

COMPREHENSIVE HANDOUT FOR INTRODUCTION TO THE BIBLE

The Books of the Bible

The main division of a Christian Bible is that of Old and New Testaments. The New Testament has 27 “books,” including four Gospels and letters and other writings.

The “Old Testament” Hebrew Canon (= official, accepted list of biblical books) is the same for Jews and Protestants, although a different order and classification is followed by these groups respectively. Catholics include several other books in the Old Testament. We will use the Jewish Canon of Scripture for the “Old Testament.”

First Division: The Torah = The Law = Pentateuch = Five Books of Moses

All these titles refer to the same books, accepted in the same order by everyone; many Jews use the Hebrew names, indicated in brackets:

1. Genesis (= Origin) [Bereshit = in the beginning]. This book covers the period from the Creation to the death of Joseph the patriarch in Egypt.
2. Exodus (= Going Out) [Shemot = (These are the) Names]. Covers the period from the oppression of the Israelites in Egypt to the building of the Tent of Meeting, where God is present, in the desert.
3. Leviticus (= Things Pertaining to the Levites [Temple ministers]) [Vayyiqra = And He Called]. Deals with all things pertaining to worship of God, temple sacrifice and purity laws.
4. Numbers [Bemidbar = In the Desert]. “Numbers” comes from the census taken in the beginning of the book, which contains various kinds of writing, including religious-legal prescriptions and historical narrative, all set in the context of Israel’s desert journey to the Promised Land. The final edition of these first four books was traditionally attributed to the “Priestly Source;” now a Deuteronomic hand is detected.
5. Deuteronomy (= Second Law, taken from LXX Deut 17:18) [Devarim = (These are the) Words]. This book consists of a long speech given by Moses on his last day of life, recounting Israel’s experience in the exodus and warning him about his future conduct. It is the prologue to the “Deuteronomic History” which follows.

Second Division: The Prophets = Nevi’im

The Former Prophets (or Deuteronomistic History)

Joshua [Yehoshua]. Tells of the conquest of the Promised Land under Joshua, Moses’ successor.

Judges [Shofetim]. Tells of the tribes of Israel before they had a king. The “judges” were charismatic military leaders, including Samson and women like Deborah.

Samuel [Shemu’el]. The Jews keep as one book what Christians divide into two. Gives the history of Israel under its kings, from Saul to the great David.

Kings [Melakhim]. The Jews keep as one book what Christians divide into two. From the death of David through his son Solomon and the building of the Temple, to the division of the kingdom into two, the northern part called “Israel” and the southern part “Judah.” Tells of the prophet Elijah, the fall of the northern kingdom and King

Josiah's reform, and ends in the tragedy of the fall of the southern kingdom and its going into exile in Babylon.

Another, more positive, version of basically the same events (carried forward in history) is that of Chronicles [Divre Hayyamim = Acts of the Days, i.e., Annals], placed by Christians after Kings but by Jews at the end of their canon. The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah, telling of the efforts of these two personages to reform Judaism after the exile, are found before Chronicles in the Jewish canon (after, in the Christian).

The Latter Prophets

The great prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, as well as the Twelve (see below), are called the "Latter Prophets" in Judaism. Their books are lengthy and full of important sayings. Isaiah lived *ca.* 740 B.C.E.; many of his words are found in Isa 1-39. He started a following from which emerged an anonymous though colossal prophet during the Babylonian Exile (587-538 B.C.E.) whose work is found in Isa 40-55. After the exile, yet another anonymous Isaian-type prophet is represented by Isa 56-66.

Jeremiah prophesied before the exile, that is, before 587 B.C.E. He took an extremely unpopular stance against Israelite military politics, and suffered much for it.

Ezekiel was a priest-prophet during the exile. He chastised Israel for its sins, but prophesied a wonderful, new state of affairs to be wrought by God's hand in the End Time.

The Twelve Prophets (called "Minor" by Christians)

These are, also followed in the same order by everyone: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habbakuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, who ends by speaking of the End Time when God will send the prophet Elijah.

Third Jewish Division: The Writings

The most important for their length are the Psalms [Tehillim], beautiful prayers, laments, confessions, etc, usually communal but sometimes individual. Then Proverbs [Mishle], witty and sapiential (wise) sayings for living life well. Job is about an innocent sufferer trying to understand God. The Song of Songs is an erotic series of love poems which can be interpreted on various levels. Ecclesiastes [Qohelet] (= pertaining to the Assembly) expresses the somewhat cynical views and advocates moderation even in virtue. Other "writings" are Ruth, Lamentations and Esther (along with Song of Songs and Qohelet = the five Jewish Megillot = Scrolls, read during feasts). The Book of Daniel, placed by Christians among the Prophets, is set in Babylon, but really addressed Jews being persecuted almost four centuries later by one of the Seleucids (successors of the Greek conqueror Alexander the Great). In this context of great suffering by those who love God and are faithful to his Torah (Law), and who die for their faith, we find clearly announced for the first time in the Hebrew Bible the belief in the resurrection of the dead (Dan 12:2-3). Also important in Dan is the notion that the "saints of the Most High" will receive an eternal kingdom (Dan 7:18, 27). This concept, and that of the "Son of man" (Dan 7:13) who also receives the kingdom, will play a very important role in Christianity, going back to Jesus himself (Mark 2:10; 10:45; 13:26-27; 14:62). The final book in the Hebrew canon, Chronicles, recaps Genesis to Kings and ends on the hopeful note of the Return from Exile.

