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# Written on Our Hearts

*The Old Testament  
Story of God's Love*

THIRD EDITION



Mary Reed Newland

Written  
on Our  
Hearts

Mary Reed Newland committed much of her life to the needy. For this reason, her family wishes to dedicate this, her final project, in her honor to those who suffer for lack of shelter, nourishment, and dignity.

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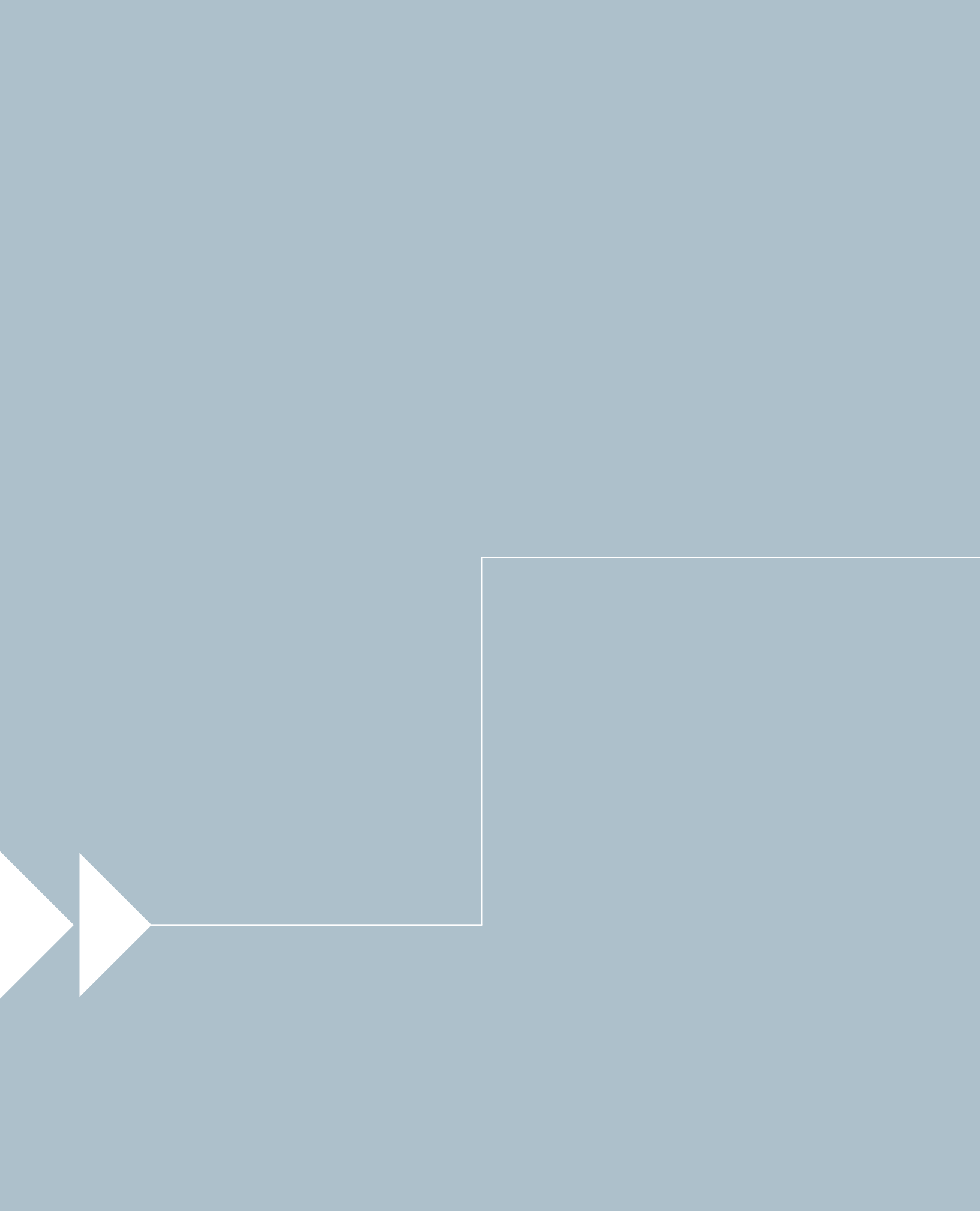
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# THE OLD TESTAMENT

# 1



## The Story of God's Boundless Love

### In This Chapter . . .

- THE BIBLE: A TIME CAPSULE FROM GOD
- INTERPRETING THE SCRIPTURES
- A GOD WHO ACTS IN HISTORY
- WHAT ARE THE SCRIPTURES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT?
- BEGIN . . . AT THE BEGINNING



## Imagine that your great-grandmother

recently passed away. You are helping to clear out the home she lived in with your great-grandfather for most of their married life. While you are cleaning out a closet, you find a large, old chest. Inside you find photos, letters, newspaper clippings, and some personal journals from fifty, even sixty or more years ago. The chest is basically a time capsule from your great-grandparents' life during their courtship and early years of marriage.

You knew your great-grandmother only as an elderly person. It is hard to believe she was once the lively young woman in the photos! Curious to learn more, you read some of the letters and discover they are love letters from when your great-grandfather was in the military. You laugh at some of the silly stories, you cry when you learn that your great-grandfather was wounded—no one knew at first how badly—and you marvel at your great-grandparents' hope and faith. You feel like you know your great-grandmother even better now than when she was alive. Then you come across a letter that your great-grandmother had written to her future descendants, and it seems like she was addressing you directly. Suddenly, across the distance of time and space, you feel her loving presence in a way that words cannot describe.



IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

## The Bible: A Time Capsule from God

The Bible can be thought of as sort of a time capsule from God—a collection of ancient stories, history, poetry, and wisdom—that help us see and un-

derstand God's boundless love for us and his longing for our happiness. And yet, the image of a time capsule does not entirely capture the loving presence of God that we encounter when we read the Bible.

The Bible is like no other book written by human hands. It tells the Story of God's love for us, but it is not solely the work of human authors.

The Bible's ultimate author is God. It is the Word of God, whose human authors were inspired by the Holy Spirit to communicate the religious truth God wants us to know. And the Holy Spirit continues to nourish and transform the lives of those who approach the Scriptures with an open heart. In the Bible we can encounter not just ancient words on a page but the living God who desires to be in a love relationship with each of us.

### The Great Story

As you probably know, the Bible consists of both the Old Testament and the New Testament. (Testament is another word for "covenant.") Taken as

▲ The Bible can be thought of as the story of God's love.



◀◀ God inspired prophets, such as Jacob, to preach and write the Word of God.

a whole, these two testaments tell the great Story of God's love. Here, in the briefest outline, is that Story:

1. God created the world and humankind out of infinite love. God revealed himself and gave himself to the creatures he created.
2. God offered hope and a promise of salvation when human beings rejected that love.
3. God chose a people and formed a covenant, or special relationship, with them and promised that through them the whole world would be saved.
4. God molded and fashioned this people, the Israelites, during the ups and downs of their history. He offered them liberation, challenged them to live justly and faithfully, took them back when they strayed, consoled them in sorrow, and saved them when they got into trouble. The people of Israel—

eventually called the Jews—looked to a future day when God's Reign of justice and peace would fill the whole world.

5. God sent the divine Son, Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah, as the human expression of his love and the fulfillment of his promises to Israel. Jesus is the fullness of God's Revelation.
6. By his life, death, and Resurrection, Jesus brought salvation to all the world.
7. The Holy Spirit was sent by God the Father and Jesus Christ to nourish, sustain, and renew the followers of Christ, who carry on his work and message until the end of time. In the end Christ will return in glory as Lord of all, and God's universal Reign of justice and peace will finally be complete.

▶▶ List five facts about your family. Then list five truths about them. How have you come to understand these truths?

▶▶ Promise is a major theme throughout the Bible. What is the most important promise you ever made? Write about what that promise has meant to you and what difficulties, if any, you have faced in keeping it.

►► Every person is invited to know the living, loving God through the Bible.



This course considers the Old Testament, the first part of the Bible, which tells the great Story through the time just before Jesus. You will probably study the New Testament in another course.

### The Inspired Word of God

What does it mean to say that the Bible is the inspired Word of God? To answer this we need to understand three important concepts: Revelation, the Word of God, and biblical inspiration.

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK



### Revelation

When God created the universe, it wasn't a divine game or an accident. It was an act of self-giving love where God intended to be in relationship with his creation. We see the ideal of this in the Garden of Eden story where God walks in the garden with Adam and talks to Adam and Eve face-to-face (see Genesis 3:8). But even when sin fractured human beings' relationship with God, God continued to reveal himself to us through creation, events, persons, and, most fully, in Jesus Christ. We call this self-communication of God and his will to us **Revelation**. God's Revelation reached its perfect completion in the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. There is no new Revelation after Christ, although we continue to grow in understanding it.

### The Word of God

That which God communicates through Revelation the Church calls the **Word of God**. You might be used to thinking that the Word of God is just another name for the Bible. But both the Bible and Sacred Tradition

### The Treasured Scrolls

The Scriptures of ancient Israel were first written in the Hebrew language on sheets of goatskin or sheepskin called parchment. These leather sheets were sewn together to make one continuous strip. Each end of the strip was fastened to a dowel, and then the strip was rolled up from both ends to make a scroll. One or more of these scrolls made up a book of the Bible.

form the unique and privileged deposit of the Word of God. Through Scripture and Tradition God's Word is passed on. Ultimately, they bear witness to the one, perfect Word, Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God who has existed throughout all of time: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). The Word of God is active in various ways, especially through the following:

- **Creation.** God brought the universe into existence by speaking his Word (see Genesis 1:3,6,9,14,20,24). So all creation tells of "the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1).
- **Proclamation of the prophets.** The Holy Spirit inspired specially chosen individuals to speak God's Word to the people of Israel. Their teaching and preaching prepares the world for the coming of Christ.
- **Jesus Christ.** God's complete and ultimate Revelation comes to us through the life, mission, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity. He is the eternal Word described at the beginning of the Gospel of John.
- **Tradition and Scripture.** After receiving the Holy Spirit, the Apostles gave witness to Jesus Christ through their

actions and preaching. Their teaching, which forms the central content of the Catholic faith, as well as the process by which that content is faithfully passed on from generation to generation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is known as the Apostolic Tradition, or just Tradition. Much of the Apostles' teaching was written down and preserved in the writings of the New Testament; thus, Scripture and Tradition are closely linked, and through both of them, we receive God's revealed truth.

### Biblical inspiration

**Biblical inspiration** means that the Holy Spirit guided the human authors to teach without error those truths of God that are necessary for our salvation; the truth about our relationship to God and all creation; and the destiny meant for us, union with God forever. The Holy Spirit also guided the Church in determining which of the Gospels and letters written in apostolic times were the authentic Word of God. The Holy Spirit's guidance is what makes the Bible the true and only written Word of God.

We need to clear up any misconceptions about the meaning of biblical inspiration. To say that the

▼ In 1947 a library of Hebrew scriptural scrolls dating back almost two thousand years was discovered in these limestone caves near the Dead Sea.

## The Dead Sea Scrolls

Modern Scripture studies can be greatly affected by discoveries such as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Possibly before the Roman invasion of Palestine in the first century AD, a Jewish community called Qumran hid its library of scrolls in caves near the Dead Sea. There they remained until 1947, when shepherds discovered them.

Before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the earliest manuscripts in Hebrew came from the ninth century AD. The scrolls from Qumran date back almost a thousand years before that and serve as a check on the accuracy of later manuscripts. These scrolls confirm that Jewish scribes copied their manuscripts with great care and precision.

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK



## 12 Chapter 1: The Old Testament

Bible is inspired by God does not mean that he dictated the words to the writers, who then simply recorded what was whispered to them! Nor does it mean that everything in the Bible is factually correct or scientifically valid.

In inspiring the Bible, God worked through the human authors, accepting their gifts of language and storytelling as well as accepting their cultural and intellectual limitations. So on one hand, God communicates through the authors' creative use of various literary forms, such as ancient myths and legends, royal court histories, letters, poems, songs, genealogies, sermons, liturgical instructions, laws, and accounts of visions. On the other hand, God communicates his

truth despite historical inaccuracies, despite changed cultural practices, and even despite any one author's incomplete understandings of who God is and what God calls us to.

So the Bible was created by a kind of collaboration of God with human beings. God inspired the biblical writers and guided the Church as she selected the forty-six books of the Old Testament and twenty-seven books of the New Testament that are in the Bible. Just as Jesus is both God and man, the Bible itself shows the hands of both God and human beings.

▶▶ Spend some time exploring your Bible. Find a passage in the Old Testament that you think is beautiful, powerful, or inspiring. Write out the passage and explain why you chose it. What does it have to say to you (what is the truth it offers you)?

### For Review

- ▶▶ In what sense can the Bible be thought of as a time capsule from God?
- ▶▶ Give a brief outline of the great Story of God's love as told in the Bible.
- ▶▶ What does it mean to say that the Scriptures are the Word of God? What does it mean to say that they are inspired by God? Explain how the Bible can be thought of as the result of a collaboration of God and human beings.

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK



## Interpreting the Scriptures

### Why Study the Bible?

Why do we need to study the Bible? If it is God’s truth, can’t we just read the words and immediately “get” their meaning?

The fact is that some parts of the Bible can be quite puzzling to our modern ears. We may not understand the circumstances in which the texts were written or the meaning originally intended by the authors. Some of the material may seem contradictory. This is particularly so for the Old Testament, whose origins are complex.

Let’s go back to the image of the Bible as God’s time capsule to us. The letters and journals in the time capsule make more sense after you read the newspaper clippings that tell what was happening in the world at that time. The books of the Bible require some similar study to discover the original intent of an author in writing a given scriptural text. Once we see what the author intended to say to

the people of his time—and this takes some understanding of the author’s sources, historical situation, and even cultural practices—we can then better appreciate what God is saying to us today through these texts.

