

SAINT MARY'S PRESS®  
**ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO  
BIBLICAL LIFE AND TIMES**

MARTIN C. ALBL, PHD

Saint Mary's Press®

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# Dedication

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This work is dedicated to my wife, Judy, who shares with me a love of the Bible as well as a curiosity about the cultures that produced it. Her support made this book possible.

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I wish to thank my editor, Brian Singer-Towns, for his helpful suggestions, flexibility, and patience in working with me. Thanks are due also to the rest of the Saint Mary's Press team who helped to see this project to completion.

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# Introduction

## God's Word Written by Human Authors

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A basic Christian belief is that the Bible is the Word of God. Because God is eternal and unchanging, it seems very reasonable to assume that the Bible, as God's Word, would be eternal and unchanging as well.

But we need to consider this assumption carefully. In addition to understanding the Bible as God's Word, Christians also believe that the Bible was written by human authors. As the Second Vatican Council taught, "God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion" (*Dei Verbum*, no. 12). This is clear from the title of many of the books themselves, such as the Gospel According to Luke and Paul's Letter to the Romans. And as we know, human beings are far from being eternal and unchanging—we are all formed and limited by our particular culture and society.

Christians also believe that the biblical authors were inspired by the Holy Spirit. If this is true, then isn't it possible that God took away any and all human limitations and allowed the authors to record his perfect and unchanging Word?

The best way to answer this question is to consider the writings of the biblical authors themselves. When we read the letters of Paul, for example, we do not get the impression that God is dictating to him word for word. Many of Paul's statements are very ordinary and personal: "I, Paul, write this in my own hand" (Phlm v. 19). "When you come, bring the cloak I left with Carpus in Troas" (2 Tm 4:13). The author of the Gospel of Luke tells us that he wrote by investigating and arranging eyewitness accounts about Jesus (see 1:1–4). In other words, Luke worked very much like any other human historian.

## The Human Author Shaped by Society and Culture

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If we wish to understand the Bible, we must take seriously the fact that all human beings are shaped by particular societies and cultures. There is no such thing as a generic human being; an individual human being must belong to at least one social and cultural group. As the council taught, to understand a biblical author correctly, we must consider how that author was influenced by "the situations of his own time and culture" (*Dei Verbum*, no. 12).

If we wish to understand a person from another culture and society, several things are necessary. Most basically, if he or she speaks another language, we must translate his or her words into English. Yet even if we understand the person's words, we may not understand the particular meaning those words have in his or her society and culture. To really understand this person, we would need to know something about his or her culture.

Let's apply this scenario to the Bible. Not only did the authors write in other languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek), but they also lived in societies and cultures that are very different from our modern American experiences. Thankfully, we have reliable English translations of those ancient writings. But an accurate translation does not guarantee that we will understand the message of these authors, because the meaning of any message is inescapably influenced by the assumptions and values of the society and culture in which it was written.

To get a concrete sense of just how different biblical societies are from our own, consider a brief list of some cultural and social givens of biblical societies:

- Slavery is a natural and acceptable social institution.
- Marriages are arranged by families. They are based on family needs, not on the romantic interests of the couple.
- Generally, women are under the legal authority of men for their entire lives—first their father's, then their husband's.
- In Israelite society, a range of actions was punishable by death, including practicing sorcery and fortune-telling, or eating the blood of an animal.

This brief list should be sufficient to show just how different many of biblical society's beliefs and customs were. If we wish to understand the Word of God properly, we must try to understand the cultural and social context of the human authors of the Bible.

## Approaching the Biblical Societies and Cultures

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We begin with two brief definitions. By *society*, I mean the social structures or institutions that are established by a particular people. These institutions include the family (or kinship group), economic institutions, religious institutions, and political institutions. In biblical societies, the dominant structures are kinship and politics: the economy and religion were not separate institutions.