Important Dates of the Biblical Period (all are B.C.E. unless otherwise noted)

History begins with the Bronze Ages (3200-1550).

The Third Dynasty (*ca.* 2600) begins “the age of classical flowering and creative genius of Egypt.”

Hammurabi (1728-1686) rules Babylon.

The Patriarchal Period (“Abraham, Isaac and Jacob”), *ca.* 2000-1700, but there is much that is unknown about these figures.

Traditional date for Joseph’s rise in Egypt is the Hyksos Period (1720-1550).

“The Exodus and the Conquest” (probably quite complicated “events”), *ca.* 1300-1050.

The Period of the Judges is commonly dated in the early Iron Age (1200-1050).

King David, 1000-962.

King Solomon, 961-922. Later in this period, the first great biblical writer, the “Yahwist” (“J”) may have begun his work (he was considered responsible, e.g., for the Adam and Eve story, but his existence is now called into question).

The prophet Elijah, around the middle of the ninth century (King Ahab, 869-850).

The eighth century is the time of great prophets: Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Micah.

Isa 7:14 may refer to the birth of King Hezekiah (715-687).

722, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel, Samaria, is taken by Assyria. The northern kingdom, composed of some ten of the twelve tribes, disappears.

King Josiah’s Reform (621), based on the “discovery” in the Temple of what may have been a “first draft” of Deuteronomy. The reform is short-lived.

The prophet Jeremiah was active from 627 (or 609)-587. This latter is the date of the destruction of the southern Kingdom of Judah with its capital Jerusalem and the Temple. The upper classes were deported to Babylon (see end of 2 Kgs).

The Period of the Babylonian Exile runs from 587-538. The prophet Ezekiel was active in the early part. The other great exilic prophet is known only as “Second Isaiah” (*ca.* 540). The exile was extremely important for the formation of the religion we call Judaism; there circumcision, the Sabbath and the kosher diet became the hallmarks of the Jew in a pagan environment.

The Persian Period (539-333). Persia conquered the neo-Babylonian empire, and the Jews were allowed to return to Palestine and rebuild their Temple. Persia ruled through provincial governors. The final editions of the Deuteronomistic and Priestly works took shape, and the Torah was given its final form. Under Persian influence, angels and demons take on greater importance for Jews. Prophets with different positions regarding the Temple and foreigners appear: “Third-Isaiah,” Zechariah, Haggai. Later, Ezra and Nehemiah (mid-fifth century?) implement their reform.

The Greek Period (333-63). Alexander the Great conquers the whole civilized world, promoting Greek culture. Under his successors the Seleucids, “Hellenization” is accepted by many Jews, rejected to the point of death by others. The final works of the Old Testament period are written. The Sadducees and the Pharisees appear as rival Jewish parties (the Essenes of Dead Sea fame also arise at this time). The Maccabees start a dynasty which rules until

The Roman Period (63-135 C.E.). Pompey conquered Palestine and made it a colony. The Jews were again ruled by foreigners. This is the period of Jesus (4 B.C.E.-30 C.E.) and the early Church. The first New Testament writings are from *ca.* 49 C.E. to *ca.* 125 C.E., the gospels *ca.* 70-95 C.E. Oral traditions are much older.

**APPROXIMATE DATES OF CERTAIN PERSONS
(with the meaning of their names) AND OF THE COMPOSITION OF
THE BOOKS OF THE CATHOLIC OLD TESTAMENT CANON¹**

