

Bible Study Helps – Old Testament

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The Bible is divided up into sections that help us understand what we are reading. Just like when you read the newspaper that has a sports section, a financial section, the front page stories, and all the rest; the Bible is divided up into helpful sections.

The Law (Torah):

Includes Genesis through Deuteronomy.

Mostly stories/narratives that run in chronological order

Historical Books:

Includes Joshua-Esther and Lamentations

Wisdom Writings:

Includes Job-Song of Songs

Prophets:

Divided into two sections based on length (Major=longer, Minor = shorter):

- Major Prophets: Isaiah-Daniel
- Minor Prophets: Hosea-Malachi

The Law (Torah)

Genesis

Date written – 1350 B.C.

Author - Moses

Summary – “In the beginning...” (Gen 1:1). This book is about beginnings. Early history of God’s people from the creation through the patriarchs (Jewish fathers like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob). Genesis contains two covenants (promises) that God made to mankind. The first is to Noah in Genesis 8:21 not to destroy the earth by water. The second is to Abraham in Genesis 15 that sets the stage for much of the rest of the Bible. God promises to make Abraham a great nation with numerous descendants. He promises him the land of Canaan (15:7). The story of gaining that land will be a major part of the story from Genesis through Joshua (where you read about many battles as the people take the land God had promised them. Genesis ends with the story of Joseph and tells how God’s people ended up in Egypt due to famine and Joseph’s brothers selling him into slavery.

Exodus

Date written – 1350 B.C.

Author - Moses

Summary – Exodus picks up 400 years after Joseph’s time in Egypt and the respect the Egyptians had for Joshua had been forgotten. As a result the Egyptians enslaved the Hebrews. The word “exodus” refers to the events of God providentially delivering his people from slavery in Egypt to freedom (Exodus 1-14) and travelling with God through the wilderness to Mt. Sinai in Exodus 15-19. This is one of the most significant

events in the history of God's people as it formed the basis for the Hebrews to form a relationship with God while in the wilderness. At Sinai God made a covenant with his people that they would follow him and obey his rules (to be holy). The most familiar part of this is the 10 commandments found in Exodus 20. After the 10 commandments and further laws God had for his people we find the people confirm their willingness to obey the covenant and laws of God in Exodus 24. The rest of the book (chapters 25-40) regards the priests, further instructions and laws that lead us to the book of Leviticus.

Leviticus

Date written – 1350 B.C.

Author - Moses

Summary – This is one of the hardest books of the Bible to read because it seems really hard to relate to and make application to our lives. This book contains a huge list of very specific rules and regulations for how to conduct sacrifices and make atonement for sins. There are a couple of interesting points that help us read this book. First, we learn that God is dwelling among his people in the tabernacle. Second, we learn that God did forgive sins under the old covenant. There are many passages that say this in Leviticus (see 4:20, 25 for an example). The second point is that we see in Leviticus just how important holiness is to God. The point is, we have to approach God on his terms. We don't just waltz into a relationship with him any way we want. We respect his conditions and terms and do our best to abide by them. The word "holy" occurs over 60 times in less than 30 chapters. One key verse is Leviticus 20:26 – "You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own."

It is helpful to see Leviticus broken down into smaller chunks (Jim George's book *The Barebones Bible Handbook*):

Chapters 1-7 Laws of Acceptable Worship

Chapters 8-10 Laws Pertaining to the Priesthood

Chapters 11-16 Laws for Uncleanness

Chapters 17-27 Laws of Acceptable Living

Numbers

Date written – 1350 B.C.

Author - Moses

Summary – We find even more laws in Numbers. By now it is clear that it was important to God to let his people know what he expected of them. Remember, they had lived in Egypt for several hundred years. Egypt was a pagan society that worshipped several false-gods. It would be important for God to reconnect with his people and lay down specific regulations about how he was to be worshipped and how to make atonement for sin through sacrifice. We also find more detailed stories about God's people in the wilderness with God.

Let's recap. When God's people left Egypt they went into the wilderness and were on their way to the promised land with God as their guide and provider. They came to Sinai and God established the ground rules and a covenant with his people, which they accepted to obey. They left Sinai for the promised land, which picks up in the book of Numbers.

In Numbers 13 the Hebrews are right on the edge of the promised land. They send spies in to find out more about what they are up against. Instead of trusting God, who promised them the land (remember the promise to Abraham?) they were afraid and decided not to invade the land (the land is currently the country of Israel today). Because they disobeyed God they would die in the wilderness as God would not allow them in the land for 40 years (See Numbers 14:34). The rest of Numbers deals with more laws and a few stories of their time in the wilderness.

