and Nehemiah were one book, and Ezra is attested (4Q117), so the combined book is usually counted as present. ↩
6. Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 4.26.13–14, preserves Melito of Sardis's list of "the books of the old covenant." It does not include Esther. Lamentations and Nehemiah are probably counted under Jeremiah and Ezra. ↩
7. The Letter of Aristeas tells the legend of seventy-two translators of the Law at Alexandria. The Law was probably translated in the third century BC and the other books over the following two centuries. The complete Greek Bibles that survive, Codex Vaticanus, Sinaiticus and Alexandrinus, are Christian manuscripts of the fourth and fifth centuries, and they do not agree exactly on which additional books they contain. ↩
8. Stephen Langton introduced the chapter divisions into the Latin Bible in the early thirteenth century, while teaching at Paris, before he became archbishop of Canterbury in 1207. Robert Estienne (Stephanus) printed verse numbers in his Greek New Testament of 1551 and in his complete Latin Bible of 1555, both printed at Geneva. Hebrew manuscripts already marked verse endings, without numbers. ↩

The Story of My People

1. The Merneptah Stele, now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, is dated to the fifth year of Merneptah, about 1208 BC. Its line "Israel is laid waste; his seed is not" is the earliest mention of Israel outside the Bible. The sign used with the name marks Israel as a people, not a city or a territory. ↩
2. Israel Finkelstein, *The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement* (1988); William G. Dever, *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* (2003). Kathleen Kenyon's excavations at Jericho (1952–1958) found little evidence of a city there in the thirteenth century BC. A minority of scholars date a destruction of Jericho earlier, to about 1400 BC. ↩
3. The Tel Dan inscription, in Aramaic, was found in fragments in 1993 and 1994. It is usually attributed to Hazael, king of Aram-Damascus, in the late ninth century BC, and reads *bytdwd*, "house of David." It is in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem. ↩
4. The Mesha Stele (about 840 BC), found at Dhiban in Jordan in 1868 and now in the Louvre, says that "Omri was king of Israel, and he oppressed Moab many days." The Kurkh Monolith of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III names "Ahab the Israelite" among the kings who fought him at Qarqar in 853 BC. ↩
5. 2 Kings 17:5–6, 24. Samaria fell after a siege in 722 BC, at the end of the reign of Shalmaneser V; his successor Sargon II claimed its capture and the deportation of 27,290 people. ↩
6. Sennacherib's annals of his campaign of 701 BC, preserved on clay prisms such as the Taylor Prism in the British Museum, say of Hezekiah: "Himself, like a bird in a cage, I shut up in Jerusalem, his royal city." They claim forty-six of his walled cities. The siege of Lachish is shown on carved reliefs from Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh, also in the British Museum. Compare 2 Kings 18–19 and Isaiah 36–37. ↩
7. The Babylonian chronicle known as the Fall of Nineveh Chronicle records the capture of Nineveh by the Babylonians and the Medes in 612 BC. ↩
8. A Babylonian chronicle dates Nebuchadnezzar's capture of Jerusalem to the second day of the month Adar in his seventh year, in March 597 BC. The final destruction is dated to 587 or 586 BC; this book uses 586. See 2 Kings 24:10–17 and 25:1–21. ↩
9. The ration tablets from Babylon, dated to about 592 BC and published by Ernst Weidner in 1939, list oil for "Ya'ukin, king of the land of Judah" and his sons. ↩
10. The Cyrus Cylinder, in the British Museum, describes Cyrus's capture of Babylon in 539 BC and his return of captured gods and peoples to their homes. It does not mention the Jews. Compare Ezra 1:1–4 and 6:3–5. ↩
11. 1 Maccabees 1:41–64 (the decrees and the desecration of the Temple, 167 BC) and 4:36–59 (the dedication of the Temple, 164 BC); 2 Maccabees 6:1–2 names the god as Olympian Zeus. 1 and 2 Maccabees are part of Catholic and Orthodox Bibles and of the Apocrypha in older Protestant Bibles. The date of Daniel rests partly on Daniel 11, which follows events closely up to about 167 BC and then predicts an end for Antiochus that did not happen. ↩
12. Josephus, *Antiquities* 14.4.4 and *Jewish War* 1.7.6 (Pompey in the Holy of Holies); *Antiquities* 14.14.4–5 (Herod named king by the Senate in 40 BC). Herod took Jerusalem in 37 BC. His death is usually dated to 4 BC, though some scholars argue for a slightly later date. ↩

1. Genesis

1. Deuteronomy 24:1–4 regulates a husband's certificate of divorce. Mishnah Gittin 9:10 records the dispute between the schools of Shammai and Hillel over the grounds for divorce. Jewish law gave the right to initiate divorce to the husband; a wife could ask a court to compel a divorce only in limited cases (Mishnah Ketubot 7:10). Mark 10:12 also addresses a wife divorcing her husband, which Roman law allowed. ↩
2. The two accounts are Genesis 1:1–2:4a and 2:4b–25. The classic statement of the documentary hypothesis, which divided the Pentateuch into sources called J, E, D and P, is Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (first published in German in 1878 as *Geschichte Israels*; retitled *Prolegomena* in 1883). Many scholars now reject or heavily revise the four-source model, but a broad consensus holds that the Pentateuch combines earlier materials, with a "Priestly" layer that includes Genesis 1, and that it reached its final form in the Persian period. ↩
3. The name Tutankhamun (Egyptian *Tut-ankh-Amun*) is usually translated "living image of Amun." In Neo-Assyrian letters to Esarhaddon, courtiers call the king the image (*ṣalmu*) of the god. The royal background of "image of God" in Genesis 1:26–27 is widely discussed; see J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image* (2005). ↩
4. The Septuagint of Genesis 4:24 reads *hebdomēkontakis hepta*, the same phrase used in Matthew 18:22. It can be translated "seventy-seven times" or "seventy times seven." ↩
5. In the Old Babylonian epic of Atrahasis (about 1700 BC), the gods send the flood because the noise of humanity disturbs their sleep. In Tablet XI of the standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh, Utnapishtim survives in a boat that grounds on Mount Nimush and sends out a dove, a swallow and a raven. Compare Genesis 8:4–12. ↩
6. Ezekiel 16:49–50. The Wisdom of Solomon 19:13–17 compares Egypt's cruelty to strangers with that of people who "refused to receive strangers" (19:14), an unnamed allusion to Sodom (compare 19:17 with Genesis 19:11). ↩
7. Genesis 47:13–26. Verse 21 in the Hebrew says Joseph "removed the people to the cities"; the Samaritan Pentateuch and the Septuagint read that he "made slaves of them." Either way, verse 25 has the people offering themselves as Pharaoh's slaves. ↩