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| Psalm 29 | originally Canaanite, 12th to 10th century |
| Other Psalms (Greek <i>psalmós</i> = Hebrew <i>mizmor</i> = “song accompanied by stringed instrument”) | up to post-exilic era |
| Samuel (<i>Shemu’el</i> = “his name is God”) | 1040-1010 |
| Nathan (<i>Natan</i> = “he [God] gave”) | 990-960 |
| Elijah (<i>Eliyahu</i> = “[my] God is YHWH”) | 869-849 |
| Elisha (<i>Elisha</i> = “[my] God has saved”) | 849-842 |
| Amos (<i>Amos</i> = “YHWH has made strong”) | 783-746 |
| Hosea (<i>Hoshea</i> = “YHWH is salvation”) | 750-732 |
| Isaiah of Jerusalem (“1-39”) (<i>Yesha’yahu</i> = “YHWH is salvation”) | 750-687 |
| Micah (<i>Mikha</i> = “who is like God?”) | 740-687 |
| Book of Job (<i>Iyyov</i> = meaning unknown; see Ezek 14:14) | 7th to 4th centuries |
| Zephaniah (<i>Tzefanyá</i> = “YHWH has treasured”) | 640-609 |
| Nahum (<i>Nahum</i> = “comfort, consolation”) | 625-612 |
| Habakkuk (<i>Habaquq</i> = ?) | 626+-587 |
| Jeremiah (<i>Yirmeyahu</i> = “YHWH has exalted [or established]”) | 627-582 |
| Ezekiel (<i>Yehezqel</i> = “YHWH has strengthened”) | 593-571 |
| Deuteronomic (including the Deuteronomic History) and Priestly compilations in the Babilonian Exile | 587-538 |
| Proverbs (<i>mishley</i> = aphorisms) | completed by Babylonian exile |
| Lamentations (<i>Eikha</i> = [Oh] how . . . !) | 586-520 |
| “Deutero-Isaiah” (40-55) | 550-537 |
| Haggai (<i>Haggai</i> = “festive”) | 521-520 |
| Zechariah (1-8) (<i>Zekharyá</i> = “YHWH has remembered”) | 520-495 |
| Qohelet (= Gatherer, “Assembler”) | post-exilic |
| Joel (<i>Yo’el</i> = “YHWH is God”) | 515-360 |
| Malachi (<i>Mal’akhi</i> = “my messenger/angel”), “Trito-Isaiah” (56-66) | early 5 th century |
| Books of Jonah (<i>Yonah</i> = “dove”), Ruth (<i>Rut</i> = “friendship”) and Obadiah (<i>Obadyá</i> = “servant of YHWH”) | 5th century |

¹ **Bold** writing indicates the actual book of the Bible, while normal type refers to the actual person. See “Important Dates of the Biblical Period” included in the prior handout “Biblical Books and Dates.”

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| Ezra (<i>Ezrah</i> = “[God’s] help”) and Nehemiah (<i>Nehemya</i> = “YHWH comforts”) | 398-375 ² |
| Chronicles, the final edition of the Pentateuch | by 4 th century |
| Deutero/Trito-Zechariah (9-14), Books of Tobit (<i>Tobiyah</i> = “my good is YHWH”), Judith (<i>Judit</i> = “Jewess”) and Esther , ³ Song of Songs | early Hellenistic period (late 4 th -3 rd century) |
| The Deuteronomists edit the books of the Latter Prophets ⁴ | 3 rd century ⁵ |
| Letter of Jeremiah | Hellenistic period (no later than 200 B.C.E.) |
| Apocalyptic-eschatological additions to Latter Prophets | by beg. of 2 nd cent. ⁶ |
| Baruch (= “blessed” = Benedict) | between 200 and 60 |
| Wisdom of Sirach (Greek version of Sira = “thorn”?) | before 180 ⁷ |
| Book of Daniel (<i>Daniyyel</i> = “my judge is God”) | 165 ⁸ |
| First Book of Maccabees (from Hebrew for “hammer”) | 134-63 |
| Second Book of Maccabees | 124-63 |
| Wisdom of Solomon (<i>Sh^elomoh</i> = ?, from <i>shalom</i>) | late 1 st cent. B.C.E.- early 1 st cent. C.E. |

² This is the date of composition. The activity of Ezra is dated by scholars to either 398 or 428 (though Ezra 7:7 might indicate 458), Nehemiah’s to 445 (for at least twelve years), with a return in 430.

³ Esther is her Persian name, from the goddess Ishtar (elsewhere known as Astarte, Aphrodite, Venus). Her Hebrew name was Hadassah = “myrtle.” The Greek (deuterocanonical) additions to Esther must date to before 93 C.E. (Josephus paraphrases them), but may date from 100-75 B.C.E.

⁴ “The Deuteronomic School [§ 11⁹²] seems to have played an especially important role in collecting and organizing the utterances of the prophets, since Deuteronomic elements are found in almost all the prophetic books (at least in the superscriptions) and predominantly so in the book of Jeremiah.” WERNER H. SCHMIDT, *Old Testament Introduction. Second Edition* (New York – Berlin: De Gruyter; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 178. The reference within brackets is to that section of the book.

⁵ JOSEPH BLENKINSOPP, *Prophecy and Canon. A Contribution to the Study of Jewish Origins* (Notre Dame – London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 99, states that “the Latter Prophets were in existence as an authoritative collection by about the beginning of the second century B.C.E.” On 16, he says that James A. Sanders seems to think that the prophetic collection was in essence formed at the same time as the Torah (in the Babylonian Exile), but “it was not complete until the second century B.C.E.”

⁶ See BLENKINSOPP, *Prophecy*, 178 fn. 5, citing OTTO PLÖGER, *Theocracy and Eschatology* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), 24-25.

⁷ Translated from the Hebrew to the Greek by his grandson in 132 B.C.E.

⁸ The deuterocanonical additions to Daniel may have been composed as early as the Persian period, but were only added to the book *ca.* 100 B.C.E.