Deuteronomy

Date written – 1350 B.C.

Author - Moses

Summary – The word Deuteronomy means “Second law.” This is a speech given by Moses reminding them of the laws God has given to them. The reason for this is because they are at the end of the 40 years and most of the people who rebelled in Numbers 14 had died. God promised that none of those who rebelled would make it to the promised land alive (Num 14:20-25). Now their children were about to go into the promised land and Moses wants them to remember all the things God had commanded their fathers. What is interesting is that as Moses talks about all the events of the past he says “you did this” and “you did that” but it was their parents who had done all those things. Moses is identifying the children with their parents and warning them not to make the same mistakes their parents made, which resulted in their death in the wilderness. Deuteronomy ends with the death of Moses and the stage has been set for the Hebrews to enter the promised land in the next book, Joshua.

Historical Books

Joshua

Date written – 1250 B.C.

Author - Joshua

Summary – Here the people finally get to be in the promised land! The book of Joshua tells the story of the invasion and the many battles that God’s people fought to take over the land. One of the things that stands out in Joshua is that when the people were doing their best to obey God, God gave them success. But if the people were disobedient, they faced defeat in battle. One problem in Joshua is that they didn’t fully obey God and they left some people in the land. That would come back to haunt them over and over again (See the book of Judges).

Judges

Date written – 1150 B.C.

Author – Samuel

Summary – In Judges 2:8-9 we read about the death of Joshua. Remember that Joshua was Moses successor in leading the people into the promised land. In the very next verse you read about how it all fell apart in the leadership vacuum that followed –

“After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals. They forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the LORD to anger because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. In his anger against Israel the LORD handed them over to raiders who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist. Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the LORD was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress. Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders.”

We see how quickly things fell apart and how God's people did exactly what God warned them not to do – idol worship and acting like the surrounding nations. The rest of Judges deals with the leaders God raised up to deliver God's people from other nations. You see this pattern repeated over and over in the book.

1. Things are good
2. People get comfortable
3. They fall into sin
4. Invaders come in and defeat them
5. People cry out to God for deliverance
6. God raises up a judge
7. People get comfortable again...repeat!

We learn from judges that we need to rely on God in good times and bad times. We should never think we have it made or that we can do things without God's help.

Ruth

Date written – 1125 B.C.

Author – Samuel

Summary – Ruth is basically a bridge book that gets us from Judges to 1 Samuel. Who would have thought? Look at the first words – “in the days when the judges ruled.” Now look at the last word in the book – “David.” David is the prime person in the next few books of the Bible (1 Samuel-1 Kings 2). Ruth is a love story that helps us understand the genealogy of David. You will also notice that Ruth is one of the few women mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:5). Ruth also teaches us a lot about redemption and care of the needy.

1 Samuel

Date written – 930-722 B.C.

Author – Samuel

Summary – Samuel was a prophet of God whose name means “God hears.” That refers to the prayers of his mother Hannah who prayed for a son even though she was barren (1:5). God saw her faithfulness and answered her prayer. She dedicated her son Samuel to the Lord and left him in the temple to grow up there in service to God. Samuel becomes God's spokesman through the appointing of Saul as the first king of Israel (1 Sam 9) and ushers in David as king (1 Sam 16). Samuel contains many stories of God's people and their continued battle of people who still remain in the promised land.

2 Samuel

Date written – 930-722 B.C.

Author – Samuel

Summary – The first half of 2 Samuel deals with the life of David. In chapter 7 God makes a promise to David that he will establish David's throne forever (7:16). But a few chapters later, David's affair with Bathsheba derails much of what God was trying to do (chapter 11). Much of the rest of 2 Samuel deals with Nathan's prophesy in 2 Sam 12:11 that calamity is going to fall on the house of David.

1 Kings

Date written – 560-540 B.C.

Author - Unknown

Summary – 1 Kings' two most prominent figures are Solomon and Elijah. 1 Kings is about God's promises to Solomon, the building of the temple and the start of other successors to the throne. 2 Kings will go into a more lengthy list of kings of Israel and whether or not they followed God. Solomon started strong but in the end he

did exactly what God warned him about – he began to worship false gods because of all the marriages he had with women from other countries. His politics got him in trouble with God.

2 Kings

Date written – 560-530 B.C.

Author - Unknown

Summary - On the religious side, 2 Kings tells us a lot about Elisha the prophet. On the political side we get a laundry list of kings and whether or not they served the Lord. One major turning point in 2 Kings is king Josiah's discovery of the Book of the Law (which was probably a scroll of the book of Deuteronomy). Based on that discovery, Josiah instituted a bunch of reforms to get the nation turned around. 2 Kings ends with the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonian armies.