2. Exodus

1. In Mark 14:12–16, Matthew 26:17–19 and Luke 22:7–15 the last supper is a Passover meal. In John 18:28 and 19:14 the crucifixion takes place on the day of preparation, before the Passover meal. The covenant cup is at Mark 14:24, Matthew 26:28, Luke 22:20 and 1 Corinthians 11:25, all of which read "new covenant" in the WEB, echoing Jeremiah 31:31. The oldest manuscripts of Mark and Matthew lack the word "new." ↩
2. The massacre of Matthew 2:16–18 is not mentioned by Josephus, who catalogs Herod's cruelties in detail, or by any other early source. The only non-Christian mention, in Macrobius (Saturnalia 2.4.11, early fifth century), is late and probably depends on the Christian story. Its parallels with Exodus 1–2 are widely noted, and many historians regard it as a theological narrative rather than a historical report. Others argue that the killing of a few infants in a small village could easily go unrecorded. ↩
3. On the avoidance of pronouncing the divine name by the Second Temple period, see Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1 and Mishnah Yoma 6:2. The hybrid form "Jehovah" combines the consonants

YHWH with the vowels of *Adonai*. It appears in Christian Latin writing from the thirteenth century and entered English through William Tyndale's Pentateuch of 1530 ("Iehouah"). ↩

4. Josephus, Antiquities 13.297 and 18.16, says the Sadducees accepted only the written law and rejected the traditions of the Pharisees. Later church writers claimed they accepted only the five books of Moses; most scholars think that overstates it. ↩
5. The Merneptah Stele, about 1208 BC, now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo: "Israel is laid waste; his seed is not." The sign used marks Israel as a people, not a city. ↩
6. "You shall not defraud" (Greek *mē aposterēsēs*) appears in Mark 10:19 but not in the parallels at Matthew 19:18–19 and Luke 18:20. The same verb is used in the Septuagint of Malachi 3:5, and in Codex Alexandrinus at Deuteronomy 24:14, for withholding a hired worker's wages. ↩
7. The Mesad Hashavyahu (Yavneh-Yam) ostracon, late seventh century BC, now in the Israel Museum, is a petition from a reaper whose garment was confiscated by an overseer. ↩
8. Laws of Hammurabi 196–200, about 1750 BC. Compare Exodus 21:23–25, Leviticus 24:19–20 and Deuteronomy 19:21. ↩
9. Exodus 34:6–7 is echoed in Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalms 86:15, 103:8 and 145:8; Joel 2:13; and Jonah 4:2. ↩

3. Leviticus

1. Mark 12:28–31; Matthew 22:34–40; Luke 10:25–28, all joining Deuteronomy 6:4–5 with Leviticus 19:18. In Luke 10:27 the lawyer himself joins the two commandments. A century later, Rabbi Akiva called Leviticus 19:18 "a great principle of the Torah" (Sifra, Qedoshim 4:12). The saying of Hillel, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor; that is the whole Torah," is in the Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a. ↩
2. Luke 2:22–24, citing Leviticus 12:6–8. ↩
3. The Hebrew *tsara'at* covers a range of skin conditions and also mold or discoloration on garments and houses (Leviticus 13:47–59; 14:33–53). It is not Hansen's disease, the modern leprosy. Some manuscripts of Mark 1:41 say Jesus was "angry" rather than "moved with pity." ↩
4. Mark 7:19b is a narrative aside. Compare Matthew 15:17. On the continuing dispute over food laws, see Acts 10:9–16; Acts 15:19–29; Galatians 2:11–14; Romans 14. ↩
5. Leviticus 16:8, 10, 26. In 1 Enoch 8:1 and 10:4–8, Azazel is a fallen angel bound in the desert. Tyndale's Pentateuch (1530) rendered the Hebrew as "scape goat," from "escape." ↩
6. Luke 10:30–32; Leviticus 21:1–4; Numbers 19:11–16. The purity explanation is common but not stated in the parable, and the priest is described as "going down" from Jerusalem, away from the Temple. ↩
7. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae I–II, question 99, distinguishes moral, ceremonial and judicial precepts of the Old Law. The same threefold division appears in the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 19. ↩
8. The Liberty Bell, cast for the Pennsylvania State House in 1752 and recast in 1753, bears the inscription "Proclaim LIBERTY throughout all the Land unto all the Inhabitants thereof Lev. XXV. v X." The Hebrew *deror*, "liberty" or "release," appears in Leviticus 25:10, Isaiah 61:1, Jeremiah 34:8–17 and Ezekiel 46:17. There is no clear evidence that the Jubilee year was ever observed as Leviticus describes. ↩