### The Church’s guidance

The Catholic Church provides help and guidance in studying and understanding the theological meaning of the Sacred Scriptures. This guidance comes through the Church’s passing on of her Tradition. Like the Scriptures, the Church’s Tradition comes from God’s Revelation—his self-communication with us. Though the Sacred Scriptures were written down, the Church’s Tradition is the oral preaching of Jesus’s followers, the Apostles, that has been handed down to the bishops and expressed in the Church’s doctrines, teachings, and worship. As mentioned previously, both Scripture and Tradition are forms of the Word of God, distinct from each other but closely related. Tradition sheds light on what God is revealing in



IMAGE: © DANILO SCHIAVELLA/EPA/CORBIS

▲ Pope Benedict XVI surrounded by bishops (cardinals) in the Vatican in Rome, Italy

▼ Talmud scholars study scripture in a Yeshiva, a Jewish religious school.

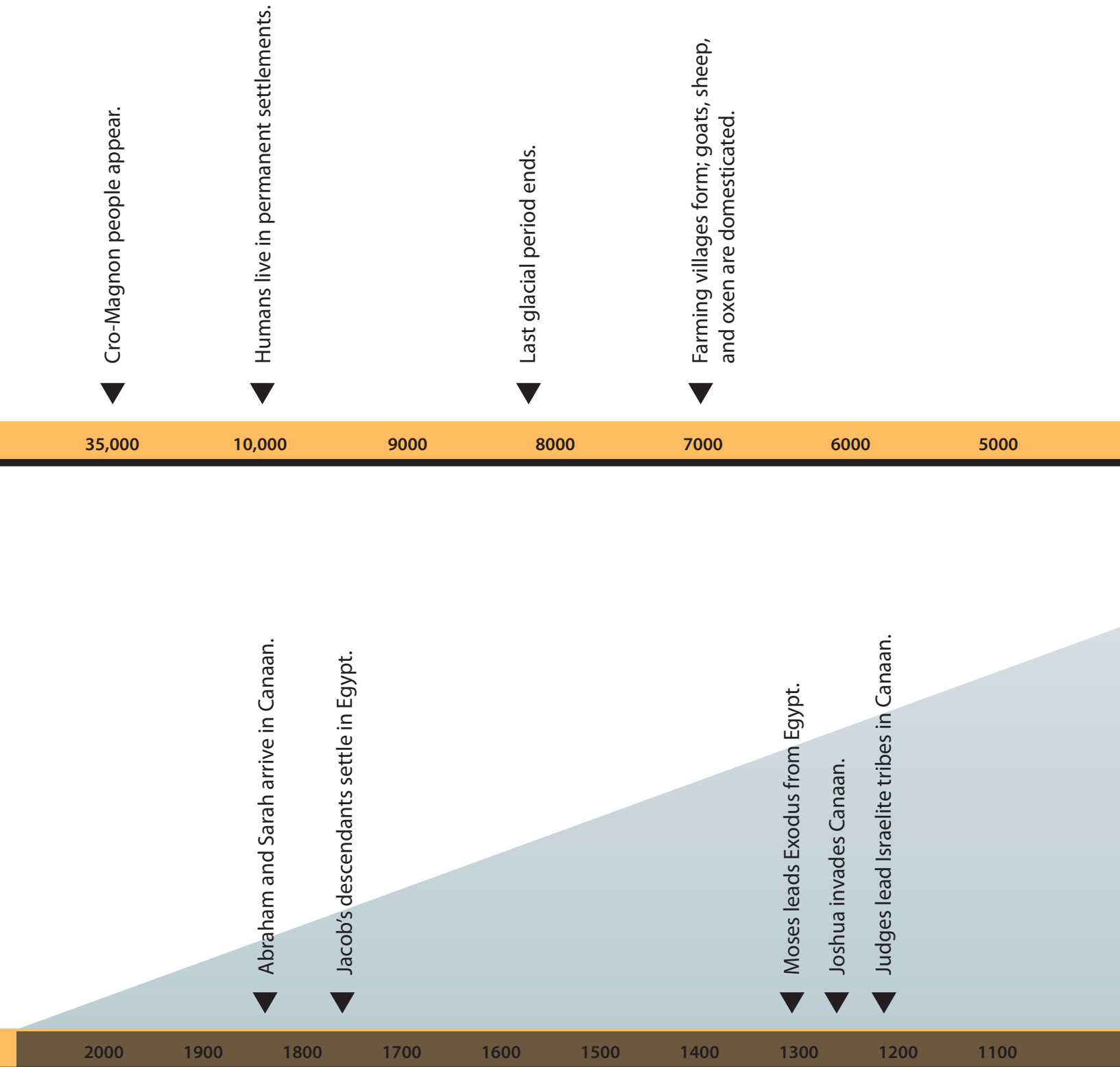
## Truth and the Bible

Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation.

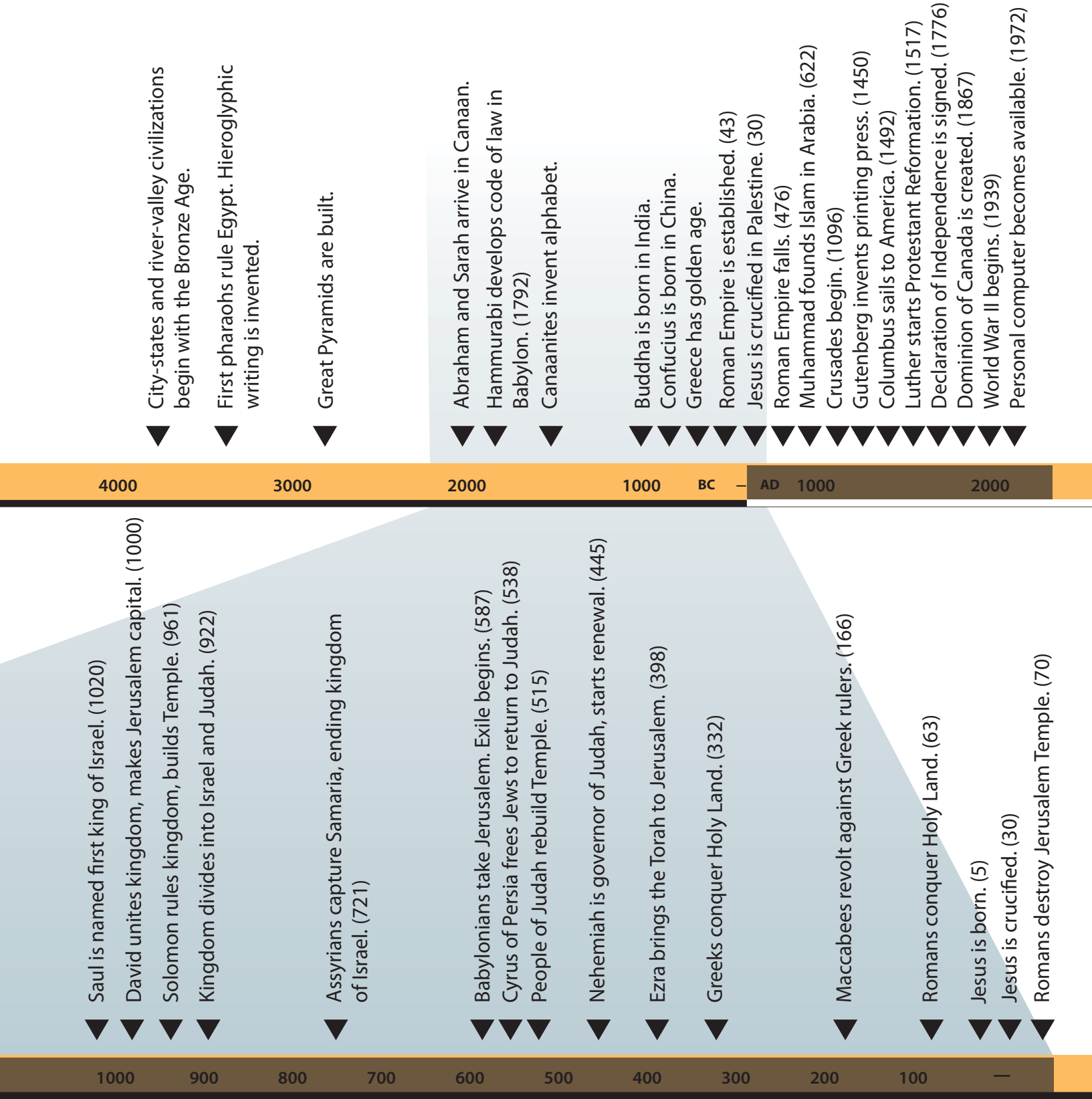
(*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, number 11)

IMAGE: © ANNIE GRIFFITHS BELT/CORBIS





# Timeline of Biblical History





the Scriptures, and the Scriptures help us better understand Tradition.

The Church's **Magisterium**, her official teaching voice or office, consists of the world's bishops together with the Pope. The Magisterium, guided by the Holy Spirit, has been entrusted with the task of interpreting the Scriptures and Tradition in every era. This is to ensure that the authentic faith handed down by the Apostles since the time of Jesus is preserved, passed on, and understood from age to age. Since the 1940s the Magisterium has affirmed and promoted the use of modern methods of biblical scholarship as a help in interpreting the Scriptures.

### Biblical scholarship

Scripture scholars also provide an important resource in helping us study the Bible. Many of them commit their whole lives to the challenging work of getting at what the human authors of the Bible really meant. Scholars delve into the history, archaeology, literary forms, and culture surrounding the development of the texts to help us understand their intended meanings. Of course, even the best Scripture scholars disagree on their findings and theories, and many questions are still open to debate (such as when a given scriptural text was written or who wrote it). By and large, though, Scripture scholarship has been a major help for us in coming to a deeper and fuller understanding of the Bible.

Ultimately, the purpose of studying the Scriptures is not simply that we might know a lot of things about the Bible or even its theological meaning. Knowledge is important and useful but not enough; rather, the deeper intent of Scripture study is that we might fall in love with the Bible, and with God, who is its source and inspiration.

### Why the Old Testament?

Why, some might wonder, do we study the Old Testament in particular? Isn't it enough for a Christian to study and appreciate the New Testament? First of all, the terms we use might help lead to this confusion. The word **old** in Old Testament does not imply "outdated" or "no longer in effect," and **new** in New Testament does not imply "replacement" or "substitute" for the Old Testament; rather, "the Old Testament prepares for the New and the New Testament fulfills the Old; the two shed light on each other" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, number 140). We cannot understand the New Testament without understanding the Old Testament. Both are the Sacred Scriptures; both are inspired by God.

But in itself—and not just because it points to the New Testament—the Old Testament has permanent value. It contains profound teachings, beautiful prayers, and some of the greatest literature ever written. Most important, in the Old Testament we encounter God, its inspiration.



Do you find it easy or challenging to trust that God is taking care of you? Write a paragraph or two explaining your thoughts on this. If you wish, offer an example of a time you felt deep trust in God, or a time you faltered in your trust.



## Why This Course?

This course provides you with a “guided tour” of the Old Testament. It walks you through all the books, considering the circumstances in which they were composed, describing their contents, and offering insights into their meaning from the perspectives of contemporary Scripture scholarship and Catholic Tradition.

The course directs you to read key passages from each book of the Old Testament, and that reading is the heart of this course. No textbook can substitute for reading the Word of God. So you are invited to plunge into the Scripture passages themselves, which have the power to touch our lives in a way that summaries of them do not.

The activities in brown boxes throughout this textbook can help you relate what is in the Bible and this course to your own life and experiences. You will also find several other types of sidebars in the chapters:

**World Happenings** tells of developments that were going on around the world at the same time as the biblical events covered in a given chapter.

**I-Witness** gives a point of view on biblical times by a fictional young character.

**The Prayer of Israel** offers a prayer from the Old Testament that is related to an event described in a given chapter.

Other informational sidebars explain aspects of the culture and history surrounding the people of Israel and the development of the Bible. Maps

and timelines will help you situate the biblical events in terms of geography and chronology.

Once you are equipped with a Bible, this textbook, and a willingness to participate in this course, you are ready to discover the meaning of the Old Testament and to encounter God in the process.



IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

▲ The descendants of Abraham were enslaved in Egypt.

## For Review

- ▶▶ How does Scripture scholarship help us get in touch with the intended meanings of the scriptural texts?
- ▶▶ What is the relationship of the Scriptures to the Church’s Tradition?
- ▶▶ Why do Christians need to understand both the Old Testament and the New Testament?

IMAGE: © NASA/CORBIS



▼ This photo, taken by a satellite, shows two fertile areas: Egypt and the Nile River on the left and Israel in the middle. The Exodus took place across the dry desert between the two areas.



IMAGE: © HOWARD DAVIES/CORBIS

▲ Today, groups of people, such as these refugees in Rwanda, have to move to escape famine and war, much like the Israelites during the Exodus.

## A God Who Acts in History

The God revealed in the Old Testament is not aloof or distant from human affairs. He acts within human history. The Story of God's actions and the people's responses over many centuries is called **salvation history**.

It will help to keep the big picture of that history in mind as we set out to discover the meaning of the Old Testament, because the history and the Scriptures of ancient Israel were intertwined. (Notice that the history on pages 16 to 19 is actually a fuller explanation of the great Story outlined at the beginning of this chapter.) Do not be concerned about memorizing names and events at this point; they will come up again many times

in this course. Instead, simply try to recognize the broad pattern of history.

First, referring to the timelines on pages 14 to 15, note the time period in which the biblical events happened. As you can see, humankind existed for many thousands of years before the biblical era; most of that time is called prehistory because no historical records of those ancient peoples exist. (The time period of the Creation and the earliest stories of humankind appearing in the Old Testament fall into the category of prehistory.) About 3000 BC, history as we know it began, with the development of early forms of writing. The biblical period—from the beginnings of Israel as a people through the time of Jesus and the earliest years of the Church—went from about 1850 BC until about AD 100. It lasted almost two thousand years. And that is about the same amount of time as has elapsed from the time of Jesus until today.

What follows is a brief overview of the events of the biblical period. You may also refer to the map entitled "Israel and the Empires of the Ancient World," on page 20 of this text.