1 Chronicles

Date written – 1350 B.C.

Author - Ezra

Summary – For 8 chapters you have a long list of names. It isn't until 9:1 that you see the connection back to the end of 2 Kings – “The people of Judah were taken captive to Babylon because of their unfaithfulness.” The reason for this list of names is that people are looking back at their history. They are remembering where they came from. They are recounting how God has worked in the past to bring them to where they are now – in captivity in Babylon. When you look at the past, it gives you hope for a brighter future. This isn't a list of names for the sake of giving you a hard time to finish reading Chronicles. These names were meaningful to them. These are their forefathers, their patriarchs.

After listing all these generations of past Israelites, the writer goes back to Saul and works from Saul to David to Solomon, echoing much of what we read in 1 Kings. However, in Chronicles we get much more of a religious feel to what we read as more space is given to the Levites (the tribe the priests were to come from) and preparation for the temple. 1 Chronicles ends with David's death.

2 Chronicles

Date written – 450-430 B.C.

Author - Ezra

Summary – 2 Chronicles is similar to 2 Kings. It starts with Solomon and the temple and then goes to his successors and whether or not they were faithful to God. Like 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles ends with the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. The mention of Cyrus, king of Persia in 2 Chronicles 36:23 ties us in to Ezra (See Ezra 1:1).

Ezra

Date written – 457-444 B.C.

Author - Ezra

Summary – Ezra the scribe doesn't come on the scene until Ezra 7. What we see in the first 6 chapters is Cyrus, the king of Persia, sending Jews back to their homeland. Remember the end of 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles? The Babylonians defeated Jerusalem and took many people away into captivity. In the Bible this is called “the exile.” The Persians defeated the Babylonians and their leader Cyrus was a smart guy. He reasoned that his empire would be more secure if he let prisoners (those exiled) go back to their homes and worship their own “gods.” In the process he let many Jews go back to their homeland and even helped them in rebuilding their temple.

One interesting thing you get here that is not mentioned in Ezra are the Samaritans you read about 500 years later in the New Testament. The Samaritan culture are basically the people who stayed behind and didn't go into exile. They stayed back and many intermarried with other cultures (See Ezra 9). When the Jews came back home from Babylon/Persia they found people settled on their lands (the Samaritans). That is why there was so much bitterness toward them. They were not "pure" Jews by lineage and some moved in on land that wasn't theirs.

Ezra 1-6 is about the rebuilding of the temple. Ezra 7-10 is about restoring its worship.

In Ezra 7, Ezra comes to Jerusalem in order to restore the law and temple worship in its proper form. What is interesting is that originally Ezra and Nehemiah were one book. They were separated many years later so if you want the whole story you have to read them together. Ezra ends with the confrontation of sin and confession on the part of the people.

Nehemiah

Date written – 424-400 B.C.

Author - Nehemiah

Summary – Ezra spent time bringing spiritual restoration to the people in war-torn Jerusalem. Now, Nehemiah comes as a leader to rebuild the city wall. There are many things we can learn from Nehemiah. Many people come to it to learn about leadership. Nehemiah exhibits some outstanding leadership skills when he comes to rebuild the wall. There is also a great element of trust in this book. The people have to put trust in Nehemiah to lead them as Nehemiah puts his trust in God. Ultimately he leads the people to trust in God as well through his example.

Nehemiah came from Persia to rebuild the wall. That is the link between Nehemiah and Esther.

Esther

Date written – 450-430

Author - Unknown

Summary – A Jewish woman who through a contest becomes queen of Persia (the greatest empire in the world at the time). If that isn't enough, the central theme of the book is how that providential situation led her to a position of influence to save the Jewish people from extermination. Esther is used most in teaching about providential circumstances (Esther 4:14). It is also an explanation of where the Jewish feast of Purim came from.

Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther deal with the time after God's people came out of Babylonian captivity. While, Ezra and Nehemiah deal with those who came back to Israel/Jerusalem; Esther deals with people who decided not to come home and to stay in the land of their captivity.

Genesis-Esther is pretty much chronological. Once you get to Job things start getting more out of order in history.

Wisdom/Poetic Books

Job

Date written – 1800 BC?

Author - Unknown

Summary – The book of Job might be the oldest book of the Bible. It starts with a debate between God and Satan over whether or not mankind serves God just because God blesses them so much. In order to prove that man will serve God just because he is God and not just "to get a bunch of stuff" God allows Satan to put Job

through a lot of suffering to see if Job will be faithful (Job 1-2). In the middle of the book you find Job having discussions with three of his friends over the nature of his suffering (Job 4-37). They believe he must have done something wrong or evil to deserve to suffer this badly. Job declares himself innocent and calls a court case against God to prove it. God shows up and humbles Job (Job 38-42). Ultimately Job was found faithful even though he had some doubts and made accusations against God and God blessed him abundantly (Job 42).