Here is one example from the time of Jesus: The Jewish high priest (religious realm) was appointed by King Herod (political realm) from a select group of high priestly families (kinship realm). In addition to his religious duties, the high priest was responsible for maintaining social order and ensuring that the Jewish people paid their tribute to the Roman authorities. Biblical societies had no sense of our modern separation of church and state.

*Culture* refers to the basic values, beliefs, and practices that are shared by a social group. Cultural values and beliefs are expressed and activated through the social institutions.

This book is divided into a series of articles devoted to specific social and cultural topics, arranged in alphabetical order. The following major areas are covered:

- *social and political institutions*, including study of the family or kinship system and political structures
- *social customs*, including dance, music, and hair and dress styles
- *general cultural beliefs and values*, including beliefs about human nature, sexuality,

- sickness and healing, and beliefs about the structure of the universe (cosmology)
- *religious beliefs and institutions*, including beliefs about purity, sacrifices, sin, and spiritual powers, as well as the synagogue and Temple systems in which these beliefs functioned
- *economic structures*, including professions in agriculture, fishing, and shepherding, as well as a consideration of the money, tax, and debt systems within the context of patron-client structures

## Defining Key Cultural Terms

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The term *biblical societies* covers a vast amount of space and time. Over a thousand years lies between the patriarchal societies of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the societies of the New Testament. Biblical societies are found in Palestine, Syria, modern-day Turkey, Greece, and Rome. Following are some key terms necessary for understanding some of that cultural variety:

**Canaanite.** This is the name for a group of Semitic tribes living in Palestine. See the “Canaanite Religion” article.

**Diaspora Jews.** This refers to Jews living in communities outside Palestine. In New Testament times, Jewish communities were thriving in various Mediterranean cities: Alexandria in Egypt, Ephesus in modern-day Turkey, Corinth in Greece, Rome, and also in the Near Eastern communities, such as Babylon.

Because most Diaspora Jews spoke Greek, they used a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures known as the Septuagint.

**Gentiles.** The term *Gentile* is a Jewish term that essentially means a “non-Jew.” Sometimes Gentiles are simply called “the nations.”

New Testament authors sometimes use the term *Greek* to mean “Gentile,” as the Greek or Hellenistic culture was the dominant culture in the ancient Mediterranean world. For example, Paul says that the saving power of the Gospel is “for Jew first, and then Greek” (Rom 1:16).

**Greco-Roman culture.** By the time the New Testament was written, the entire Mediterranean area was part of the Roman Empire. It is therefore appropriate to speak of a Greco-Roman culture, rather than simply a Hellenistic culture.

The effect of Roman culture was felt primarily in the political and military areas. In the Gospels, Jesus encounters Roman military officers (see Mk 8:5–13), discusses paying taxes to Rome (see 12:13–17), is condemned to death by the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, and is crucified by Roman soldiers (see 15:1–39).

In other areas of culture, however, Roman influence was minimal. Even the Roman soldiers and government officials in Palestine and the Diaspora primarily spoke Greek, not Latin. Roman religion and philosophy was itself heavily influenced by Hellenism.

**Hebrew.** This is a general term for members of the twelve Tribes of Israel, used especially in Exodus and in First Samuel.

**Hellenistic culture.** The Greek King Alexander the Great (356 to 323 BC) conquered the Middle East, including Palestine, and lands as far away as India. Long after his reign, Greek language and culture continued to dominate these areas. Higher education, for example, often focused on learning the ancient Greek classics (such as Homer or other Greek poets) or on studying various branches of

Greek philosophy (Platonic, Aristotilean, Stoic). The native cultures of these lands, naturally, also continued to have an influence. The blending of Greek and native influences is known as Hellenistic culture (*Hellas* is the Greek term for Greece).

**Israelites.** This term is used for members of the twelve Tribes of Israel after the time of Exodus. It can refer specifically to members of the northern kingdom of Israel after they split from the southern kingdom of Judah after the death of Solomon (see 2 Chr 13:16). Its most common use, however, is as the self-designation of those Hebrew-speaking people in Palestine who had a covenant with the Lord. Their descendants who lived outside of Palestine and who spoke Greek also called themselves Israelites, especially when referring to the religious aspects of their lives.