## The Founders and the Promise

The history and the religion of the Israelites began with Abraham. Abraham was a wandering herdsman, or nomad, who lived in the region now called Iraq, around 1850 BC. According to the Book of Genesis, God made an agreement with Abraham.

God promised to make Abraham’s descendants a blessing to the world and to give them the land of Canaan, later known as Palestine. The Promise, as this is called, was that Abraham’s descendants would reveal the one God to the world. Christians believe that this Promise reached its fulfillment in the coming of Christ.

Abraham’s descendants and their families inherited the Promise. Abraham, his son Isaac, and grandson Jacob would be called the patriarchs, or founders, of the Jewish faith. Their wives—Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel—would be called the matriarchs.

## The Exodus of the Israelites and the Covenant

At the close of the Book of Genesis, the descendants of Abraham are living in Egypt, having traveled there from Canaan in order to survive a famine. Yet as the Book of Exodus opens, we find them enslaved by the Egyptians. Practically nothing is known about the Israelites in Egypt from about 1700 to 1290 BC.

Moses, the main character in the story of the Exodus, was one of the greatest religious leaders in history. About 1290 BC the understanding that one God was above all other gods came to Moses when God

## Still the Chosen People: Catholic Teaching on Judaism

Catholic teaching is that Christians are forever linked with the Jewish people, who were the first to hear the word of God. God’s Covenant and special relationship with the Jews still stand, “for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Romans 11:29). The words of Saint Paul about the Jews express this: “To them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah” (9:4–5).

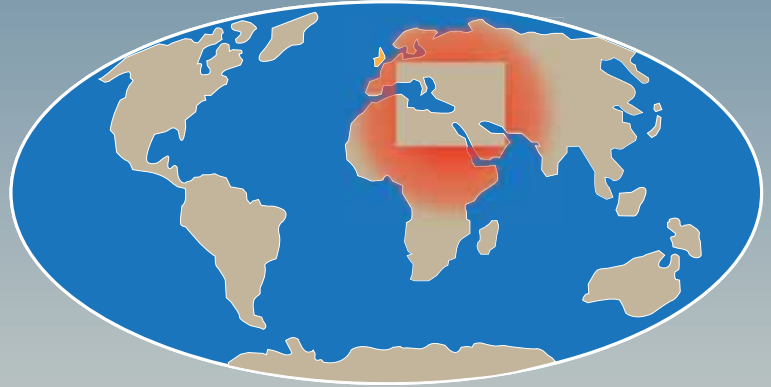
In spite of great suffering and persecution (often at the hands of Christians), Jews have remained faithful to God through the centuries since biblical times. Like Christians, Jews work toward and await in hope the coming of God’s Reign of peace and justice. But whereas Judaism looks for an unknown messiah to come, Christianity recognizes Jesus Christ as the Messiah who has already come and who will return in glory.

▼ In a historic gesture, Pope John Paul II visited the Western Wall in Jerusalem, a site that is sacred to Jews.

IMAGE: © REUTERS/CORBIS

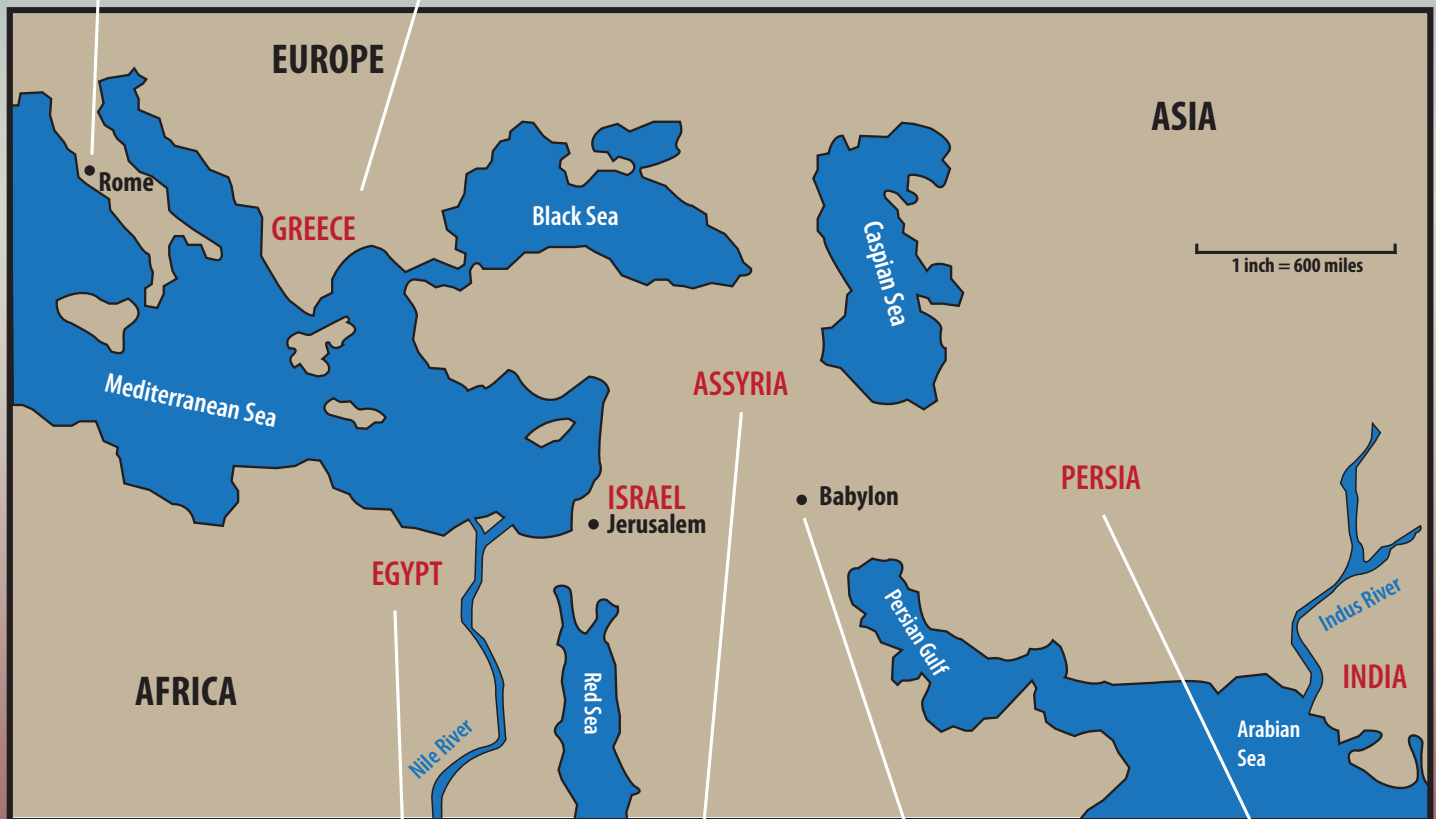


# Israel and the Empires of the Ancient World



Rome ruled Israel beginning in 63 BC and destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in AD 70. In AD 135, the Romans forbade all Jews to enter Jerusalem.

Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire in 330 BC. The Greek rulers of Egypt and Syria, successors of Alexander, controlled Israel for nearly three hundred years.



From 2000 to 1200 BC, Egypt frequently dominated the land known as Canaan.

Assyria destroyed the capital of the kingdom called Israel in 722 BC.

Babylon destroyed Jerusalem in 587 BC and took many of its citizens into exile.

Persia replaced Babylon as ruler of the Near East in 538 BC.

revealed his name—Yahweh, meaning “I am the One who is always present.” With God’s power the Israelites, led by Moses, made a daring escape from Pharaoh’s army through the sea—the Exodus—and were thus freed from slavery.

After a dramatic encounter between Moses and God on Mount Sinai, a covenant, or agreement, between Yahweh and the Israelites was confirmed. The Israelites’ part of the Covenant was to keep the Ten Commandments, which God had presented to Moses. God’s part was to make the Israelites “the people of God” and to be with them as long as they kept the Covenant. Once again God promised that they would be given the land of Canaan. But before they entered Canaan, they wandered for forty years in the desert as they learned to trust God’s care for them.

### Taking Over the Promised Land

After Moses’ time the Israelites, led by Joshua, entered Canaan. Over the next centuries—from about 1250 to 1000 BC—they fought against the people who lived in that region. In these battles the Israelites were led by military leaders called judges. During this time

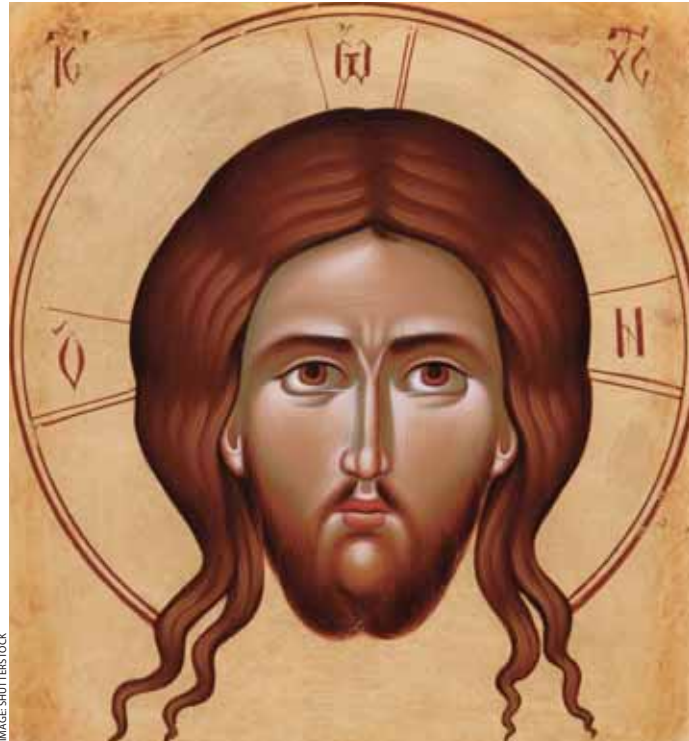


IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

the Israelites abandoned their nomadic ways for the more settled agricultural life that was native to the region.

### The Nation and the Temple

Around 1000 BC Israel became recognized as a nation, with David as its anointed king and Jerusalem as its capital city. God made a promise to David that his royal line would endure forever. (Later Jews put their hopes in a descendant of David to save them from oppression.)

David’s son Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem, and it became the principal place of worship for the nation. As both a political and religious capital, Jerusalem became a great and holy city.

◀ Christians see Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah who fulfilled God’s promise to Israel.

▼ The Jewish Dispersion spread Jews throughout the world, to places such as Brooklyn, New York.



IMAGE: © P DELISS/GODONG/CORBIS

▶▶ List five experiences you have had of being a stranger or of being with strangers: for example, moving to a new city or trying to communicate with a foreigner. Next to each experience, write the emotions you felt.





IMAGE: © MICHAEL S. LEWIS/CORBIS

▲ Catholics in South Africa celebrate Mass with the help of Scripture.

## The Kings and the Prophets

After Solomon's death in 922 BC, the nation divided, with the kingdom of Israel in the north and the kingdom of Judah in the south. Heavy taxes and forced service in both kingdoms

created hardships for the people. In addition, the kings often practiced idolatry—the worship of idols (images of other gods).

Prophets spoke out against both kingdoms' injustices to the people and infidelity to God. They questioned the behavior of the kings and called them and their people back to the Covenant. Yet the kingdoms continued to oppress the poor and worship pagan gods until eventually powerful conquerors crushed both kingdoms. The Assyrians obliterated the northern kingdom of Israel in 721 BC and took its people into exile. In 587 BC the Babylonians destroyed Judah, including the city of Jerusalem, and took its people to Babylon as captives.

## The Babylonian Exile and the Jewish Dispersion

While the people were exiled in Babylon, still other prophets encouraged them to repent of their sins and turn back to God. During this time the prophet known as Second Isaiah proclaimed that God was the one and only God. Monotheism, the belief in

one God, was now the Revelation of this people to the world, their blessing to the nations.

After fifty years in Babylon, the exiles were released from captivity by the conquering Persians and allowed to return home. Judah, no longer a politically independent kingdom, had become a district within the Persian Empire, and the returned exiles became known as Jews, from the word **Judah**. They rebuilt the Temple, and under Ezra and Nehemiah, they re-established the Law and restored Jerusalem. That city became the religious capital for the Jews who had resettled all over the world—that is, the Jews of the Dispersion.

During the Exile the Jewish leaders had begun collecting and reflecting on their ancestral writings, forming the core of what would later become their Bible, known to Christians as the Old Testament.

## More Oppressors

The armies of Alexander the Great, leader of the Greek Empire, conquered the Persian Empire in 330 BC. This made the Greeks overlords of the Jews for nearly three hundred years, with the exception of a brief period of independence after a revolt led by the Maccabees family. The Greeks were followed by the Romans, who captured Jerusalem in 63 BC. Although tolerant of other cultures and religions, the Roman Empire severely punished its subjects for revolts.

# The Books of the Old Testament

The listing of the books of the Bible is called the canon of the Scriptures. Catholic Christians accept the following books as their canon of the Old Testament:



IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

◀◀ Jews refer to the first five books of the Bible as the Torah.

## The Pentateuch

Genesis	Exodus	Leviticus
Numbers	Deuteronomy	

## The Historical Books

Joshua	Judges	Ruth
1 Samuel	2 Samuel	1 Kings
2 Kings	1 Chronicles	2 Chronicles
Ezra	Nehemiah	Tobit
Judith	Esther	1 Maccabees
	2 Maccabees	

## The Wisdom Books

Job	Psalms	Proverbs
Ecclesiastes	Song of Songs	Wisdom
	Sirach	

## The Prophetic Books

Isaiah	Jeremiah	Lamentations
Baruch	Ezekiel	Daniel
Hosea	Joel	Amos
Obadiah	Jonah	Micah
Nahum	Habakkuk	Zephaniah
Haggai	Zechariah	Malachi





IMAGE: © JANET JARMAN/CORBIS

▲ Catholics in Mexico read the Bible during Sunday school.