Psalms

Date written – 1300-450 BC

Authors – David, Sons of Korah, Asaph, Solomon, Moses, Heman, Ethan, Jeduthun

Summary – The book of psalms is not narrative (story). It is poetry and so there are few connections between the psalms. The book is divided up into 5 sections:

Part 1: 1-41

Part 2: 42-72

Part 3: 73-89

Part 4: 90-106

Part 5: 107-150

The psalms reflect everything it means to be human. There is victory and defeat. There is anger, compassion, love, humility, bitterness, rage, sadness, and joy. There is a psalm for every occasion in life. The psalms show us how to live in total openness to God with our feelings. We learn how to deal with sin (Psalm 51). We learn how to rejoice in God (Psalm 68) and so many other good and practical things.

Proverbs

Date written – 970 BC

Author – Solomon

Summary – Solomon was favored by God and was asked for anything he wanted. He chose wisdom (1 Kings 4). The proverbs are the result of that wisdom, writing down as a good teacher and king things for others to listen to and follow in order to follow the ways of the wise. Proverbs usually are not very connected with each other. The chapters and verses read more like a list of short, wise sayings.

Ecclesiastes

Date written – 950 BC

Author – Solomon

Summary – In this book Solomon portrays himself as the “Teacher”. This is a very serious and hard hitting book that doesn’t hold much back. Solomon is intent to save other grief by giving practical advice on how to avoid poor decisions and how to have the right priorities in life. The most important thing in life is a passionate pursuit of God. Everything else pales in comparison.

Song of Songs

Date written – 970 BC

Author – Solomon

Summary – Song of Songs is about passionate romance. This is written like a love letter in very graphic language, so much so, that young Jewish boys were forbidden to read this book. This book shows us that sexuality is not a dirty thing but is a blessing. It demonstrates the beauty of the human body, the passion one should have for their spouse, and the importance of romance.

The Prophets

Isaiah

Date written – 700 BC

Author – Isaiah

Summary – Isaiah was a prophet who spoke out against compromise among God’s people. This made him less than popular. But in doing so he reveals so much to us today about God’s holiness, righteousness, and much about Jesus Christ as God’s suffering servant (Isa 53). God often used Isaiah as a visual aid to demonstrate what he was trying to get them to understand. In Isaiah 20:2-6 he is told to preach naked to show the people that they too would be shamed if they followed earthly rulers over God. Isaiah teaches us that God does act as judge but he does so in order to teach us and redeem us.

Jeremiah

Date written – 600 BC

Author – Jeremiah

Summary – Jeremiah went through a lot as a prophet for the Lord. He had his share of beatings and persecution at the hands of his own people. This was all because he was sent to them with the unpopular message of repentance and of the defeat of the nation. Jeremiah is one of the prophets that warned the people of their exile or banishment from the land with the coming of the Assyrian army and the destruction of Jerusalem. Not quite the most popular message! We admire Jeremiah’s willingness to be bold and speak the truth even when it wasn’t popular or got him into trouble.

Lamentations

Date written – 587 BC

Author – Jeremiah

Summary – Jerusalem was destroyed in 587 BC. Lamentations contains Jeremiah’s reflections on those devastating events. Jeremiah is often called the “Weeping prophet” and Lamentations certainly carries that tone. Even though the people had been sinful, it is still difficult watching them come to ruin. Even so, there is still hope for God’s people to return to their former glory but the process is hard – exile from the land only to have their children later come and reclaim it.

Ezekiel

Date written – 600 BC

Author – Ezekiel

Summary – Ezekiel was a prophet to the exiles in Babylon at the same time Jeremiah was back home prophesying in Jerusalem. When the Babylonians and Assyrians took the people of Israel and Judah into captivity they normally took the rich and powerful first. That is how Ezekiel is in exile while Jeremiah was still back home preaching to those left behind. Ezekiel is in Babylonia trying to get the newly exiled Israelites to finally get their hearts right.

Daniel

Date written – 530 BC

Author – Daniel

Summary – Like Ezekiel, Daniel is also in Babylon. We normally think of the word prophesy or prophet being about predicting the future. Prophesy is actually about revealing things from God to mankind. Sometimes those are future events and other times it is a message from God about right here and now. Daniel is the prophetic book in the Old Testament that is mostly about events that are to come. It was to show the people in Babylon through the exile that God was still concerned for them and had a plan for their future. We learn this through Daniel’s recording of several visions God gave him about future events (now long past).