**Jews** (*Ioudaioi*, in Greek). This term was first used by the exiles returning from Babylon, when they first established the Persian province of Yehud (see Ezz 4:12), later known as the Roman province of Judea. Originally it may have referred simply to the people from Yehud or Judea, but soon it was applied to all those who belonged to the covenant people of the Lord and followed his Law, both inside and outside of Palestine. In contrast to the “insider” group term *Israelites* (the name used by the people to refer to themselves), the term *Jews* is generally used by “outsiders,” such as Greco-Roman writers, and also by those followers of the Torah who lived outside Palestine, especially in reference to their relationship with non-Israelites.

**Mediterranean culture.** Beyond these specific cultures, scholars such as Bruce Malina rightly speak of a Mediterranean culture that not only unites these widespread biblical societies but also includes many social groups existing today. Basic Mediterranean cultural values have changed little over the centuries, maintaining the centrality of the kinship group, a group-oriented (rather than individualistic) perspective, patriarchal leadership of social institutions, and the use of honor and shame to reinforce social norms. So in this sense, the articles in this book will also sometimes speak of a general “biblical culture.”

## Cultures in Cooperation and Conflict

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As we saw from the last definition, the various Mediterranean cultures did not exist in isolation from one another. By the time of Jesus, Jews in Palestine had been influenced by Hellenistic culture for three centuries. Although Jesus grew up in the tiny Jewish village of Nazareth (whose population then was no more than five hundred), only about four miles away from Nazareth was the city of Sepphoris, a walled city with a theater that seated three thousand people.

The Apostle Paul is a good example of the blending of cultures. Paul was born in the city of Tarsus (in modern-day Turkey). Tarsus was a Greek city, known for its schools of philosophy and rhetoric. Paul was proud of his hometown. He tells a Roman officer, “I am a Jew, of Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city” (Acts 21:39). Paul also frequently mentioned the fact that he was born a Roman citizen (see 16:37, 22:25–29). He wrote his letters in Greek. Yet Paul was educated as a Pharisee, a strict follower of Jewish laws (see Phil 3:5, Acts 22:3). Even his name is revealing: in Semitic (Hebrew or Aramaic) circles he is called Saul; in a Greco-Roman environment, he goes by Paul.



# Sources for the Study of Biblical Societies

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In our study of biblical societies, we rely on information from the following major sources:

**The Bible.** Our main goal is to achieve a better understanding of the Bible, so we refer to specific passages often. We will include such books as First and Second Maccabees and Tobit, which are part of the Old Testament canon accepted by Catholic and Orthodox churches.

**Near Eastern literature.** Study of Canaanite and Babylonian religions shows how Israel's neighbors sometimes influenced Israel's beliefs.

**Second Temple Jewish literature.** Second Temple Judaism refers to Judaism from the time of the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple after the Babylonian Exile (around 515 BC) to the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in AD 70. The most significant sources include:

- *Dead Sea Scrolls.* These are the writings of a Jewish sect that lived in the Judean wilderness. The scrolls include many copies of biblical books as well as community rules, hymns, biblical commentaries, and other writings that shed light on the community's practices.
- *Writings of Philo of Alexandria (20 BC to AD 50).* Philo of Alexandria was a Jewish philosopher and biblical commentator well acquainted with Hellenistic philosophy and culture.
- *Writings of Josephus (AD 37 to ca. 100).* A Jewish religious, political, and military leader who wrote a history of the Jewish people and an account of the Jewish revolt against the Romans (AD 66 to 70).