4. Numbers

1. The Ketef Hinnom amulets were excavated in 1979 by Gabriel Barkay and are now in the Israel Museum. They are dated to the late seventh or early sixth century BC and contain a text close to Numbers 6:24–26. See Gabriel Barkay and others, "The Amulets from Ketef Hinnom: A New Edition and Evaluation," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 334 (2004). ↩
2. Luke 1:15; compare Numbers 6:3 and Judges 13:4–5. Luke does not call John a Nazirite. Paul joins men completing a Nazirite vow in Acts 21:23–26. ↩
3. The Greek *kraspedon* (fringe, tassel) appears at Matthew 9:20, 14:36 and 23:5, Mark 6:56 and Luke 8:44. The law is at Numbers 15:37–41 and Deuteronomy 22:12. ↩
4. 2 Kings 18:4. ↩
5. Balaam comes from "Aram, the eastern mountains" (Numbers 23:7). Rabbi Akiva's application of Numbers 24:17 to Simon bar Kosiba is reported in the Jerusalem Talmud, Taanit 4:8 (68d). Origen, Against Celsus 1.59–60, connects the Magi's star with Balaam's prophecy. ↩
6. Numbers 27:1–11; Numbers 36:1–12; Joshua 17:3–6. ↩
7. Numbers 25:6–13; Psalm 106:30–31; Sirach 45:23; 1 Maccabees 2:26 and 2:54. Simon is "the Zealot" at Luke 6:15 and Acts 1:13 and "the Cananaean," from the Aramaic for zealot, at Mark 3:18 and Matthew 10:4. Whether the name marks a political party or personal religious zeal is debated. Josephus describes the Zealots as an organized faction only in the war of the 60s. ↩

5. Deuteronomy

1. Matthew 4:1–11 and Luke 4:1–13 (in a different order). Matthew 4:10 and Luke 4:8 read "worship" where the Hebrew and the main Septuagint text of Deuteronomy 6:13 read "fear." The added "only" is found in Greek manuscripts such as Codex Vaticanus. ↩
2. Mishnah Berakhot 1:1–4 regulates the recitation of the Shema evening and morning. Josephus, Antiquities 4.212, describes twice-daily thanksgiving at rising and at going to sleep. ↩
3. The Septuagint of Deuteronomy 17:18 renders the Hebrew *mishneh ha-torah ha-zot*, "a copy of this law," as *to deuteronomion touto*, "this second law." ↩
4. 2 Kings 22:3–23:25; compare 2 Chronicles 34. The identification of Josiah's scroll with a form of Deuteronomy was argued by W. M. L. de Wette in 1805 and is widely held, though the extent of that scroll is debated. ↩
5. Babylonian Talmud, Bava Batra 14b–15a, attributes the last eight verses of Deuteronomy (34:5–12) to Joshua. ↩
6. Mishnah Shevi'it 10:3–4 attributes the prosbul to Hillel and explains that it was instituted because people refrained from lending, transgressing Deuteronomy 15:9. ↩
7. Laws of Hammurabi 15–16 prescribe death for helping a slave escape or for harboring a fugitive slave. ↩
8. Mishnah Sanhedrin 8:1–5 hedges the law with conditions. The Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 71a, records the view that "there never was a stubborn and rebellious son and never will be." ↩
9. Mishnah Gittin 9:10. The School of Hillel allowed divorce "even if she spoiled his dish." ↩
10. Deuteronomy 7:1–6 and 20:16–18. On the relationship between these commands, their late setting and the archaeological record, see the chapter on Joshua. ↩

1. 4QTestimonia (4Q175) from Qumran Cave 4 places Deuteronomy 5:28–29 and 18:18–19 with Numbers 24:15–17 and Deuteronomy 33:8–11, followed by Joshua 6:26 with a passage from the Apocryphon of Joshua. Compare John 1:21, 6:14 and 7:40, and Acts 3:22–23 and 7:37. ↩

6. Joshua

1. The Hebrew *Yehoshua* appears in later books as *Yeshua* (Nehemiah 8:17). The Septuagint renders both as *Iēsous*, and titles the book *Iēsous*. The King James Version translates *Iēsous* as "Jesus" at Acts 7:45 and Hebrews 4:8, where Joshua is meant; most modern translations print "Joshua." ↩
2. Matthew 1:3–6. The Old Testament does not record Rahab's marriage to Salmon; Matthew is the only source. The genealogy also places very few generations between Salmon and David for the time involved. ↩
3. Kathleen Kenyon's excavations at Jericho (1952–1958) dated the destruction of the last great walled city to about 1550 BC and found little occupation in the late thirteenth century. Bryant Wood has argued for a destruction around 1400 BC, a minority view. At Ai (et-Tell), excavations by Judith Marquet-Krause (1933–1935) and Joseph Callaway (from 1964) found no occupation between about 2400 and 1200 BC. On highland settlement, see Israel Finkelstein, *The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement* (1988), and William G. Dever, *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* (2003). ↩
4. Compare Joshua 10:40–42 and 11:16–23 with Joshua 13:1–6, 15:63, 16:10 and 17:12–13, and Judges 1. ↩
5. John Underhill, *Newes from America* (London, 1638), defending the burning of the Pequot fort at Mystic in May 1637. Underhill appeals to "Davids warre" rather than to Joshua. ↩
6. A remark against Copernicus citing Joshua 10 is recorded in Luther's Table Talk for 1539; its exact wording differs between Anton Lauterbach's notes and Johannes Aurifaber's later edition. Galileo discussed Joshua 10 at length in his *Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina* (1615). The Book of Jashar is also cited at 2 Samuel 1:18. ↩

7. Judges

1. On the antiquity of the Song of Deborah, see David A. Robertson, *Linguistic Evidence in Dating Early Hebrew Poetry* (1972). Its date is debated, but it is widely regarded as one of the oldest poems in the Hebrew Bible. ↩
2. Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (1984), which treats the story of Jephthah's daughter and the unnamed woman of Judges 19, among others. ↩