Hosea

Date written – 750 BC

Author – Hosea

Summary – Hosea was called by God to be a prophet who was to speak out about the spiritual adultery of idolatry. God used Hosea as an object lesson by having him go and marry a prostitute. She would cheat on him time and time again, just like God's people had cheated on God through worshipping idols. We learn from Hosea how great God's love is for us, how much he puts up with and how badly he wants us to be pure and make things right.

Joel

Date written – 800 BC

Author – Joel

Summary – Joel was writing in order to warn the people of an upcoming disaster. The land was going to be invaded by a mighty army. He uses the analogy or image of an invasion of locusts that come in and ravage the land, devouring everything in their path. He urges the people to repent or perish. Joel tells the people the Day of the Lord is coming...this is a day of judgment and wrath. In this case the day of the Lord is a dreadful thing to be feared for those who were unrepentant. We learn from Joel that sin does matter, that God is watching, and that there is a price to be paid for rebellion against the Lord.

Amos

Date written – 800 BC

Author – Amos

Summary – Amos preached judgment on the northern tribes of Israel due to their sin and rebellion. Amos is made up of a series of sermons and judgments preached against God's people with the hope of their repentance. They didn't listen. The last chapter of Amos prophesies Israel will be destroyed and later be restored.

Obadiah

Date written – 850 BC

Author – Obadiah

Summary – This prophesy is about Edom and Jerusalem. Edom was a nation made up of relatives to the Jews (through Esau – See Obadiah 1:6 and Genesis 25-27). When Jerusalem was attacked, Edom should have helped them. Instead they mocked Israel and incurred the wrath and judgment of God. Edom is the shortest book in the Old Testament, only 1 chapter long. In this book we see how passionate God is for his people and will eventually bring judgment on those who stand opposed to God's people.

Jonah

Date written – 750 BC

Author – Jonah

Summary – Jonah is really a book about God's mercy. It is one of the few times in the Old Testament that God offers a nation, other than Israel, opportunity to repent. It shows that God is interested in the hearts of all people, everywhere. Jonah failed to recognize God's goodness and mercy. First he flees from God's call and last he pouts and complains about God's mercy. God is good in spite of our misunderstanding.

Micah

Date written – 700 BC

Author – Micah

Summary – Like the rest, Micah is concerned with God’s judgment against Israel’s sin. Micah also speaks out against false hope that things will go well because they are “God’s people” even if they aren’t acting like it. We often think of sin as something between us and God but it can be more than that. Micah emphasizes how they have acted evilly against even their own people and how God will bring judgment on them for it.

Nahum

Date written – 650 BC

Author – Nahum

Summary – Like Jonah Nahum also prophesies against Ninevah. This time God is fed up with their sin and will bring destruction. Ninevah was the capital of Assyria and was viewed as a great and powerful nation. But no one can stand up to the judgment of God. God made good on his word and destroyed them.

Habakkuk

Date written – 600 BC

Author – Habakkuk

Summary – Habakkuk starts out with Habakkuk questioning the integrity of his own people, Israel. He calls for God’s judgment to come upon them for their wickedness. When God declares he will answer Habakkuk’s plea by bringing the Assyrian’s to destroy them Habakkuk is left with the question of why God would let someone even more wicked have victory over God’s people. God doesn’t answer his question directly. Habakkuk is left with his question but with a new realization that even though he doesn’t “Get it” that God does and that he just has to live by faith (Hab 2:4)

Zephaniah

Date written – 625 BC

Author – Zephaniah

Summary – Like many of the books before Zephaniah is a book about God’s judgment on Israel for their sin but the promise and hope of restoration to follow.

Haggai

Date written – 520 BC

Author – Haggai

Summary – Haggai kicks off the last three prophets, who were preaching to those who were now back home from exile. The message of Haggai is to keep first things first. The people had come back home and built nice homes for themselves but God’s temple had not be rebuilt properly. He called on them to make this right.

Zechariah

Date written – 500 BC

Author – Zechariah

Summary – Zechariah happens just after Haggai, once the people have started rebuilding the temple. Much of Zechariah is very difficult to understand so don’t feel too bad if this is a difficult book to read. Zechariah looks forward to the coming of the Messiah.

Malachi

Date written – 450 BC

Author – Malachi

Summary – The last book of the Old Testament picks up where Haggai and Zechariah left off. The people still have much to do to get their priorities in line. Even though they had gone through a rough exile and were finally back home it shows people can still very easily become complacent.