It was a dark time for the people of the Promise, who longed for release from oppression and for the day when all their hopes for a good and peaceful life would be fulfilled. Many Jews looked to the coming of a messiah, one sent by God to save them; some expected this messiah to be from the family line of David.

It is at this point in the history of Israel that the Old Testament accounts end. We will return shortly to see what became of the religion of Judaism.

### Jesus, the Savior

Into a situation of defeat and darkness for the people of Israel, Jesus was born, one of the house, or family line, of David. Christians see Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah—the fulfillment of all God’s promises to Israel and the Savior of the world. With his death and Resurrection, Jesus’ followers recognized that he was the Son of God. The community of believers began to grow, first among Jews but later among Gentiles, or non-Jews. The story of Jesus and the growth of the early Church is told in the New Testament.

### Judaism After the Biblical Period

Most of the Jews of the first century AD did not become Christian. Judaism went on, and it has carried the light of faith in the one God into our contemporary age.

The history of Judaism in the time after Jesus began with a crushing

blow. In AD 70 a Jewish revolt against the Roman Empire led to the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the second Temple. The surviving Jews fled to Africa, Asia, and Europe. The Jewish Dispersion, sometimes called the Diaspora, became the central fact of Jewish history.

The dispersion of Jews all over the empire spurred the definition of an official set of scriptures to guide Jewish religious life. This would ensure the Jews’ sense of identity as a people set apart and bound by the Covenant with God; it would help them keep separate from the surrounding cultures that worshiped other gods and had immoral practices.

By the end of the first century AD, this official set of the Hebrew Scriptures was defined. In AD 90 Jewish religious leaders met to agree on the **canon**—that is, the list of books recognized as divinely inspired and thus the primary source and guide for religious belief and practice. In translations this canon became known as the Bible, literally meaning “the book.” The Jewish Bible was organized into three main parts: the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings.

### For Review

- ▶▶ List the events in salvation history as given in the timeline of biblical history in this chapter.
- ▶▶ How do Christians see Jesus Christ in relation to the promises made by God to Israel?
- ▶▶ Summarize Catholic teaching on Judaism.

## What Are the Scriptures of the Old Testament?

### For the Jews: Letters from Home

We have already seen that the Old Testament, and the Bible as a whole, can be thought of as a time capsule from God—a collection of writings conveying God’s truth that enables us to encounter God, who inspired it. It is not simply an ordinary human document.

The Scriptures, though, can also be considered in their human aspect. They were written by flesh-and-blood men (and perhaps women) for real audiences who needed to hear what these writers had to say in their own time and place. And so, for the Jews of the Dispersion, flung around the ancient world of the Mediterranean by war and persecution, their Hebrew Scriptures must have seemed like letters from home.

Imagine what a letter from home might mean to a group of refugees. Even a brief note in their own language would be treasured as a source of deep joy. The Hebrew Scriptures were like that for the Jews of the Dispersion. They were words from their families, from their homeland, and from their ancestors. They told the Jews in their own language how best to live a faithful life in unfamiliar surroundings. Most important, the Scriptures told them that their people still loved them and that the God of their people would be with them always.

These “letters from home” took the form of many types of writing: stories, legends, histories, oracles, conversations, letters, novels, lists, biographies, laws, speeches, poems, proverbs, and prayers.

### The Catholic Canon of the Old Testament

The Hebrew Scriptures were sacred to the early Christian communities because Christianity’s religious roots were in Judaism. Christians thus adopted the sacred writings of Judaism as their own; they were always considered part of the Scriptures of Christianity.

So the Bible of Judaism contains the same Scriptures as what Christians call the Old Testament, with the exception of a few more texts in the Catholic canon. (These other texts—some of them originally written in Greek and others translated from Hebrew or Aramaic into Greek—often appear in Protestant Bibles under the category of apocryphal writings; they are not part of the Protestant or the Jewish canon.)

The **Catholic canon** of the Old Testament consists of forty-six books, grouped in the following major sections:

- the Pentateuch
- the historical books
- the wisdom books
- the prophetic books

### The Pentateuch

The heart of Israel's story is told in the first five books of the Bible, called the Pentateuch, which means "five books." The Jews refer to these books as the Torah, a Hebrew word that means "instruction" but is sometimes translated as "the Law." In the Jewish faith, these books are the primary scriptural authority in matters of belief and practice.

The Pentateuch's opening stories about the Creation, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, and the Tower of Babel show us God as a loving Creator and reveal the effects of disobedience. Following these stories are the tales of the patriarchs and the matriarchs—Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, and Joseph.

Next we are told of Israel's slavery in Egypt, the Israelites' escape under the leadership of Moses, the Covenant at Mount Sinai, and the forty years in the wilderness, ending on the eve of the Israelites' entry into the Promised Land.

The Pentateuch is called the religious masterpiece of the Old Testament, and its five books are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

### The historical books

The historical books tell of Israel's conquest of the land of Canaan—including stories of Joshua, of the judges, and of Israel's first kings (Saul, David, and Solomon). These books also describe the breakup of the nation of Israel, the reigns of the later

kings, and the prophets' attempts to warn those kings of coming disaster.

In spite of the prophets' warnings, the kings disobey, disaster comes, and exile follows. Fifty years later a remnant of the people returns to Jerusalem, rebuilds the Temple, and struggles again with foreign powers and the people's own weaknesses. Through it all Israel's prophets remind the people of their Covenant with God and of their call to be a blessing to all the nations of the world. In addition to Joshua and Judges, the historical books include Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Tobit, Judith, Esther, and 1 and 2 Maccabees. (The phrase "*1 and 2*" before a book name indicates "the First and Second Books of.")

### The wisdom books

The wisdom books are usually listed as Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wisdom, and Sirach (also called Ecclesiasticus).

- The Book of Job explores the problem of good versus evil. Job demands a reason from God for the calamities that overcome him, and God answers in a speech of matchless splendor.
- The Book of Psalms is a collection of religious songs once attributed solely to David but now to a number of authors. Some psalms were written for liturgical occasions, others for private prayer.
- The Book of Proverbs is a collection of writings filled with practical advice about living ordinary life in the spirit of godliness.
- The author of the Book of Ecclesiastes was a questioner who, in the end, saw

that life was a mystery for which he had no answers. It is wise to live life as well as possible and to enjoy it, he decided.

- The Song of Songs is a collection of love songs in the form of dialogue, the speakers being the bride, the bridegroom, and attendants.
- The Book of Wisdom was meant to strengthen the faith of Israel and spoke for the first time in Israel's history about life after death.
- The Book of Sirach was written to show that God had revealed true wisdom to Israel.

### The prophetic books

The early prophets—such as Samuel and Nathan, Elijah and Elisha—are known for their life stories rather than for their recorded words. Often called the nonwriting prophets, these figures appear in the historical books.

The writing prophets, each of whose teachings are a book of the Bible, can be thought of in three groups, named in reference to the Exile in Babylon:

- The *pre-exilic* prophets are Hosea and Amos (who spoke to the northern kingdom of Israel) and Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah (all of whom spoke to the southern kingdom of Judah).
- The *exilic* prophets are Ezekiel (who went to Babylon with the deportees), Second Isaiah (the second part of the Book of Isaiah), and the unknown author of the Book of Lamentations.
- The *post-exilic* prophets include Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Third Isaiah (the third part of the Book of Isaiah), Joel, Obadiah, and Baruch.

Containing some of the most powerful religious writing in the world, the prophetic books tell us about men who loved Israel and who warned that to depart from fidelity to God would lead not only to moral blindness but to destruction as a nation—which is what happened. The Books of Jonah and Daniel are also listed with the prophetic writings. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel are called major prophets because their books are long, and the others are called minor prophets because their books are short.

This course covers all the books of the Old Testament (some only briefly). However, it does not treat the books in the same order that they appear in the Bible, which is by categories. This way the course can follow roughly the history of Israel. For example, historical and prophetic books are treated together in some chapters because in a given chapter they relate to the same biblical period.

A full listing of the books of the Old Testament by main categories appears on page 23.

## For Review

- ▶▶ How many books are in the Catholic canon of the Old Testament? Into what main sections are they divided?
- ▶▶ Name three books in each of the main sections of the Old Testament.

## Begin . . . at the Beginning

With all this in mind, open the first book of the Old Testament—the Book of Genesis, which tells the story of the Creation and of the first people on earth. As you proceed keep in mind the words of the great modern Jewish thinker Martin Buber. Referring to the Hebrew Scriptures, Buber addressed these words to Christian readers:

To you, the book is a forecourt;  
to us, it is the sanctuary.  
But in this place,  
we can dwell together,  
and together listen to the voice  
that speaks here.

*(The Writings of Martin Buber, page 275)*

▶▶ In your own words, write a paragraph explaining the meaning of Martin Buber's statement.



# BEGINNINGS



▼ “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). The ancient Jews must have marveled at the beauty of God’s Creation, such as this oasis in Israel.



## Stories of God’s Creation and Promises

### In This Chapter . . .

- STORIES OF THE ORIGINS
- ABRAHAM: THE FATHER OF BIBLICAL FAITH
- JACOB: A MAN NAMED ISRAEL
- JOSEPH: TREACHERY, TRIUMPH, AND FORGIVENESS
- NOURISHED SPIRITS

Egyptians improve farming methods along Nile River.



2000

Abraham and Sarah arrive in Canaan.



1900

Jacob’s descendants settle in Egypt.



1800

1700

## Much of the Old Testament,

including the Book of Genesis, was written down and put into final form around the period of the Babylonian Exile, in the sixth century BC. Imagine what that period must have been like for the exiles:

The Exile is a time of great crisis for the Israelite people. They have lost their beloved homeland, Judah. Their holy city, Jerusalem, has been conquered, and their sacred Temple, the center of their life, has been destroyed. Here they are, a defeated people forced to live among their captors in Babylon. Babylonian culture and religion, with their strange ways and belief in many destructive, warring gods, feels like a horrendous assault on everything the exiles hold dear.

Disturbing questions gnaw at the exiles: Has God abandoned us? We thought we were the Chosen People of an all-powerful God. Or are the Babylonians right after all? Could the chaotic, competitive gods of the Babylonians really be superior to the one God we worship? Is that why we have been defeated, humiliated, and brought here to this strange, unfriendly land—because our God failed?

▼ This satellite image shows Israel on the left and the area where Babylon stood on the right. A vast desert separated the two areas.

In the midst of their doubts and feelings of despair, the exiles desperately need to hear the liberating truth: Our God is in charge—of everything in the world, including the Babylonians. God is all good and creates only goodness. We can count on that. Even when we mess things up through our weakness and sin, God brings goodness out of that. Defeat? Nonsense! God can turn even our failures to good if we trust in him with all our heart. We are God’s people, and he will never abandon us.

That message of hope and trust in God’s goodness did reach the discouraged exiles and their offspring, who after about fifty years were released from Babylon to go back and build a new life in their home country, Judah. The Book of Genesis, put together in its final form during and after the Exile, strengthened and lifted the hearts of the returning Israelites (by that time called the Jews, which comes from Judah). It helped remind them that from the beginning their God had been in charge, bringing forth goodness out of everything, even out of nothingness! Genesis helped them understand their origins, who they were, and why they should have hope.

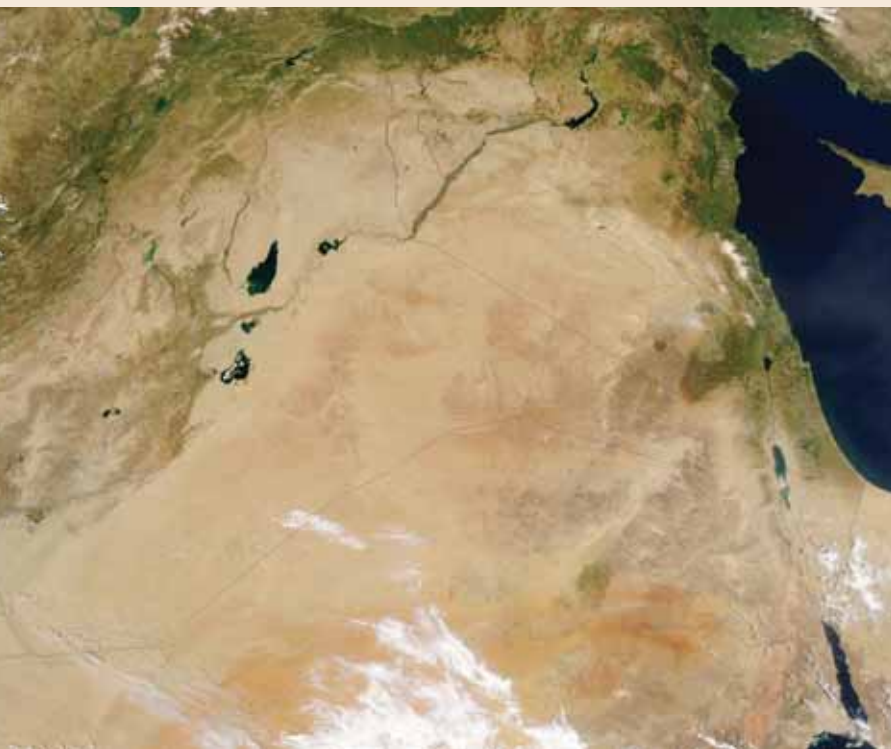


IMAGE: © NASA/CORBIS

## Stories of the Origins

The first part of Genesis (which means “beginning”), chapters 1 to 11, is a kind of prehistory of Israel. Various versions of the stories in it were first told by folksingers and storytellers early in Israel’s history, as they wove together accounts of “where we came from.” The stories are filled with fragments of myths from the ancient Near East. But over the centuries and especially around the time of the Exile, the stories were transformed by the Scripture writers, who were guided by the Holy Spirit. The stories became powerful, God-inspired religious tales that expressed the Israelites’ beliefs about God and the world’s origins, in stark contrast to the beliefs of their Near East neighbors. Those eleven chapters of Genesis contain the marvelous stories many of us recall from childhood:

- Creation (how the original goodness of Creation came from the one God)
- Adam and Eve and the Fall (how sin entered the world)
- Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood (how the evil of sin spread)
- The Tower of Babel (how humanity, in terrible condition, was unable to save itself from its own sinfulness)

By the end of Genesis, chapter 11, the stage is set for the great drama that follows, the story of God’s relationship with a special people through whom the world would be saved. The rest of Genesis tells of how one man, Abraham, and his descendants down to Joseph became that Chosen People, the Israelites.