8. Ruth

1. The date of Ruth is disputed. A post-exilic date is argued from its language and from its apparent dialogue with Ezra 9–10 and Nehemiah 13. Others date it to the monarchy, citing its classical Hebrew and its interest in David's ancestry (Ruth 4:17–22). Ruth 4:7, which explains a custom "in former times," shows the writer lived well after the events. See Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Ruth* (JPS Bible Commentary, 2011). ↩
2. Matthew 1:1–16 and Luke 3:23–38. Matthew names Joseph's father as Jacob; Luke names him Heli. Matthew traces the line through Solomon, Luke through Nathan (Luke 3:31). Proposed harmonizations go back to Julius Africanus, preserved in Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 1.7. ↩

9. 1 Samuel

1. 1 Samuel 17:4. The Masoretic Text reads six cubits and a span. The Septuagint, Josephus (Antiquities 6.171) and the Dead Sea Scroll 4QSam^a read four cubits and a span. A cubit is about 18 inches (45 cm). ↩
2. 2 Samuel 21:19; 1 Chronicles 20:5. Many scholars think the story of Elhanan is the older tradition and that the Goliath name was later attached to David's victory. Others argue Elhanan was another name for David. ↩
3. Mark 2:26. In 1 Samuel 21–22 the priest at Nob is Ahimelech, father of Abiathar (1 Samuel 22:20). Matthew 12:4 and Luke 6:4 omit the name. ↩

10. 2 Samuel

1. Psalms of Solomon 17:21–32, from the first century BC, prays for God to raise up "their king, the son of David," to purge Jerusalem of gentiles. Compare 4QFlorilegium (4Q174), which interprets 2 Samuel 7:11–14 messianically. ↩

11. 1 Kings

1. 1 Kings 5:13–14 describes a levy of 30,000 men "out of all Israel." 1 Kings 9:20–22 says Solomon conscripted only the remaining non-Israelite peoples as forced labor. Compare 1 Kings 11:28 and 12:4, 18, which assume Israelite forced labor. ↩

12. 2 Kings

1. 2 Kings 1:8; Mark 1:6; Matthew 3:4. ↩
2. Luke 9:51–56. Some later manuscripts add "as Elijah did" in verse 54 and expand Jesus' rebuke in verse 55. These words are absent from the earliest manuscripts. ↩
3. Nain lies on the northern slope of the Hill of Moreh, and Shunem (modern Sulam) on its southwestern side, about 3 km (2 miles) apart. ↩
4. 2 Kings 17:24–41. Josephus calls the Samaritans "Cutheans," after one of the settler peoples (Antiquities 9.288–291). The Samaritans' own tradition traces them to the northern tribes and a priesthood descended from Aaron, with their sanctuary on Mount Gerizim. ↩
5. The Annals of Sennacherib, preserved on the Taylor Prism (British Museum), the Oriental Institute Prism (Chicago) and the Jerusalem Prism (Israel Museum). Sennacherib lists 30 talents of gold and 800 talents of silver. 2 Kings 18:14 gives 30 talents of gold and 300 of silver. The Lachish reliefs from Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh are in the British Museum. ↩
6. The Babylonian ration tablets published by Ernst Weidner in 1939, from the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II and dated around 592 BC, list oil rations for "Ya'ukin, king of the land of Yahud" and his sons. ↩

13. 1 Chronicles

1. The Septuagint title *Paraleipomena* means "things omitted" or "things passed over." The Hebrew title is *Divre ha-yamim*, "the events (or words) of the days." Jerome suggested the title *Chronicon*, from which the English name comes. ↩
2. In Job 1–2 and Zechariah 3:1–2, the Hebrew has *ha-satan*, "the adversary," with the article. In 1 Chronicles 21:1, *satan* appears without the article. Whether it should be read as a proper name or as

"an adversary" is debated. ↩

14. 2 Chronicles

1. 2 Chronicles 36:22–23 is repeated almost word for word at the beginning of Ezra (1:1–3), where the decree continues. ↩
2. Matthew 23:35. The prophet is "Zechariah the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo" (Zechariah 1:1). The man stoned in 2 Chronicles 24:20 is "Zechariah the son of Jehoiada the priest." Luke 11:51 gives no father's name. ↩
3. No Assyrian record mentions Manasseh being taken to Babylon, though Assyrian inscriptions of Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal do list Manasseh of Judah among vassal kings. The Prayer of Manasseh, probably composed in the last centuries BC, is included in the Apocrypha of some Protestant Bibles and in Orthodox Bibles. ↩
4. Compare Leviticus 26:34–35 and 26:43. The seventy years come from Jeremiah 25:11–12 and 29:10. ↩

15. Ezra

1. The Cyrus Cylinder (British Museum), written after the Persian capture of Babylon in 539 BC, describes Cyrus restoring the gods of various cities to their shrines and returning their peoples. It names Mesopotamian and Iranian cities and does not mention Judah, Jerusalem or the Jews. The policy it describes is consistent with Ezra 1, but it is not direct evidence for the decree in Ezra. ↩
2. The Samaritan–Jewish rift developed over centuries and its origins are debated. The Samaritans' own temple on Mount Gerizim was built in the fifth century BC and destroyed by John Hyrcanus around 110 BC. See Gary Knoppers, *Jews and Samaritans* (2013). ↩
3. The Hebrew of Ezra 10:44 is difficult; it seems to say that some of the wives had borne children, and the Greek of Ezra follows it. 1 Esdras 9:36 reads "and they sent them away with their children," and the NRSV follows that reading. Ezra 10:3 already speaks of putting away the wives "and those who are born of them." ↩