**Rabbinic literature.** The writings of later Jewish rabbis often give insight into biblical culture. Most valuable is the Mishnah, a collection of tractates that record rabbinic legal debates and rulings on various questions of ordinary Jewish life. Although written around the year AD 200, it often reflects debates that took place earlier. The Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds, commentaries on the Mishnah, were compiled many centuries after biblical times but occasionally provide some insight into biblical values and practices.

**Archaeological evidence.** The physical remains of temples, synagogues, and ritual baths give us insight into ancient religious beliefs and practices; remains of houses and work tools give us insight into daily life.

**Social-scientific studies of modern Mediterranean cultures.** As mentioned earlier, studies of modern Mediterranean groups provide insight into ancient cultural values. The bibliography shows the studies on which I have relied most. Especially influential on my thinking is the work of Bruce Malina, John Pilch, and their colleagues.

Supplied with these various tools, you are ready for an excursion into the foreign lands of biblical societies. It is my hope that these pages will help to make your reading of the Bible more understandable and more meaningful.

# Alphabetical List of Bible Books and Abbreviations

Book	Abbreviation
Acts	Acts
Amos	Am
Baruch	Bar
1 Chronicles	1 Chr
2 Chronicles	2 Chr
Colossians	Col
1 Corinthians	1 Cor
2 Corinthians	2 Cor
Daniel	Dn
Deuteronomy	Dt
Ecclesiastes	Eccl
Ephesians	Eph
Esther	Est
Exodus	Ex
Ezekiel	Ez
Ezra	Ezr
Galatians	Gal
Genesis	Gn
Habakkuk	Hb
Haggai	Hg
Hebrews	Heb
Hosea	Hos
Isaiah	Is
James	Jas
Jeremiah	Jer
Job	Jb
Joel	Jl
1 John1	Jn
2 John2	Jn
3 John3	Jn
John	Jn
Jonah	Jon
Joshua	Jos
Jude	Jude
Judges	Jgs
Judith	Jdt
1 Kings	1 Kgs

Book	Abbreviation
2 Kings	2 Kgs
Lamentations	Lam
Leviticus	Lv
Luke	Lk
1 Maccabees	1 Mc
2 Maccabees	2 Mc
Malachi	Mal
Mark	Mk
Matthew	Mt
Micah	Mi
Nahum	Na
Nehemiah	Neh
Numbers	Nm
Obadiah	Ob
1 Peter	1 Pt
2 Peter	2 Pt
Philemon	Phlm
Philippians	Phil
Proverbs	Prv
Psalms	Ps(s)
Revelation	Rv
Romans	Rom
Ruth	Ru
1 Samuel	1 Sm
2 Samuel	2 Sm
Sirach	Sir
Song of Songs	Song
1 Thessalonians	1 Thes
2 Thessalonians	2 Thes
1 Timothy	1 Tm
2 Timothy	2 Tm
Titus	Ti
Tobit	Tb
Wisdom	Wis
Zechariah	Zec
Zephaniah	Zep

# Afterlife

We all have some ideas about the afterlife. At a funeral, we hear the pastor speak of heaven. We might watch a TV show about angels. But many details about the afterlife are usually not too clear. Does everyone go to heaven, except perhaps mass murderers like Hitler? Does hell, a place filled with devils and eternal fire, really exist, or was that just a concept invented to scare people into behaving properly? What do people look like in heaven? Are they the same age as when they died? Will we recognize our loved ones in heaven?

The Bible does not have a single response to these questions; rather, as we'll see, biblical beliefs about the afterlife changed and developed over time.

In Old Testament times, the primary belief was that at death all people went to Sheol, a sort of shadowy, underworld existence. After the time of the Babylonian Exile, however, the belief in eternal reward and eternal punishment developed in some Jewish circles together with the concept of a final resurrection of the dead. By Jesus' time, some Jews (the Pharisees, for example) believed in the resurrection of the dead while others (the Sadducees, for example) did not.