But let’s begin at the very beginning: “In the beginning . . .”

### Creation: Original Goodness

Where did we come from? Why are we here at all? Are we meant to be happy or miserable? Ancient peoples turned these questions over in their minds, as human beings have continued to do right down to today. You may find yourself wondering about them at times.

Many people in the ancient Near East, including the Babylonians, had rather pessimistic answers to these questions. They were **polytheistic** (worshiping many gods) and believed that the world had come from those gods—self-serving, violent, and destructive deities that had made the earth for their own pleasure, and humankind for their slaves. This was a chaotic world where human beings were caught in the middle of the gods’ wars, trying to please first one



◀◀ Hinduism is an example of a polytheistic religion.



▶▶ What difference do a people's beliefs about their origins make to their attitudes about life? Make two columns, one headed "Babylonians' Attitudes" and the other "Ancient Jews' Attitudes." In each column, list the attitudes toward life you might expect to see in each group because of the beliefs its members held about how the world and humans came about.



bad-tempered god, then another, to avoid their wrath.

But the ancient Jews had quite a different answer to the question of why we are here at all. Contrast the Babylonians' frightening worldview with the Jewish view in the Book of Genesis of a wonderful world created by God: Out of chaos, the one God brings forth goodness—order, beauty, and abundant forms of marvelous life. It is all meant to be wondered at, enjoyed, and cared for by human beings, who are made partners with God in loving all Creation.

In this first story, the sun and the moon and the stars are not gods that

rule humans (as the Babylonians believed them to be) but are created by God as good and then are calmly set in their proper place in "the dome" (Genesis 1:7) of the sky. God is in charge. The great sea monsters, perceived as evil demons by many ancient peoples, are shown to be what they are—good, innocent creatures that God loves. When he creates man and woman, they are godlike, made in God's

image—full of dignity, not slaves of the gods.

You can sense God's delight in such handiwork: "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good" (Genesis 1:31).

*Read Genesis 1:1–31, 2:1–4.*

### A love for life and the world

The beautiful story of Creation underlies a basic attitude in the Judeo-Christian heritage: God is good, we are good, and life is good. He cares about us and all Creation, and wants us to be happy. We are to uphold the inherent dignity and worth of each human being because all are created in God's image. And God has entrusted us with this amazing world to be caretakers, not destroyers, of Creation. He wants full life for every person and intends for us to preserve and watch over the environment.

### The Sabbath: A gift of rest

The Creation story tells of God "resting" on the seventh day after such a flurry of creative work. This might seem a curious detail to include: why would God need to rest?

Remember that the story was written during the Exile. Keeping the **Sabbath**, a day of rest each week, was a sacred custom the Jews had carried with them to the Exile. It marked them as unique among their neighbors. In Babylon the Sabbath took on much importance as a constant reminder for the Jews that they were God's people, not the Babylonians' or their gods'. So the Creation story writer included God's own resting on the seventh day to emphasize

## The Prayer of Israel: Praise!

Praise the LORD!

Praise him, sun and moon;  
praise him, all you shining stars!  
Praise him, you highest heavens,  
and you waters above the heavens!

Praise the LORD from the earth,  
you sea monsters and all deeps,  
fire and hail, snow and frost,  
stormy wind fulfilling his command!

Mountains and all hills,  
fruit trees and all cedars!

Wild animals and all cattle,  
creeping things and flying birds!

Kings of the earth and all peoples,  
princes and all rulers of the earth!

Young men and women alike,  
old and young together!

Let them praise the name of the Lord,  
for his name alone is exalted;  
his glory is above earth and heaven.

(Psalm 148:1–13)

the importance of keeping the Sabbath holy as a day to rest, praise God, and be refreshed together—a gift from God, not to be turned down.

Jews today celebrate the Sabbath from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset. Christians observe a day of rest on Sunday, the day they recall the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. For Christians, the obligation to rest on Sunday replaces the obligation to rest on the Sabbath.

### Is it science?

The Creation account in Genesis has stirred up controversy among believers, both Christian and Jewish, especially in the last century. You may have heard of arguments by **creationists**, who insist that the account in Genesis is factually true—that is, God created the world in just seven days,

in the order given in the story. On the other side are **evolutionists**, who argue that the universe has evolved over millions of years, with humankind as a recent part of that evolutionary process. Evolutionists claim that the Bible's Creation account was never intended by its biblical writer to be a factual explanation. Developed in the literary form of a myth, it was meant to convey religious truth, not scientific fact.

The Catholic understanding of the Creation account is that no contradiction exists between the biblical story and the theory of evolution. The Genesis story is about the religious meaning of the origins of the universe, not the scientific facts of those origins. The Church affirms that much scientific evidence supports the evolution theory. But in no way does that shake

▼ The disagreement between creationists and evolutionists took center stage during the famous Scopes trial in 1925. Clarence Darrow, on the left, defended John Scopes, a biology teacher who taught evolution despite a Tennessee law banning this. William Jennings Bryan, on the right, took the stand as an expert on the Bible. The trial ended in a conviction of Scopes.

## I-Witness: Deborah

Lord, I'm Deborah, daughter of Simon, the best carpenter in Babylon. The men in our family have been carpenters since the time of our ancestor Abraham, my father says.

I want to shout my thanks for life! Our Babylonian neighbors don't pray like this, I know. Their gods seem cold and calculating, and their prayers like frightened begging.

My sister married today, and the celebration filled our street with singing and music. We filled our bellies with food and wine, and danced until evening. I couldn't get to sleep, with all the excitement. So I want to share my joy with you.

And to share some sadness too. My older sister and I have been close all our life; she has been almost a mother to me. Now she is leaving for her new husband's town, which is days distant from Babylon. I will miss her greatly.

And it's easy for me to forget what a great gift you have given me. What if I had never had a sister? Her care for me has given me a soft smile and a light heart, and has lighted my path in life this far. Thank you for all that! Amen.

IMAGE: © BETTMANN/CORBIS



▶▶ In the Creation story, Adam and Eve lived in the Garden of Eden, a paradise. What do you picture when you think of paradise?

▶▶ “[God] rested on the seventh day” (Genesis 2:2). When was the last time you rested? Create a chart of your typical week, noting how much time is given to schoolwork, school activities, job, family, friends, sleep, and other things you’re involved in. Write a paragraph or two about how much time you spend relaxing and unwinding, and how you use that time. If you could say no to one “extra” activity in your life so that you would have more room for relaxing, what would you give up?

▼ The story of Creation conveys the magnificence of God’s goodness and power.



the religious truth of the Creation account—the truth that God is the source of all goodness, including our own existence as humans made in God’s image.

In the story of Creation, we can see the magnificence of God’s truth. It is expressed through the inspired poetic genius of its writer, probably a member of the priestly class, who with few words put everything in place.

### Adam and Eve: Sin Enters the World

Genesis moves on to another account of Creation, which focuses on the story of **Adam and Eve**. Do not be concerned if some of the details are inconsistent with the first account.

Remember, the biblical—writers had the job of weaving together a number of different strands from their oral

tradition. Sometimes, when inconsistencies arose, they didn’t worry about them but let both accounts stand. No doubt they figured that each one contributed some valuable religious truth that they did not want to leave out. From our vantage point, we can see God’s inspiration at work in the writers’ decisions of what to include.

In the story Adam and Eve are created to enjoy the delightful garden and be intimate companions for each other. They are also privileged to be on walking and talking terms with their Creator. But soon the man and the woman are caught up in disobedience and guilt. They have eaten the forbidden fruit, and feeling naked, they try to cover themselves. When they hear God approaching, they hide. God calls Adam, and his excuse for hiding is his nakedness. Yet earlier Adam was naked and unashamed. God asks if he has eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge, and Adam, unwilling to take the blame, tries to shift it to Eve. Eve, just as unwilling, accuses the serpent of tricking her.

Thus sin has done its work and ruined Adam and Eve’s relationships—with God, between themselves, and with Creation. Now God foretells the consequences of their sin: Man’s work will not give him perfect pleasure but will be difficult and will weary him, and woman will be subject to her husband and bear children in pain.

*Read Genesis 2:4–25, 3:1–24.*



## The sin of trying to be equal to God

This story of Creation tells of the **Fall**—that is, the first sin of humankind—termed by Christians **Original Sin**. The “knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis 2:17)—so alluring to Eve and Adam—is the knowledge of all things, and this is God’s alone. Adam and Eve are not satisfied with being what they are, finite creatures loved by God and destined for happiness. No, they want to be equal to God. That desire is an illusion, for no one can be God but God. So Adam and Eve choose to rebel against the divine command that human beings should not try to be equal to God. Their sin reminds us of what sin essentially is—the refusal to acknowledge God as God and ourselves as dependent on him.

## Human freedom and suffering

We must not miss the crucial message that God wanted to convey through the ancient Jewish storytellers: It was free human beings, not God, who screwed up life in the garden. Created with freedom, humans can choose to rebel against God. The misery that follows results from free human choice. Thus God does not create injustice in the world; human beings do by their own bad choices. In Catholic Tradition all suffering—even that from natural disasters, illness, and death—stems from the sin of Adam and Eve, not from God.

One might argue that Adam and Eve were tricked by the serpent, so how can we say they were really free?



IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

Oddly enough, the trickery in the story is not so different from what most of us experience when we sin. Like the serpent deceiving Adam and Eve, we delude and trick ourselves into thinking that the bad we choose is really good for us, that we know better than God. Then are we really free? Yes, the biblical storytellers would say, because such self-deception and rationalizing for the purpose of going against what God wants is itself a free choice. We don’t have to be tricked by our own desires—we choose to be!

## Sin’s Spread: Cain and Abel

Like ripples in a pond, sin will spread out over the ages and touch everyone. Genesis describes sin’s spread first with a story about hatred between brothers that ends in murder, then with a story about depravity in society, and finally with one about arrogance among the nations.

▲ In Catholic Tradition all suffering — even suffering caused by natural disasters and illness — stems from the sins of Adam and Eve, not from God.

▶▶ In the Fall, Adam and Eve try to be equal to God. List three situations in the world today where human beings are trying to be equal to God and refuse to acknowledge their dependence on him. Write about one of them that you find interesting or inspiring.





IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

▲ God instructed Noah to build an ark to survive the Flood.

▶▶ “Am I my brother’s keeper?” What does it mean to be responsible for another person? Perhaps someone in your school, neighborhood, family, or workplace, or some group in your community is at risk or in trouble. Is it your job to help them? Share your thoughts on this in a one-page essay.

The story of **Cain and Abel** tells of two brothers, sons of Adam and Eve—the first a farmer, the second a shepherd—offering gifts to God in sacrifice. God blesses only Abel’s sacrifice and encourages Cain to rise above his jealousy. Angry, Cain murders Abel. So the first sin has begun to affect the human family, in the form of another sin, murder. As if that were not enough, in response to God’s inquiry about Abel’s whereabouts, we hear Cain’s insolent, hypocritical reply, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis 4:9). Those familiar words are echoed even today

in the responses of people who want to deny they have any responsibility toward others.

*Read Genesis 4:1–16.*

### More Sin and a Promise: Noah and the Flood

The account of the **Flood** tells of how bad things can get once sin spreads its ugliness. There is such depravity on the earth that God regrets creating the human race.

Only one man, **Noah**, finds favor with God and is instructed to build an ark to protect himself, his family,

and some animals from destruction. Noah does as God commands, the Flood comes, and the ark safely rides the waters until they recede. All other creatures are destroyed.

Leaving the ark, Noah offers a sacrifice of thanksgiving. The story of Noah ends with God’s first **covenant**, or solemn promise—with Noah because he obeyed.

*Read Genesis, chapters 6 – 8, 9:1–17.*

### God’s Word saves us

The story of Noah is probably related to other similar flood stories found in ancient literature. The tale’s authors were not interested in figuring out historical causes of the Flood, if indeed such a flood occurred, but in teaching the powerful truth that whoever hears and obeys God’s Word will be saved and whoever does not will be lost.

“Saved from what?” is the question. We know that devout people are not necessarily saved from disaster. Even those who Jesus says will live forever are not saved from calamity in this life.

The answer is that hearing and keeping God’s Word saves us from forgetting how to love and serve. When we do forget how to love, something happens inside us, where it is unseen. We turn hard and cold, perhaps not instantly but gradually. Our warm, fleshy heart eventually turns to cold stone without our even being aware of it. That is the awful fate that God wants to save us from.

### The rainbow: A sign of a promise

The end of the Flood is marked with a rainbow as a sign of God’s love for every creature on the earth, and a promise that the world will never again be destroyed by a flood.

The next time you see a rainbow, allow yourself to feel the hope that rainbows seem to nurture in us human beings. Remember how dearly God loves the earth.



IMAGE SHUTTERSTOCK

◀◀ Through the story of Noah and the Flood, the rainbow has become a sign of God’s love and covenant.

### An Arrogant World: The Tower of Babel

The last of the prehistory stories in Genesis is the tale of Babel. Once again humankind tries to carve out a destiny of its own making. Here the presumptuous ambition of Adam and Eve to be equal to God is projected

on a grand scale when the nations try to build a tower with its summit in the heavens so they can “make a name for themselves.” God comes down to see the tower, is appalled by the nations’ arrogance, and stops them by confusing their language and dispersing the peoples.

*Read Genesis 11:1–9.*

▶▶ In a paragraph, compare the story of Babel, which illustrates the effect of sin, to the story of Pentecost (Acts of Apostles 2:1–21), which illustrates the effect of the Holy Spirit. Find a newspaper clipping showing the effect of sin in our society, and another that shows the effect of good.