16. Nehemiah

1. The Elephantine papyri, from a Jewish military colony at the First Cataract of the Nile. The petition to Bagohi (Bagavahya), governor of Judah, dated 407 BC, asks for help rebuilding the colony's temple. It mentions an earlier, unanswered letter to Bagohi, to "Jehohanan the high priest" and his fellow priests, and to the Jewish nobles, and says that the petitioners have also written to "Delaiah and Shelemiah, sons of Sanballat, governor of Samaria." See Bezalel Porten, *Archives from Elephantine* (1968). ↩
2. Nehemiah 5:1–5. The Hebrew of verse 5, *nikbashot*, "subdued" or "forced," may mean that some daughters had been taken as slaves or that they had been sexually abused. Translations differ. ↩
3. Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 3a and Nedarim 37b, connect Nehemiah 8:8 with the practice of reading the Aramaic translation (targum) alongside the Hebrew. ↩

17. Esther

1. The six Greek Additions (often labeled A to F) total 107 verses. They include Mordecai's dream and its interpretation, the texts of the royal decrees, and prayers of Mordecai and Esther. Jerome moved them to the end of the book in the Vulgate, as chapters 10:4–16:24. ↩

2. Herodotus, Histories 7.114 and 9.108–113, names Xerxes' queen as Amestris. Esther 2:5–6 may be read as saying either Mordecai or his great-grandfather Kish was exiled with Jehoiachin in 597 BC. The irrevocable law of the Medes and Persians (Esther 1:19; 8:8; Daniel 6:8) is not attested outside the Bible. A Persian official named Marduka appears in tablets from Persepolis, but the identification with Mordecai is uncertain. ↩
3. No manuscript of Esther has been identified at Qumran. Melito of Sardis's list (Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 4.26.14) omits it. The Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 7a, records rabbinic debate about its status. ↩
4. Luther's Table Talk records him saying he was so hostile to 2 Maccabees and Esther that he wished they did not exist, "for they judaize too greatly and have much pagan impropriety" (Table Talk, early 1530s). Compare his remark on Esther in *The Bondage of the Will* (1525). ↩
5. John 5:1. Some manuscripts read "the feast," which would suggest Passover or Tabernacles. Proposals include Passover, Pentecost, Tabernacles, Purim and Trumpets. ↩

18. Job

1. In Job 1–2, the Hebrew has *ha-satan*, "the adversary" or "the accuser," with the article, a figure among the "sons of God." Compare Zechariah 3:1–2. The identification of this figure with the devil came later. ↩
2. Job 13:15. The written Hebrew text (*ketiv*) reads *lo'*, "not," giving "I have no hope." The traditional reading (*qere*) is *lo*, "in him," giving "I will hope in him." The King James follows the *qere*; the NRSV and many modern translations follow the *ketiv*. ↩
3. Job 19:25–27. The Hebrew of verse 26 is notoriously difficult, and it is debated whether Job expects vindication in this life or after death. Handel used the King James text in *Messiah* (1742). ↩

19. Psalms

1. *Selah* occurs seventy-one times in the Psalms and three times in Habakkuk 3. Proposed meanings include a pause, a musical interlude, a raising of the voice or a repeat; none is established. ↩
2. Mishnah Pesachim 10:6–7 records the Hallel (Psalms 113–118) as part of the Passover meal, with Psalms 113–114 sung before the meal and the rest after it. The Mishnah was compiled about AD 200, so its details cannot simply be assumed for the time of Jesus, but the practice of singing Hallel at Passover is generally thought to be earlier. Identifying the hymn of Mark 14:26 and Matthew 26:30 with the Hallel is the usual reading, not a certainty. ↩
3. The count of seventy-three follows the Hebrew (Masoretic) text. The Greek Septuagint attributes more psalms to David. The Hebrew preposition *le-* in *le-David* can mean by, for, about or belonging to. Most scholars regard the headings as later than the psalms they introduce. ↩
4. The five books are Psalms 1–41, 42–72, 73–89, 90–106 and 107–150. The closing blessings are at 41:13, 72:18–19, 89:52 and 106:48. A rabbinic comparison of the five books of Psalms with the five books of Moses appears in Midrash Tehillim on Psalm 1, a compilation much later than the Psalms. ↩
5. About thirty-six to forty manuscripts of Psalms were found at Qumran, more than of any other biblical book. The Great Psalms Scroll from Cave 11 (11Q5, also called 11QPsa), from the first century AD, differs from the traditional order from Psalm 101 onward and includes compositions not in the Hebrew Psalter, among them a Hebrew form of Psalm 151. Its prose passage "David's

Compositions" (column 27) credits David with 3,600 psalms and 450 songs, 4,050 in all. Whether the scroll is a variant edition of the Psalter or a liturgical collection is debated. ↩

6. The Septuagint, followed by the Latin Vulgate, combines Psalms 9 and 10, and also 114 and 115, and divides Psalms 116 and 147. As a result most psalms from 10 to 147 carry a number one lower than in the Hebrew. In the Douay-Rheims Bible, Psalm 23 is Psalm 22, "The Lord ruleth me." The Septuagint also includes Psalm 151, which is in Orthodox Bibles. ↩
7. Mishnah Tamid 7:4 lists the psalms sung by the Levites in the Temple on each day: Psalm 24 on the first day of the week, 48 on the second, 82 on the third, 94 on the fourth, 81 on the fifth, 93 on the sixth and 92 on the Sabbath. The heading of Psalm 92, "A song for the Sabbath day," is in the biblical text itself. ↩
8. The heading *shir ha-ma'alot*, "Song of Ascents," stands over Psalms 120–134. The pilgrimage interpretation is the most widely held. Mishnah Middot 2:5 connects the fifteen songs with fifteen steps in the Temple on which the Levites sang. Both explanations may contain some truth. ↩
9. Matthew 21:16 follows the Septuagint of Psalm 8:2 (8:3 in Greek numbering), which reads *ainon*, "praise." The Hebrew has *'oz*, "strength." ↩
10. The prologue of the laws of Hammurabi of Babylon (about 1750 BC) calls the king "the shepherd, called by Enlil." Shepherd language for kings is common across ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian royal texts. ↩
11. Luke 23:46 quotes Psalm 31:5 (31:6 in Hebrew). John 19:30 gives the last words as "It is finished." Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34 give the cry of Psalm 22:1, Mark in Aramaic, Matthew with the address in a form closer to Hebrew. The gospels also describe the soldiers dividing his clothes by lot in terms drawn from Psalm 22:18, quoted directly at John 19:24. ↩