## Sheol

Throughout most of the Old Testament, there is no conception of the Christian ideas of heaven and hell; rather, the common belief was that all of the dead, both the wicked and the good, would go to Sheol, where they existed in a sort of fleeting, shadowy way. The Hebrew word *Sheol* is sometimes translated as "the netherworld."

No one seems to remember God in Sheol: "Turn, Lord, save my life;

/ in your mercy rescue me. / For who among the dead remembers you? / Who praises you in Sheol?" (Ps 6:6; see also 115:17 and Is 38:18). Yet the psalmist has a sense that God's presence is still there in some way: "If I ascend to the heavens, you are there; / if I lie down in Sheol, you are there too" (Ps 139:8).

In Sheol "there will be no work, nor reason, nor knowledge, nor wisdom" (Eccl 9:10). Job describes Sheol as a place of dust and darkness, corruption and maggots (17:13–16). Sheol can simply be another name for the grave, or death itself: "My life draws near to Sheol" (Ps 88:4).

For both believers in God and non-believers, the ultimate destiny is Sheol. The psalmist is equally sure that "to Sheol the wicked will depart, / all the nations that forget God" (Ps 9:18). When Jacob believed that his son Joseph was dead, he refused to be consoled, insisting, "No, I will go down mourning to my son in the nether world [Sheol]" (Gn 37:35).

Belief in Sheol is closely associated with ancient Hebrew beliefs about human nature. The Hebrews did not share the Greek conception of the human as composed of a fragile physical body and an immortal soul. They thought more holistically of an essential connection between soul and body, and thus had difficulty conceiving of an immortal life apart from the body (see the "Human Nature" article).

The Old Testament does speak of some exceptions to the fate of Sheol: Enoch "walked with God, and he was no longer here, for God took him" (Gn 5:24), and Elijah is carried alive in a flaming chariot up to heaven in a whirlwind (see 2 Kgs 2:11). These events were mysterious exceptions, however,

and give no information about the general fate of humans.

In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures used by early Christians), the word *Sheol* was translated with the Greek word *Hades*. In Greek mythology, *Hades* refers to the realm of the dead and its ruler, the god Hades (Pluto, in Roman mythology). In general, the ancient Greek ideas about Hades were similar to Hebrew ideas of life in *Sheol*: all people, good and bad, descended to Hades and existed in a gloomy and shadowy way.

In the New Testament, Hades is thought of as a temporary place for the dead. Even Jesus descended to Hades after death: Peter says that God did not abandon Jesus in the netherworld (*Hades*, in the original Greek), but rather raised him from the dead (Acts 2:31). At the time of the Last Judgment, according to the Book of Revelation, “Hades and Death” will give up their dead, and the dead will then receive either eternal life in heaven or in hell. Revelation says that Death and Hades will then be “thrown into the pool of fire” (20:14)—Hades will have fulfilled its temporary purpose.

## Gehenna and Hell

The term *hell* is not used in the NAB translation of the Bible. The belief in a place of eternal punishment of the wicked or unfaithful, however, is clearly found in the New Testament. In the Gospels, the common term used for this eternal punishment is *Gehenna*; the Book of Revelation uses the terms *pool of fire* or *the second death* for this concept.

Gehenna is the name of a valley that runs southwest of Jerusalem. (*Gehenna* is a Greek version of the Hebrew *Ge-hinnom*, which means “Valley of

Hinnom.”) In Old Testament times, children were offered in this valley as burnt sacrifices to the Canaanite gods Molech and Baal (see Jer 7:31, 2 Chr 28:3). The prophet Jeremiah threatened that God would punish participants in this worship: the valley of Gehenna would be filled with corpses, and it would be called the “Valley of Slaughter” (Jer 19:6).

The valley was associated with fire: at first with the fires of the sacrifices, and then later, when it became a garbage dump, with the huge, continuous fires with which garbage was burned.