IMAGE © THE GALLERY COLLECTION/CORBIS

◀◀ The Tower of Babel is a symbol of human arrogance and a lack of consideration for God.

▶▶ The skyscraper on the right used to house Enron, an energy company that became a symbol of corporate corruption. Can a skyscraper housing a corrupt corporation be compared to the Tower of Babel?



IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

### The presumption of the nations

The story of Babel is not about how the earth's people came to have different languages or be dispersed. Rather, it shows how sin has spread to affect even the behavior of the na-

tions, who seek glory in power, might, wealth, superiority, and dominance—without a thought for God. Today the nightly newscasts are filled with stories of such attempts, as well as stories of the pain, corruption, and devastation they beget.

Thus the first eleven chapters of Genesis tell about God's good purpose for the world, but then how things went wrong when human beings arrogantly chose to try to be God's equal and how this sin spread over the world. These prehistory chapters come to a close with the world in a terrible state, desperately in need of God's salvation.

If the first part of Genesis explains why things went wrong in the world, the second part tells how God chose a people to start setting things right again. This latter part of Genesis, the focus of the remainder of this chapter, tells stories about the founders of the Israelites, the people chosen as the instrument through whom God would save the world.

▶▶ Create a story that shows the destructive nature of sin, especially how one act of sin can lead to another and another.

## For Review

- ▶▶ How did the Book of Genesis lift the hearts of the exiles as they returned to their homeland, Judah?
- ▶▶ Summarize the difference between the Jewish view of the origins of the world and the Babylonian view.
- ▶▶ In the Creation story, why is it said that God rested on the seventh day?
- ▶▶ What is the Catholic understanding of how the biblical Creation account relates to the theory of evolution?
- ▶▶ What do Adam and Eve desire by eating of the tree of the “knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis 2:17)?
- ▶▶ According to the story of the Fall, who is responsible for suffering and injustice in the world—God or human beings?
- ▶▶ Which Genesis stories tell about the spread of sin after the first sin?
- ▶▶ To whom does God offer the first covenant? Why is it offered, and what is the sign of that event?

## Abraham: The Father of Biblical Faith

Like the stories about Creation, the stories of the founders were remembered and told for centuries before they were written down. Unlike the stories of Creation, the stories of the patriarchs and the matriarchs take place in historical times. Their setting is a period about four thousand years ago (2000 to 1700 BC).

The first of these stories tells about **Abraham**, the father of biblical faith, and his wife, **Sarah**. Through Abraham and his descendants, God would establish a people, a “nation,” through which he would save the world. It all begins with the story of a man who is willing to follow God’s call wherever it leads him. Abraham and Sarah first appear in the Book of Genesis with the names **Abram** and **Sarai**.

### The Call of Abram and God’s Promise

Among the Semitic nomads wandering the highlands of the Near East is a man named Abram. (The word **Semites** refers to a number of ancient peoples of the Near East, from whom the Israelites descended.) Abram travels from the city of Ur to the city of Haran (see the map on page 46), and it is in Haran that he hears God’s call. God bids

Abram to take his family away from all that is familiar and go to a land “that I will show you” (Genesis 12:1). And God promises that from Abram’s offspring will come a great nation, a blessing for the world. This is the first mention of God’s **Promise** to the people who would become Israel. Abram takes Sarai, his nephew **Lot**, and all his possessions, and goes, not knowing where God is leading him or what to expect. In faith he follows a God he does not yet know to the land called **Canaan**.

*Read Genesis 12:1–9.*

### A new God

The story of Abram’s call is about Abram’s struggle to understand the mystery of the gods—until it comes to him that one God is above all other gods. Abram’s call probably came the way that God’s call comes to anyone: silently, subtly, during the search for answers that we call prayer.

Abram may not have understood God as the only God, but as the God he would worship above all others.

► Identify someone you know of who left behind all that was familiar to him or her in order to follow the call of some good purpose. If possible, ask the person what the experience was like and write it up in one page.



IMAGE © EYE UBIQUITOUS/CORBIS

◀ Abram hears God’s call in Haran.





IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

▲ God told Abram (who was later called Abraham) that his descendants would be as countless as the stars.

Even though belief in the one God is the cornerstone of Judaism, it was not yet clear to the people of Abram’s time. But from a later perspective, Jews recognized the God of Abram as the one and only God.

### Letting God lead

Abram, an old man whose wife was childless and beyond her childbearing years, let God lead him—and became the father of the faith of the Jews, the Christians, and the Muslims. Recall the story of Babel, where human beings close themselves

off to God in the illusion that they are “on top,” in control. Their arrogance brought disaster! Abram, on the other hand, was humble before God. He was open to God’s purpose for his life and was willing to leave behind all that was familiar to follow God’s call. He knew he was not in control; God was. Thus God was able to accomplish great things through Abram.

### Count the Stars If You Can

Years pass, and Abram and his family travel to other lands and arrive back in Canaan. But still there are no children. Having waited faithfully and grown older, Abram begins to doubt that he will have a son. Imagine him sitting in his tent one night, gently

complaining to God in prayer. He has no child; Sarai is barren, apparently unable to bear children. Is he to adopt a son?

In answer God tells Abram to look up at the stars and count them if he can. God promises that Abram’s descendants will outnumber the stars. And Abram believes, despite the apparent impossibility of it all.

*Read Genesis 15:1–6.*

By **descendants** God refers to all who believe or will believe because Abram believes. It is a beautiful story for a starry night or for a time when faith burns low and discouragement seems to press the spirit. In the Christian faith, this promise is ultimately fulfilled when God sends his only son, Jesus Christ, to live with humans.

### An Alternative Plan: Hagar

Sarai continues to be childless. She finally proposes that Abram take her Egyptian maid, Hagar, as a concubine and beget a child by her, which would legally belong to Sarai. (As we will see later, God still intends for Sarai to bear a child. God’s plans cannot be foiled that easily by human tinkering with destiny.) This idea works, but not without a lot of bad feeling between the two women. At one point the pregnant Hagar runs away to flee the harshness of her mistress. In the wilderness a messenger of God appears to her. At his command she returns to submit to Sarai, fortified by the promise that her unborn son, **Ishmael**, will grow to manhood wild and free.

*Read Genesis 16:1–16.*

### Concubines and polygamy

The customs in early biblical times of taking concubines and of practicing **polygamy**—that is, taking more than one wife—need some explanation: If a wife was barren, a female servant might become a surrogate childbearer, a concubine to the husband. Or the husband might take a second wife in order to give the family children. Both of these practices helped to assure the survival of the tribe. The story of Adam and Eve suggests, however, that **monogamy**—taking only one wife—was the biblical ideal.

### The Sign of the Covenant

God establishes with Abram a covenant, a solemn pledge on both sides. This repeats the covenant made previously with Abram—the Promise that he will bring forth a multitude of descendants, and that all the land of Canaan eventually will be his people's. The sign of the covenant be-

tween God and the people is a ritual for all males, **circumcision** (the removal of the foreskin of the penis), which identifies Abram's people as God's people. To reflect this new status and identity, Abram's name is changed to Abraham and Sarai's to Sarah.

*Read Genesis 17:1–22.*

### Visited by Strangers

Abraham is sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day when he is approached by three strangers—who, we later learn, represent God. In a beautiful display of graciousness, Abraham offers them refreshment, water for bathing, and a place to rest.

According to the custom of the time, Sarah, as a woman, is not present in this scene, but she is listening behind the flap of the tent. When she hears one of the visitors say that in a year she will bear a son, she laughs out loud. The visitor answers her laugh with, “Is anything too wonder-

IMAGE: © GIL COHEN MAGEN/REUTERS/CORBIS



« An Israeli Bedouin woman bakes bread. Bedouins are desert nomads known for their hospitality.

▶▶ “Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?” Sarah laughs when she hears she will have a child in her old age. But with God nothing is impossible, nothing is too wonderful! Write about a wonderful event from your life. What were the circumstances? Did you expect it to happen?

When Abraham said yes to God’s call, he received the gift of expectant faith—knowing, with all his heart and soul, that God would take care of him, bless him, amaze him. This journey would be a wonder-filled, God-filled adventure. We, too, can expect that God is with us every moment of our lives.



ful for the Lord?” (Genesis 18:14). The story, rich in color and detail, repeats God’s promise to Abraham that one day he will be a father of nations.

*Read Genesis 18:1–15.*

### Hospitality: “Entertaining angels”

The story of the visit to Abraham highlights a solemn obligation of biblical times: the giving of **hospitality**. For a traveler in the wilderness, hospitality was a matter of survival, and to be refused hospitality was sometimes a death sentence.

Abraham and Sarah offer generous hospitality out of pure kindness, without any inkling that these mysterious guests represent God and have something marvelous to tell them. The Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament hints at this story, which would have been quite familiar to readers of the letter, with these words: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that

some have entertained angels without knowing it” (13:2).

### “Laugh”

Both Abraham and Sarah laugh when told they will have a son of their own (see Genesis 17:17, 18:12). These verses contain a bit of wordplay: **Isaac**, the name that God gives to their son-to-be, means “laugh” in Hebrew.

### Pleading with God

As the story continues, God reveals to Abraham a plan to destroy the wicked cities of **Sodom and Gomorrah** if the complaints against their inhabitants are found true. Abraham pleads for the safety of his nephew Lot, who lives in Sodom, and again and again presses God not to destroy the just people along with the wicked in this infamous city—even if they number only a few. God graciously agrees. It is amusing but also touching to hear

IMAGE: © RALF-FINN HESTOFT/CORBIS

▶▶ Su Casa Catholic Community provides shelter in Chicago for political refugees from Central America. Sister Pat and some children work together on a garden at Su Casa.



the dialogue as Abraham bargains, successfully, with his God.

In Sodom the wicked inhabitants propose the rape of some young men (or angels) to whom Lot has given shelter. Rape is evil at any time but doubly heinous considering the life-giving hospitality required by guests. Lot offers his own daughters in order to protect his guests—to no avail. So the cities will be destroyed, except for Lot and his family, the only just people remaining in those wicked places. The angels rescue Lot and his family. In the well-known ending to the story, Lot's wife, curious about the fate of the cities, looks back to check out the destruction and turns into a pillar of salt—a famous but unimportant biblical detail.

*Read Genesis 18:16–33, 19:1–29.*

### Enter Isaac, Exit Ishmael

Isaac is born, and now Sarah's laughter is of a joyful kind. Hagar is expelled because Sarah fears that Ishmael might threaten Isaac's inheritance. Again we must admire Hagar's behavior. Alone in the wilderness with no water left and thinking that her boy will die, she walks some distance away from him because she cannot bear to watch his suffering. Then, aided by an angel of the Lord, Hagar finds a spring and saves her son. Ishmael goes on, with God's blessing, to live in the wilderness and eventually take a wife. The story is a tribute to Hagar's perseverance and faith.

*Read Genesis 21:1–21.*

### A God who chooses imperfect people

Curiously, Hagar emerges from the Genesis story more noble than the ancestral heroes Abraham and Sarah. Hagar is portrayed very sympathetically, even though Sarah's son, not Hagar's, is the one God intends to be the ancestor of the Chosen People.

The Jews did not try to whitewash their heroes. Instead they showed that God had chosen a people far from perfect. Yet in spite of their faults, God was able to make them a light to the world. And that says something encouraging to all of us imperfect people.

What of poor Hagar? Does God love her any less than Sarah? Is that why her son is not chosen to be an ancestor of the Israelites? The story makes it clear that God holds her and her offspring in the most tender care. Being chosen does not necessarily mean being more worthy, as the Israelites will be reminded over and over in their checkered history with their God.

### Ishmael's destiny

Tradition has made Ishmael a **bedouin**, that is, a nomadic Arab, and the **father of the Arab peoples**. The religion of the Muslims, **Islam**, developed many centuries after biblical times among the Arabs. Thus Muslims claim Abraham as their father in faith through the line of Ishmael. So Abraham is considered the ancestor of all three great **monotheistic** (worshiping one God) religions in

▶▶ Expecting God's goodness to prevail, Abraham does not give up. Abraham pleads with him to protect Lot and his family. Who is someone you care about so much that you would plead with God on his or her behalf? Is it someone who is in trouble? hurting? lost or confused? angry? Write a conversation between you and God about this person dear to your heart.



▶▶ How do you define hero? Make a list of your "heroic ancestors," including family heroes as well as national ones. Pick three and write a brief reflection for each about what makes him or her a hero. Be sure to include the hero's imperfections as well as his or her good points. How has he or she made a difference in your life?



▶▶ Bedouin nomads continue to live in the deserts of the Middle East and Northern Africa.



IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

▶▶ Write your own reactions to the story of Abraham's test. What questions does that story raise for you?

the world today: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

### Abraham's Sacrifice

The next story is often called **Abraham's test**. In it, God bids Abraham to take Isaac, the son he loves with all his heart, to a place on a mountain and sacrifice him as a holocaust—that is, a burnt offering. Abraham responds by immediately setting out for the mountain with the boy. In answer to Isaac's question about what they will sacrifice, Abraham can only say, filled with faith, that God will provide a lamb. At the last moment, an angel of God stops Abraham from

killing his son, and instead provides a ram for the sacrifice.

*Read Genesis 22:1–19.*

### A story of faithfulness

Most modern readers strongly object to the idea that God would ask anyone to kill his or her child. But that is not the point of the story for the biblical writer, who wants us to focus on the faithfulness between Abraham and God.

Think for a moment about how much Isaac must have meant to Abraham. He and Sarah had longed for a child for years. Moreover, it was supposed to be through Isaac that God's promise to Abraham would be fulfilled. And we can imagine that most parents would rather die themselves than see their children die. In a way then, by asking Abraham to give up his only son, God is asking Abraham to give up more than if he had asked him to give up his own life! God seems to be asking, "Are you willing to give up everything for me?"

Abraham's unhesitating obedience to God's command dramatically demonstrates the extent of his faithfulness and his complete trust in God's goodness. Abraham knows that everything—even human life—comes from and belongs to God. But he also trusts that "God himself will provide" (Genesis 22:7) what is good.