20. Proverbs

1. The Hebrew title is *Mishle Shelomoh*, "the proverbs of Solomon" (Proverbs 1:1). The Septuagint regularly renders *mashal* as *parabolē*, the word the gospels use for Jesus' parables, or as *paroimia*. ↩
2. The Instruction of Amenemope (British Museum Papyrus 10474) was published by E. A. Wallis Budge in 1923. Budge noted resemblances to Hebrew wisdom literature, and in 1924 Adolf Erman set out detailed parallels, most of them in Proverbs 22:17–23:11, part of the collection 22:17–24:22. Amenemope is usually dated to the late second millennium BC. The reading "thirty" in Proverbs 22:20 is based on a correction of the Hebrew text and is now widely accepted. ↩
3. Compare Wisdom of Solomon 7:22–8:1 and Sirach 24, and see Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I–XII* (1966), appendix on "the Word." ↩
4. The Septuagint of Proverbs 8:22 reads *ektisen me*, "he created me." Arius used it to argue that the Son was a creature. Athanasius answered at length in his *Orations against the Arians* 2.18–82. The controversy led to the Council of Nicaea in 325. ↩
5. Samuel Butler, *Hudibras*, Part II (title page dated 1664; on sale in December 1663): "Then spare the rod, and spill the child" (later editions read "spoil"). The saying is older: Ralph Venning, *Mysteries and Revelations* (1649), has "They spare the rod, and spoyle the child." ↩

21. Ecclesiastes

1. *Pardes* (Ecclesiastes 2:5; Song of Songs 4:13; Nehemiah 2:8) is a loanword from Old Persian. *Pitgam*, "sentence" or "decree" (Ecclesiastes 8:11), is also Persian. Other features of the book's Hebrew resemble later Mishnaic Hebrew. A minority of scholars argue for an earlier date. ↩

2. Pete Seeger's "Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything There Is a Season)" was written in the late 1950s and first recorded in 1962. The Byrds' version reached number one in the United States in December 1965. ↩
3. Ecclesiastes 12:9–14 speaks of "the Teacher" in the third person. It is widely regarded as an epilogue by one or two later editors. ↩
4. Mishnah Yadayim 3:5 and Mishnah Eduyot 5:3 record disputes between the schools of Shammai and Hillel over whether Ecclesiastes "renders the hands unclean," meaning whether it is holy scripture. ↩

22. Song of Songs

1. Some scholars find the divine name in Song of Songs 8:6, where *shalhevetyah*, "a raging flame," can be read as "flame of Yah." Most translations take the ending as an intensifier. The World English Bible reads it as the name: "a very flame of the LORD." ↩
2. Mishnah Yadayim 3:5. ↩
3. Tosefta Sanhedrin 12:10. A similar warning appears in the Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 101a. ↩
4. Origen's commentary on the Song survives in part in Rufinus's Latin translation, along with two homilies translated by Jerome. Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, begun in 1135, were left unfinished at his death in 1153 after reaching Song of Songs 3:1. ↩
5. Theodore of Mopsuestia (died 428) was condemned at the Second Council of Constantinople in 553, in the controversy over the "Three Chapters." The council's acts include objections to his interpretation of the Song of Songs as a human love poem. ↩

23. Isaiah

1. Luke 4:18–19 follows the Septuagint of Isaiah 61:1–2, inserts a line from Isaiah 58:6, and ends before "the day of vengeance of our God." The World English Bible renders the inserted line "to deliver those who are crushed" in Luke and "to let the oppressed go free" in Isaiah. The oldest manuscripts of Luke lack "to heal the broken hearted," which the World English Bible, following later manuscripts, includes. ↩
2. The Great Isaiah Scroll (1QIsa^a), found in Qumran Cave 1 in 1947 and now in the Shrine of the Book, Jerusalem, is about 7.3 meters long and is usually dated to about 125 BC. The previous oldest complete Hebrew texts of Isaiah were medieval codices of the late ninth to eleventh centuries AD, such as the Cairo Codex of the Prophets (895), the St. Petersburg Codex of the Prophets (916), the Aleppo Codex (about 930) and the Leningrad Codex (1008). ↩
3. J. C. Döderlein (1775) and J. G. Eichhorn (1780s) argued for a second author of chapters 40–66. Bernhard Duhm's commentary of 1892 distinguished a third section, chapters 56–66. Many scholars now view the book as the product of a long tradition rather than three separate authors. For a defense of single authorship, see Oswald T. Allis, *The Unity of Isaiah* (1950). ↩
4. The Septuagint renders *almah* as *parthenos*. Matthew 1:23 quotes the Greek. The Revised Standard Version (1952) printed "young woman." On 30 November 1952 the Rev. Martin Luther Hux of Rocky Mount, North Carolina, publicly burned the RSV in protest. Accounts differ on whether he burned a whole copy or only the page containing Isaiah 7:14. ↩
5. The "Isaiah Wall" in Ralph Bunche Park, across First Avenue from the United Nations headquarters, carries Isaiah 2:4. The bronze statue *Let Us Beat Swords into Plowshares*, by Yevgeny Vuchetich, was given to the United Nations by the Soviet Union in 1959. ↩