Because of the evil reputation of the valley, its name became associated with developing Jewish ideas about eternal punishment. Gehenna’s fires symbolized the eternal fire that punished the wicked. The prophet Isaiah mentions this fire in his description of those condemned by God: “Their worm shall not die, / nor their fire be extinguished; / and they shall be abhorrent to all mankind” (Is 66:24); Jesus connects this verse with Gehenna (see Mk 9:48).

In the synoptic Gospels, Jesus often uses the word *Gehenna*. The whole body can be thrown into Gehenna (see Mt 5:29–30, 10:28); Jesus describes it as “a fiery furnace, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth” (13:42). It is identified as “the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (25:41), and “eternal punishment” (25:46).

The Book of Revelation has a similar conception: it refers to the Last Judgment of the wicked as the second death, and describes this second death as a “burning pool of fire and sulfur” (21:8, cf. 19:20, 20:14). The devil, “the beast and the false prophet” are also thrown into the pool where they “will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (20:10).

In today’s world, we don’t often hear much discussion about hell, so

these terrible images of eternal suffering seem strange and disturbing. For many people, it is especially surprising that Jesus himself, whom we generally consider to be meek, mild, and forgiving, most clearly speaks about the possibility of eternal punishment for those who do not repent.

We should remember, however, what the biblical language about Gehenna is trying to express. For Christians the essential meaning of hell is life apart from God. In the Christian view, each person decides, through his or her own attitudes, thoughts, and actions, whether he will ultimately choose to accept or reject God—God does not force people to accept him. If a person chooses (with God’s help) to accept God, then the person will be eternally in heaven with God. If the person chooses to reject God, then she or he has chosen to place herself or himself in hell—eternal existence apart from God.

Because God is the perfection of everything that is good, life without God can only mean a life that is separated from everything good—joy, peace, love, and honesty. The existence of a person apart from God would be an eternal existence filled with fear, loneliness, hatred, anger—and this life would truly be hell.

## Heaven

Whereas modern Christians tend to think of heaven as a spiritual reality only, the biblical writers did not distinguish clearly between the physical reality of the sky and a spiritual heaven. In both the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament, the words for *heaven* can refer to either a physical reality (the sky) or to the spiritual idea of the dwelling place of God, or to both. It is not always clear which of

the two is meant in particular Bible passages.

Some ancient Hebrews or Christians may have believed that God did literally live in the sky; others clearly took this language metaphorically. King Solomon, for example, asks: “Can it indeed be that God dwells among men on earth? If the heavens and the highest heavens cannot contain you, how much less this temple which I have built!” (1 Kgs 8:27).

## Heaven and the Kingdom of God

In the Gospels, the concept of heaven is closely associated with the belief in the Kingdom of God. (Matthew often uses the term *Kingdom of Heaven* where other Gospel writers have *Kingdom of God*.) The concept of the Kingdom itself is somewhat ambiguous, however. Some references seem to indicate a supernatural heaven, as when Jesus taught: “And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. Better for you to enter in the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into Gehenna [hell]” (Mk 9:47).

In other passages, however, it is clear that the Kingdom of God takes place on earth. The best known example is in the Lord’s Prayer: “Your kingdom come, / your will be done, / on earth as in heaven” (Mt 6:10). Jesus’ disciples are to pray that God’s Kingdom be established on the earth.

God’s Reign connects the two types of passages. God’s Kingdom exists wherever God rules—wherever things are done according to God’s will. God’s will is done in the supernatural realm of heaven, but it is also done when perfect peace, justice, and love are established on earth. Ancient Jews called this future time of perfect peace and justice the

**Church:** Mt 28:10; Acts 16:13–15,40; Rom 16:1–12. **Christian wives and husbands:** Eph 5:21–32, Col 3:18–19, 1 Pt 3:1–2. **Controversy over women's roles:** 1 Cor 14:34–36, 1 Tm 2:9–15.

### See Also

- “Canaanite Religion”
- “Dance and Music”

- “Dress and Hair”
- “Dwellings”
- “Family”
- “Food and Drink”
- “Marriage”
- “Purity”

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