Abraham's faith and trust in God are not in vain. Abraham entrusted everything to God, who responded by giving it all back to him, plus much more. Because of his great faith, Abra-



◀◀ This painting by Caravaggio shows the angel of God stopping Abraham from sacrificing his son Isaac.

ham became the father of all people who place their trust and faith in God.

This story has special significance for Christians, who see in it a foreshadowing of Jesus' saving death and Resurrection. Just as Abraham was willing to give his only son to God, God was willing to give his only Son, Jesus Christ, to humanity. Just as God provided a ram in order to save Isaac's life, God provided Jesus—whom Christians call the "lamb of God"—in order to save all humanity from sin and death.

Some readers still wonder whether this story shows God approving of child sacrifice. But notice that God prevented Abraham from carrying out the sacrifice of his son.

While child sacrifice to the gods was not uncommon among the cultures of the time, many Scripture scholars believe that the story of Abraham's test confirms that God forbids human sacrifice, as do other passages in the Old Testament (see 2 Kings 16:3 and Micah 6:7).

### Isaac and Rebekah: Best Biblical Romance

Abraham returns home and at Sarah's death buys a field in which to bury her, the first piece of ground that his people possess in a land that will one day be theirs.

Isaac grows up, and Abraham, facing his own death, instructs his

steward to find a bride for Isaac from among their tribe back in Haran. Now we have a novella—a little masterpiece of storytelling. Rich detail, exotic marriage customs, and the loveliness and generosity of **Rebekah** are woven together in the most beautiful of all the biblical romances. We see Rebekah’s adventurous spirit when she agrees to leave Haran immediately, over the protests of her kin. The story ends with the bride glimpsing Isaac as she approaches her new home and Isaac taking her to his tent, where he marries her. In

Rebekah he finds comfort after the death of his mother.

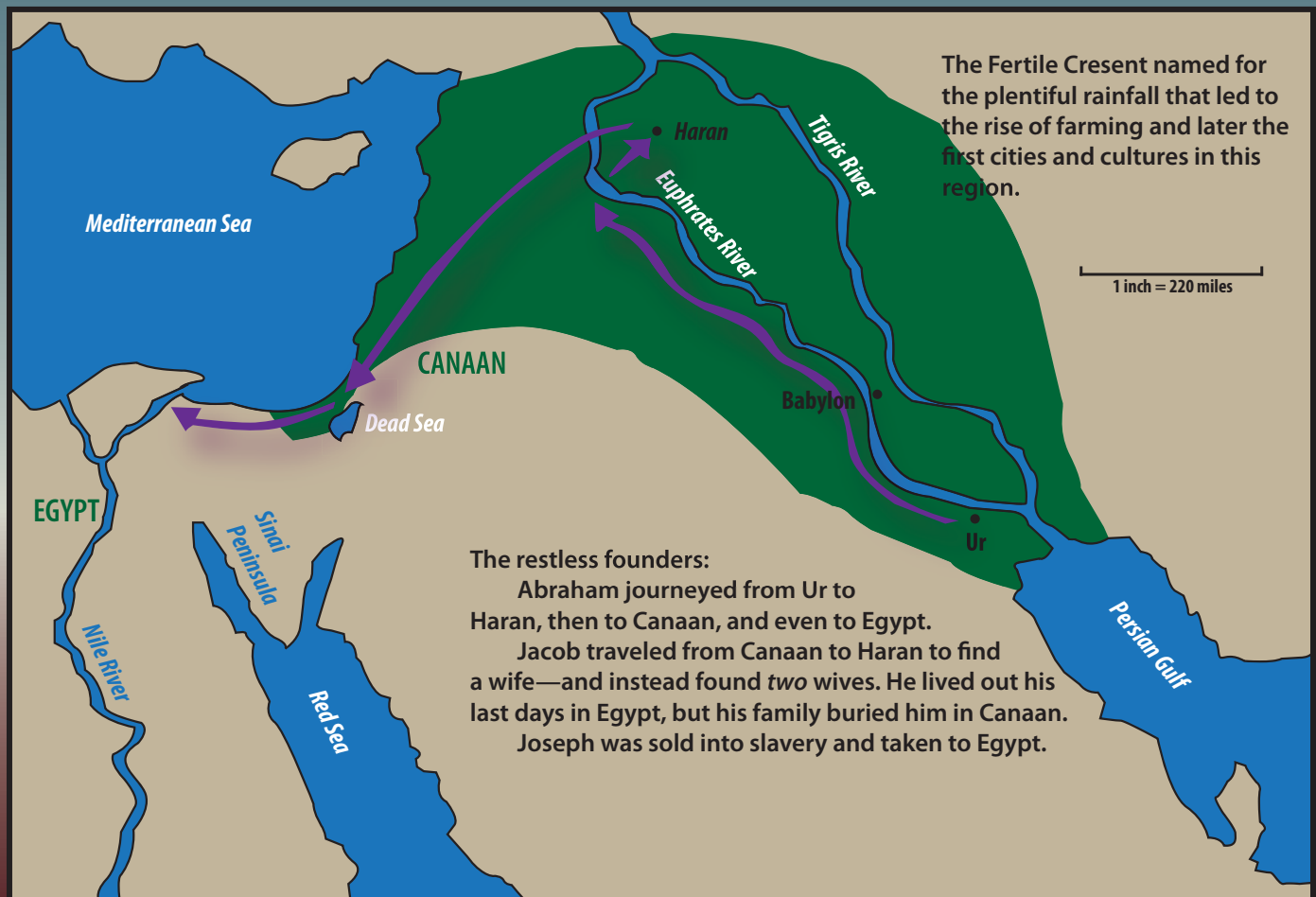
Abraham marries again and has many children by another woman. When he dies—at the age of one hundred and seventy-five—Isaac and Ishmael bury him next to Sarah in the family’s field.

*Read Genesis 24:1–67.*

### Abraham’s great age

Abraham’s unbelievable age at his death is an exaggeration common in biblical stories. It is a way of saying that Abraham was wise and blessed.

## The Founders’ Journeys



And so the story unfolds. Through many ins and outs, heroic moments, laughter, sinfulness, and sadness, God is at work. First through Abraham and Sarah, then through Isaac and Rebekah, God is keeping the Promise to fashion a people who will be God's own, and a blessing for all the nations. After the disaster of the Fall and the rampant spread of sin and depravity over the earth, it looks as though God is beginning to put the world back together again.

But the drama is just getting started. . . .

## For Review

- ▶▶ Who is called the father of biblical faith?
- ▶▶ What does God promise to Abram as the covenant? What is the sign of that covenant for Abram's people?
- ▶▶ Why are Sodom and Gomorrah destroyed?
- ▶▶ Who is traditionally known as the father of the Arab peoples?
- ▶▶ What is emphasized as a forbidden act in the story of Abraham's test?
- ▶▶ Which of Abraham's sons is destined to become an ancestor of the Israelites? Whom does that son marry?

## Jacob: A Man Named Israel

Once again, in the stories about Isaac and Rebekah's son Jacob, the biblical writer shows God at work building a people—making sure, by hook or by crook, that the divine purposes

are accomplished. And in the case of Jacob, a bit of the “crook” is definitely involved.

### A Birthright Stolen, a Blessing Ripped Off

From the time of her pregnancy, Rebekah knows that the younger of the twins she will bear (the one to be born second) is destined to be the principal heir to Isaac's goods and, most important, heir to his leadership of the tribe. By rights, the elder, the firstborn of the twins, should succeed his father. But Rebekah is convinced that God's purpose is otherwise, and she devotes herself to maneuvering the younger twin into the position of heir. This move will entail some deception, which Rebekah seems quite ready to engage in.

The twins are born—first **Esau**, the shaggy redhead, and then **Jacob**, following close behind, grasping Esau's heel as if trying to get ahead of him. Clued in about his destiny by his mother as a child, the young man Jacob manages to trick Esau into swearing over his birthright to him.

In time, father Isaac, old and failing in his eyesight, wants to give his dear elder son, Esau, his blessing to seal his right to head the clan. Rebekah, ever alert on Jacob's behalf, stages an elaborate deception of her husband so that Jacob, not Esau, will get Isaac's blessing. In a scene that would make a hilarious charade, Jacob puts goatskin on his neck and wrists so as to feel like hairy Esau to his near-blind father. Sure enough,



▶▶ The Book of Genesis tells of both Abraham and Jacob traveling through the desert of Canaan.



IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

▶▶ In the Israelites' understanding, things would work out the way God wanted them to—no matter what or who tried to get in the way. God could bring good out of situations that were weird, puzzling, unfair, or evil. Write a one-page reflection on this idea, including examples from your own life, if possible.

the little drama works, and Jacob gets the prized blessing. Aghast, Isaac realizes he has been deceived, but he cannot take back his blessing once given. The furious Esau vows to kill Jacob one day.

*Read Genesis 27:1–41.*

### **Rebekah's good intent**

For all her presumption, Rebekah sincerely believes that the will of God in this affair is in her hands. She strives to obey it at great personal risk.

### **Jacob Journeys to Haran**

To escape Esau's fury, Jacob suddenly must flee to Haran, where Abraham first heard his call from God so many years before. The young man can also find a suitable wife there, not a Canaanite that his mother would frown upon. Jacob—young, feisty, and self-satisfied—sets off with

Isaac's blessing. Camping the first night, he dreams of angels ascending and descending from Heaven (have you ever heard the old spiritual "Jacob's Ladder"?). He hears the voice of God repeat the Promise made to Abraham, and names the place **Bethel**, meaning "the house, or abode, of God."

*Read Genesis 27:42–46; 28:1–5, 10–22.*

### **A brash young man**

In the final scene of this episode, Jacob seems to choose the terms of the relationship with God (Genesis 28:20–21). But God, not people, initiates covenants. Jacob sounds like a brash young man who feels that it is his right to bargain with God.

### **Life in Haran**

Arriving in Haran, Jacob stays at the home of his uncle **Laban**. He is so

good at helping with the flocks that Laban would like to keep him there and marry off both of his daughters to Jacob as well. Jacob is in love with the younger, **Rachel**. But Laban tricks him into marrying the older sister, **Leah**, after seven years and then has him wait seven more years before giving him Rachel in marriage.

The years pass, and Jacob is older and wiser, although no less conniving. He has two wives, two concubines, and many children, and is fed up with Laban. In a kind of midlife crisis, he remembers the land of Canaan and God's Promise and wants to return home. So he and his substantial household of wives, slaves, and flocks set off for Canaan.

### A Strange Encounter on the Way to the Promised Land

Midway to Canaan, Jacob remembers Esau. Fearful of his brother's anger, Jacob sends herdsmen ahead with large flocks of animals to be given as gifts to placate him. In his fright Jacob reminds God, to whom he was almost flippant many years before, of the promise of protection, which he now desperately needs.

Reaching the border of Canaan, Jacob shepherds his family and flocks across a river and, staying alone on the other side, has a strange encounter, the meaning of which continues to puzzle biblical commentators.

The mysterious being who meets Jacob in this story has been called by translators a stranger, a man, an angel—some even suggest a demon.



IMAGE © THE GALLERY COLLECTION/CORBIS

This “someone” wrestles with Jacob until the break of day, when Jacob, refusing to let go, asks for a blessing. In reply the stranger asks his name, and when he says that it is Jacob, he is told that from now on he will be known as **Israel**, meaning “one who

▲ Jacob dreamed of angels ascending to Heaven.

▶▶ A shepherd in Israel, tending his flock much like Jacob and the herdsmen mentioned in Genesis.

▶▶ Imagine a young person “wrestling” with God. What issues might he or she be struggling with? Write a story describing the situation.



IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

## World Happenings from 2000 to 1700 BC

### Africa

The Egyptian pharaohs no longer build pyramids as their tombs. Instead they are buried in tombs deeply tunneled into the walls of the hills on the western side of the Nile River.

### America

The Eskimo culture begins on the Bering Strait. Pottery is made in Mexican villages.

### China

The potter's wheel is introduced. Pigs, dogs, oxen, goats, and sheep are domesticated.

### Europe

Early cultures begin using bronze to make tools and weapons. The Stonehenge circle in England is used for religious and astronomical ceremonies. Culture on the island of Crete is at its height; the bull-god is worshiped at the city of Knossos.

### India

Chickens and elephants are domesticated. Sacrifice is offered in the worship of a mother-goddess.

### The Near East

Around 2000 BC the destruction of Ur, the Near East's major city, results in the decline of the dominant culture.

has contended with divine and human beings.” Left alone as the sun rises, Jacob marvels that he has seen God face-to-face and has not died.

*Read Genesis 32:23–32.*

### A curtain-raising story

In the context of biblical history, this is a curtain-raising story. Jacob is returning to the destiny long ago promised, to the land of Canaan, and to his place among the people chosen to be a blessing to the nations. He has been named Israel by God, and his descendants, the chosen ones, will be known as the Israelites.

### Family Worship of God

Jacob continues on to meet and make peace with Esau. He then goes to Bethel and builds an altar on the spot where he heard God's promise on his outward journey. He orders his family to rid themselves of the trappings of their pagan religion—not

only the household gods but also their ornaments, earrings, even clothing—in a purification rite that initiates the family into the worship of the God of Israel. Again God transfers to Jacob the blessing given to Abraham and Isaac, the Promise of the land of Canaan and a royal line that is to be a blessing to the nations.

In a short passage, we are told of the death of Rachel at the birth of her second son, **Benjamin**. Jacob returns home and finds Isaac still alive. At his death Jacob and Esau bury their father in the field where Abraham and Sarah lie.

*Read Genesis 35:1–29.*

## For Review

- ▶▶ Why does Rebekah try to maneuver Jacob into the position of principal heir of Isaac?
- ▶▶ What strange encounter does Jacob have on the way back to Canaan? What new name is he given then, and what does it mean?
- ▶▶ How does Jacob initiate his family into the worship of the God of Israel?