6. The servant is identified with Israel or Jacob at Isaiah 41:8, 44:1, 44:21, 45:4 and 49:3, but at 49:5–6 the servant has a mission to Israel. Medieval Jewish commentators such as Rashi read Isaiah 53 as describing the people of Israel. The passages are applied to Jesus at Matthew 8:17, Luke 22:37, Acts 8:32–35 and 1 Peter 2:22–25. ↩
7. 4Q521, the so-called Messianic Apocalypse, fragment 2, column 2, lines 7–12. Compare Matthew 11:5 and Luke 7:22. The text is usually dated to the early first century BC. ↩
8. In synagogue reading, when Isaiah 66 is read as the prophetic portion, verse 23 is repeated after verse 24. Medieval Masoretic manuscripts note the same practice for the endings of Malachi, Lamentations and Ecclesiastes. ↩

24. Jeremiah

1. The Septuagint of Jeremiah is about one-eighth shorter than the Masoretic Text and places the oracles against the nations after 25:13. At Qumran, 4QJer^b and 4QJer^d agree with the shorter Greek form, while 4QJer^a and 4QJer^c agree with the longer Hebrew. See Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*. ↩
2. Matthew 27:9–10. The thirty shekels and the potter are from Zechariah 11:12–13. Jeremiah visits a potter (Jeremiah 18–19) and buys a field (Jeremiah 32:6–15). Some manuscripts and early translations of Matthew omit Jeremiah's name, and a few later ones substitute Zechariah's, evidently to correct the attribution. ↩

25. Lamentations

1. Chapters 1, 2 and 4 are single acrostics of 22 verses, chapter 3 is a triple acrostic of 66 verses, and chapter 5 has 22 verses without the alphabetic pattern. In chapters 2, 3 and 4 the order of two letters, *ayin* and *pe*, is reversed, as in the Dead Sea Scrolls copy 4QLam of chapter 1 and in other ancient alphabets. ↩
2. Synagogue practice repeats Lamentations 5:21 after 5:22. A note to this effect appears in medieval Masoretic manuscripts, which give the same instruction for Isaiah, Malachi and Ecclesiastes. ↩
3. The fast of the Ninth of Av (Tisha B'Av) is described in Mishnah Taanit 4:6–7. The reading of Lamentations on that day is attested in the Babylonian Talmud and the tractate Soferim. ↩

26. Ezekiel

1. *Ben adam* is used to address Ezekiel 93 times. The NRSV translates it "mortal"; the King James and many others, "son of man." ↩
2. Erich von Däniken, *Chariots of the Gods?* (1968 in German; English 1969), and Josef F. Blumrich, *The Spaceships of Ezekiel* (1974). Blumrich was an engineer at NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center. ↩
3. Mishnah Hagigah 2:1 restricts teaching "the chariot" (the vision of Ezekiel 1). The Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 13b, says that Hananiah son of Hezekiah burned three hundred jars of oil working to reconcile Ezekiel with the Law, and that without him the book would have been withdrawn. ↩
4. On Ezekiel 16 and 23, see Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (1995). ↩
5. The Septuagint reads *Rōs* as a name; most modern translations (NRSV, NIV, ESV) read "chief prince." The Scofield Reference Bible (1909) identified Gog's army as Russia and Meshech and

Tubal as Moscow and Tobolsk. Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970), popularized reading Rosh as Russia, an idea that goes back to the nineteenth-century Hebrew scholar Wilhelm Gesenius. Meshech and Tubal are known from Assyrian records as Mushki and Tabal, in Anatolia. ↩

6. Compare Ezekiel 47:1–12, Zechariah 14:8 and Joel 3:18. John 7:37–39 was spoken at the festival of Tabernacles, when water was carried in procession to the Temple altar (Mishnah Sukkah 4:9). ↩

27. Daniel

1. Daniel 11:40–45. Antiochus IV died at Tabae in Persia in late 164 BC (Polybius 31.9; 1 Maccabees 6:1–16; 2 Maccabees 9). Porphyry's argument in *Against the Christians*, book 12, is known from Jerome's *Commentary on Daniel*, prologue and on chapter 11. ↩
2. The Nabonidus Cylinders from Ur name Belshazzar as Nabonidus's eldest son, and the Verse Account of Nabonidus says Nabonidus entrusted the kingship to him while he stayed at Tayma. Babylonian sources never call Belshazzar king. The Nabonidus Chronicle records Babylon's fall to the army of Cyrus in 539 BC. No "Darius the Mede" is known outside Daniel. Defenders of an early date identify him with Gubaru, Cyrus's governor, or with Cyrus himself. ↩
3. On the interpretation of Daniel 7, see John J. Collins, *Daniel* (Hermeneia, 1993), who argues that the figure is the angel Michael, leader of the people (Daniel 10:21; 12:1). Others read the figure as a symbol of the faithful (Daniel 7:18, 27). ↩
4. On Onias III, see 2 Maccabees 4:33–35 and Daniel 9:26 and 11:22. ↩
5. Isaac Newton, *Observations upon the Prophecies of Daniel and the Apocalypse of St. John* (published 1733). A manuscript now in the National Library of Israel, Jerusalem (Yahuda MS 7.3g, f. 13v), says the 1,260 days "will end A.C. 2060. It may end later, but I see no reason for its ending sooner." ↩
6. The Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Jews (inserted after Daniel 3:23), Susanna (Daniel 13 in Catholic Bibles) and Bel and the Dragon (Daniel 14). They are in the Septuagint and in Theodotion's Greek version. ↩

28. Hosea

1. On the marriage metaphor in Hosea 2, see Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love* (1995), and Gale A. Yee, "Hosea," in *The Women's Bible Commentary* (1992). ↩

29. Joel

1. John Hagee, *Four Blood Moons: Something Is About to Change* (2013), about the lunar eclipse tetrad of April 2014 to September 2015. ↩

30. Amos

1. The Samaria ivories were excavated in 1931–1935 by the Joint Expedition led by J. W. Crowfoot and are mostly dated to the ninth and eighth centuries BC. Compare 1 Kings 22:39 on Ahab's "ivory house." ↩
2. King quoted Amos 5:24 in the "I Have a Dream" speech (August 28, 1963) and in the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (April 1963). The Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, designed by Maya Lin and dedicated in 1989, bears the words in King's paraphrase. ↩

3. On Amos 9:11–15, see Shalom Paul, *Amos* (Hermeneia, 1991), who defends its authenticity, and Hans Walter Wolff, *Joel and Amos* (Hermeneia, 1977), who considers it later. Acts 15:16–17 follows the Septuagint, which reads "that the rest of humanity may seek" where the Hebrew reads "that they may possess the remnant of Edom." ↩

31. Obadiah

1. Josephus, Antiquities 13.257–258, says John Hyrcanus conquered Idumea and required the Idumeans to be circumcised and to observe Jewish law. The conquest is usually dated about 125 BC; some date it as late as 112 BC. ↩
2. Josephus, Antiquities 14.8–10 and Jewish War 1.123, describes Herod's father Antipater as an Idumean. Herod's mother, Cypros, was from a Nabatean Arab family. ↩

32. Jonah

1. Gath-hepher is generally identified with Khirbet ez-Zurra' near the village of Mashhad, about 5 km (3 miles) northeast of Nazareth, where a tomb of Jonah is shown. Jerome, in the preface to his commentary on Jonah, places it two miles from Sepphoris. ↩
2. Matthew 12:40 has no parallel in Luke 11:29–32. By Jewish reckoning, any part of a day could count as a day and night; compare Esther 4:16 with 5:1. The Greek *kētos* in Matthew 12:40 follows the Septuagint of Jonah 2:1 (1:17 in English). ↩
3. Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 31a, assigns Jonah as the prophetic reading for the afternoon service of Yom Kippur. This is the earliest record of the custom; there is no evidence for it in the first century. ↩

33. Micah

1. George Washington's letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, August 1790: "every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid." The phrase appears in dozens of his letters. Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* (2015) uses it in the song "One Last Time." ↩
2. Matthew 2:1–23 and Luke 2:1–20. In Matthew the family appears to live in Bethlehem and moves to Nazareth after Egypt. In Luke they live in Nazareth and travel to Bethlehem for a census. Many historians doubt the Bethlehem birth; others defend it. ↩
3. Jimmy Carter quoted Micah 6:8 in his inaugural address on January 20, 1977. ↩
4. The *Tashlikh* ceremony, attested from the late Middle Ages, is performed on the first afternoon of Rosh Hashanah with recitation of Micah 7:18–20. ↩

34. Nahum

1. Royal inscriptions of Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BC) describe flaying rebels and piling heads. The palace reliefs of Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal from Nineveh, now largely in the British Museum, show the impaling and flaying of prisoners. ↩
2. Jerome, in the prologue to his commentary on Nahum, identified Elkosh with a village called Elcesi in Galilee. Other traditions place it in Judah or near Mosul in Iraq. The connection between Capernaum and the prophet is unknown. ↩

35. Habakkuk

1. Martin Luther, Preface to the Latin edition of his works (1545), describing his understanding of Romans 1:17. The date and nature of this "tower experience" are debated. ↩
2. The Habakkuk Pesher (1QpHab), found in Qumran Cave 1 in 1947, comments on Habakkuk 1–2. It is usually dated to the second half of the first century BC. ↩

36. Zephaniah

1. The sequence *Dies Irae* is usually dated to the thirteenth century and traditionally attributed to Thomas of Celano. It was part of the Roman Requiem Mass until the liturgical reforms of 1969–1970. It is set in the Requiems of Mozart (1791) and Verdi (1874). The main title of Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), by Wendy Carlos and Rachel Elkind, is based on its chant melody. ↩

37. Haggai

1. Zerubbabel is last named in Ezra 5:2 and is absent from the account of the Temple's completion and dedication (Ezra 6:13–22). Some scholars think the Persians removed him because of hopes like Haggai's; there is no evidence either way. ↩
2. John 2:20. Josephus dates the start of Herod's rebuilding to the eighteenth year of his reign, about 20–19 BC (Antiquities 15.380), and says work on the whole complex was completed only in AD 63–64, a few years before it was destroyed (Antiquities 20.219). ↩

38. Zechariah

1. Matthew 21:2–7; compare Mark 11:2–7, Luke 19:30–35 and John 12:14–15, which have one animal. Whether Matthew misread the parallelism or deliberately made the fulfillment explicit is debated. ↩
2. Matthew 27:9–10. See also the chapter on Jeremiah. ↩
3. Hebrew *kena'ani* means "Canaanite" and, by extension, "merchant" or "trader" (compare Proverbs 31:24; Job 41:6, 40:30 in Hebrew). Translations divide between the two senses. ↩

39. Malachi

1. Mark 1:2–3 combines Malachi 3:1 (with Exodus 23:20) and Isaiah 40:3 under the heading "in the prophet Isaiah." Many later manuscripts, followed by the King James Version, read "in the prophets." ↩
2. Malachi 2:16. The RSV, the NRSV (1989 and 2021) and the NIV (1984) read "I hate divorce"; the King James has "he hateth putting away." The Hebrew can be read as "If one hates and divorces," and the ESV, the NIV (2011) and others now translate it along those lines. ↩
3. Charles Wesley, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" (1739; first line altered by George Whitefield, 1753), third verse in modern hymnals. ↩
4. In synagogue reading, Malachi 4:5 (3:23 in Hebrew) is repeated after 4:6 (3:24). In Hebrew Bibles, chapter 4 is counted as Malachi 3:19–24. ↩

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