## Joseph: Treachery, Triumph, and Forgiveness

The stories about Joseph are also about his father, Jacob, because God is not finished with Jacob yet. These famous tales also drive home the message that keeping God's Word brings rewards far beyond anything imaginable—and that he can bring good out of even the most

wicked of deeds and desperate of circumstances.

### Sold into Slavery

Joseph, Rachel's first son, is seventeen years old and Jacob's favorite. Some of his brothers—Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher—however, dislike Joseph because after he tended flocks with them, he told his father tales about their behavior. The others resent him for being his father's favorite, the son of Jacob's beloved Rachel.

▼ Joseph had to relinquish his cloak when he was sold into slavery.

IMAGE: © ARTE & IMMAGINI SRL/CORBIS



▶▶ Do you identify with the feelings of any of the characters in the beginning of this story: the favorite son? the brothers? Reuben? Write a paragraph describing how families can be harmed by jealousy or favoritism.

▼ The sarcophagus of an Egyptian pharaoh, or king. Joseph gained the favor of the pharaoh of Egypt by interpreting the pharaoh's dreams.

Jacob has a long, flowing tunic made for Joseph—the garb of tent dwellers, not shepherds, and unlike the short, coarse garments that his brothers wear. Worse, Joseph's dreams contain portents that one day he will lord it over his family. When he rashly recounts these dreams, even Jacob rebukes him. The scene is set for his undoing.

One day the brothers are tending the flocks some distance away from home, and Jacob sends Joseph to see if things are well with them. As the brothers watch him approach wearing his long, flowing coat—hardly the clothing for a hike in the country—they plot to kill

him and throw his body down a well. But **Reuben** has no heart for such a deed and suggests that instead they put Joseph into a dry well, for Reuben plans to return later to rescue him. The brothers do this and then sit down to eat—the writer's comment on their callousness.

Seeing traders on the way to Egypt, **Judah** suggests that they sell Joseph instead and avoid having his blood on their hands. The deed is done, and the brothers hide it by showing Joseph's coat, which they have dipped in goat's blood, to Jacob. Seeing the bloody coat, Jacob believes that Joseph has been killed by a wild animal. Jacob tears his own garments and mourns the loss of Joseph for many days.

*Read Genesis 37:1–35.*

### A melodrama

Here are all the elements of a family saga. Consider the parts of this melodrama:

- Jacob's favoritism
- Joseph's talebearing and boastfulness
- the brothers' envy and betrayal
- the brothers' deception of their father, Jacob (they seem to have inherited some of his traits)

The wonder is that sinful and guilty as they are, God will lead these men to self-knowledge and remorse, some even to heroism and holiness.

### Joseph's Fate in Egypt

Once in Egypt Joseph does quite well for himself. Though a slave, he is giv-

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK



en considerable responsibility under the pharaoh's chief steward. But Joseph lands in prison, falsely accused of rape by the steward's lustful wife, who has tried unsuccessfully to seduce the handsome young man.

Even in prison, though, Joseph is singled out as special. The knack for interpreting dreams that got him in such trouble with his brothers comes in handy when Joseph is asked to explain the pharaoh's dreams to him. He does so well at it that he gains the pharaoh's favor.

By the age of thirty, Joseph has been made governor of Egypt, second only to the pharaoh in power. He has married a beautiful Egyptian woman, and they have two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim.

Then severe famine strikes the whole Near East, including Egypt. But years earlier Joseph had predicted the famine through the pharaoh's dreams, and fortunately he has been storing up grain supplies for just such a disaster. People from all over the Near East go to Egypt to buy grain from the Egyptian surplus.

*Read Genesis, chapters 39 – 41.*

### The Brothers on Joseph's Turf

You can probably imagine what comes next. Back in Canaan, Jacob sends ten of his sons to Egypt to buy grain for the family's survival. And who is in charge of grain sales? Governor Joseph, of course.

Joseph's brothers, however, do not recognize him, and so Joseph takes the opportunity to toy with them



IMAGE: © JOHN VAN HASSELT/CORBIS SYGMA

a bit. He pretends to think they are spies and puts them in prison, refusing to sell them grain. Then he decides to let them go with the grain on condition they will return with their younger brother, Benjamin (as Jacob's dearest child after Joseph, Benjamin has not been allowed to come along on the trip). And they must leave one of the brothers, Simeon, as a pledge until they return.

Back home, the brothers plead with Jacob to let them take Benjamin to Egypt so they can rescue

▲ Slavery continues today in some parts of the world, such as Pakistan, where this child, who is a bonded laborer, is essentially a slave.

the brother they left behind. Reuben even offers his own sons as a pledge for Benjamin's safety. But Jacob is adamant: they may not take his beloved Benjamin.

*Read Genesis 42:1–38.*

### Jacob's Sacrifice

Eventually Jacob's clan needs grain again, but without Benjamin the brothers cannot go back to Egypt for it. After bemoaning the terrible price he must pay, Jacob finally consents to part with Benjamin because his people must live. The sacrifice will take him to his grave, he cries—surely plucking out his beard—but he will do it.

*Read Genesis 43:1–14.*

### The great Jacob

We want to shout, "Hooray, Jacob!" Up until this point we have not seen a lot to admire in Jacob's character. Consider his lifelong deceit, craft, and greed. Not until the moment when he agrees to sacrifice Benjamin (as Abraham was willing to do with his own son generations before) does Jacob reach heroic heights and become one of the great saints of the Scriptures.

### Return, Reunion, Reconciliation

Back the brothers go to Egypt, and on arriving they are invited to Joseph's house for a banquet—still unaware that he is the brother they sold into slavery. When Joseph sees Benjamin, he leaves the room to weep.

Later, when Joseph sits down to eat, he sends tidbits from his own plate to share with Benjamin as a gesture of royal favor.

When the brothers prepare at last to leave with their grain, the steward hides Joseph's own goblet in Benjamin's sack as a plant. Once they are on their way, Joseph sends servants after them. The cup is found, and Joseph orders Benjamin to stay behind as a slave. Now Judah steps forward and, in a beautiful speech, pleads with Joseph to consider the aged father who will die if Benjamin fails to return. Judah pledges his own life in Benjamin's place, and Joseph, close to tears, sends everyone but the brothers from the room.

Weeping so loudly that the others hear him in the hall, Joseph finally reveals his identity, forbidding his brothers to blame themselves for their past misdeeds. Everything was allowed to happen, he says, so that when they were in danger of starving, someone would be there to feed them. Joseph's story is a tale of reconciliation and redemption.

*Read Genesis 43:15–34, 44:1–34, 45:1–28.*

### Everyone grows

Not only does Jacob get a bigger heart in this story, but Joseph and his brothers do as well. Joseph, who in his youth was boastful and proud, has the heart to forgive his brothers their wicked deed of selling him into slavery. The brothers have grown, becoming ready to make sacrifices for the well-being of those they love. The

▶▶ In Joseph we find a beautiful example of forgiveness: Joseph forgives his brothers for the extremely hostile and jealous act of selling him into slavery and abandoning him. Write about a person or group in our world who is in need of forgiveness. What was the wrongdoing? Describe any obstacles to forgiving. What could be the outcome of forgiveness in this situation? What might happen if forgiveness is withheld?





◀◀ Joseph's story is a tale of reconciliation and redemption.

whole family has developed from bitterness and hate to tender appreciation of one another.

### Happy Ending

So all ends happily. The brothers return home, fetch Jacob and his family, journey back to Egypt, and settle there. Jacob is rewarded for his sacrifice of Benjamin by seeing all his sons reunited. In his old age, Jacob adopts Joseph's two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim—which is why they are listed as two of the twelve tribes of Israel. When Jacob dies, Joseph takes his body back to Canaan for burial. Joseph also lives to an old age and makes his brothers swear that whenever their people return to the land of God's Promise, his bones will be taken there to be buried in the field

where Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob lie.

The stories of the patriarchs are all tales with happy endings—astonishingly so. Joseph's last request reveals, however, that the saga of ancient Israel is not over.

### Stories Jesus heard

The personalities in the stories of Joseph are so alive and believable and the events drawn in such detail that they seem to be eyewitness accounts. These are the tales that Jesus heard—tales told to him by Mary and Joseph, by the rabbi at the synagogue school, or on feast days at worship. The blood of Joseph and his family flowed in Jesus' veins, and he must have loved them with all his heart.



## For Review

- ▶▶ What do Joseph's brothers do to him as a young man, and why?
- ▶▶ How does Joseph gain the pharaoh's favor?
- ▶▶ How does Jacob become a hero?
- ▶▶ In what ways do Joseph and his brothers grow through the story?

## Nourished Spirits

Imagine how the Genesis stories must have bolstered the spirits of the exiled Israelites in Babylon. They could see in these stories the pattern of God's work: *God worked with simple, flawed human beings to bring about his Promise, that we would become a "light to the nations," the people through whom he will save the world. Our all-powerful God makes good happen, in spite of our sin and weakness.* This hopeful message reached the exiles, who needed to recognize God's loving hand at work in the midst of their tragic failure.

By the end of the Book of Genesis, the descendants of Jacob Israel are living in Egypt. The stage is set for telling the story of the greatest event in the unfolding of God's plan among the Israelites—the Exodus.

# FREEDOM

▼ Egyptian ruins along the Nile River



IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

## The Exodus and the Covenant of Sinai

### In This Chapter . . .

- THE EXODUS: FREED FROM SLAVERY
- THE COVENANT OF SINAI: AN OFFERING FROM GOD
- SEALING THE COVENANT
- MORE THAN MILES TO GO

Canaanites invent alphabet.



Egyptians expel Semitic rulers, the Hyksos.



Commercial trade grows in Mediterranean region, India, China.



Egyptian pharaoh forbids worship of all gods but sun god.



Moses leads Exodus from Egypt.



Sea peoples invade Egypt and Canaan.



1600

1500

1400

1300

1200

## Right at the Heart of the Old Testament,

the Book of Exodus proclaims the great truth that God freed the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob from oppression and slavery in Egypt, then formed them into a chosen nation, Israel, and created an everlasting bond with them through the Covenant of Sinai.

The Exodus stories, like those of Genesis and the other books of the Torah, were collected and edited into the Book of Exodus around the time of the Exile in Babylon (seven hundred or so years after the Exodus took place). These accounts were close to the hearts of the exilic and postexilic Jews for many reasons:

- At the beginning of the story of the Exodus, the Israelites were living as slaves in a foreign land, Egypt. The Jews of the Exile had a similar experience, living in Babylon as captive subjects of a mighty empire.
- The people of the Exodus struggled in a frightening and hostile wilderness. Similarly, the exiled Jews made a long, painful journey to Babylon, and back again to Judah some fifty years later.
- Most important for the Jews was God's Revelation to their ancestors in the wilderness. Through Moses the people of Israel discovered the identity of their God, and through the Covenant, they found their own identity as his people. Similarly, in Babylon, after repenting of their sins, the exiles rediscovered their true identity as God's beloved.

▼ Moses was found in a basket floating on the Nile River.

### The Exodus: Freed from Slavery

The Book of Exodus begins about four hundred and fifty years after the death of Joseph. The reigning pharaoh, or king, of Egypt, unlike the Semitic pharaohs of Joseph's time, hates and fears the people of Israel and orders them enslaved. Then comes the royal command: All Israelite males must be slain at birth.

### Young Moses

The story of **Moses** begins when his mother, to save her infant son from being slain by Pharaoh's orders, puts him in a basket and floats it on the Nile River, where he is discovered by Pharaoh's daughter. A little girl darts out of the reeds with the information that a Hebrew woman nearby could nurse the baby. The princess hires the woman to care for the child among the Hebrews until he is old enough to be returned to the royal household. Because the little girl is Moses' sister, **Miriam**, and the nursing woman is his mother, he grows up knowing that he is really an Israelite—although he is raised by Pharaoh's daughter as an Egyptian prince.

IMAGE: © TROLLEY DODGER/CORBIS



Reaching manhood, one day Moses sees an Egyptian slave driver beating a Hebrew. He is outraged at the injustice done to one of his own kinsfolk, so he attacks the slave driver, kills him, and buries his body in the sand. When he finds out the next day that the murder is known to others, Moses fears Pharaoh's anger and flees Egypt eastward to the land of the nomadic Midians. There he meets a priest, marries one of his daughters, and becomes a shepherd.

*Read Exodus 1:6–22, 2:1–15.*

### The Burning Bush: In the Presence of the Holy

Life goes on miserably for the Israelite slaves; one cruel pharaoh replaces another. Though the Israelites have forgotten about the God of their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, they cry out in agony. God is mindful of their suffering.

One day while tending sheep in Midian, Moses sees a strange sight—a bush aflame but not consumed. Drawing near, he hears God telling him to remove his sandals, for he is standing on holy ground. Moses is awed by the mysterious presence, then alarmed to hear the command that he return to Egypt and order **Pharaoh** to let the Israelites go. Moses protests that he is unsuited for such a task, but God insists. Again Moses protests: he does not know God's name. Who will he tell the people that their God is? God reveals the sacred name to be **Yahweh**—interpreted within the scriptural text as “I am who am” or “I am who I am.”

Once again Moses excuses himself: the people will not believe him. God gives him two miraculous signs by which to convince the people—or at least himself. Still Moses argues: he is slow of speech and tongue (perhaps having a speech impediment). Finally, God becomes angry and says that Moses' brother, **Aaron**, will accompany him and do the talking—but Moses is to go!

*Read Exodus 3:1–22, 4:1–17.*

### The name Yahweh

“I am who I am” might better be expressed as “I am the One who is always present.” For centuries people had believed that they were the slaves of the gods. A God who was not only supreme but also a constant and caring presence was a revolutionary idea.

►► Miriam and her mother risk their lives when they defy the pharaoh's orders, but Israel eventually is freed because they had the courage and ingenuity to save Moses' life. Write a one-page essay about someone you know whose courageous act brought about a change for the good. Include a picture of the person, if possible.

▼ Moses saw a fire that did not consume.

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK



▶▶ How does it feel to accept someone's help? Is that easy or difficult for you? Perhaps you have a task in front of you that you believe you cannot accomplish on your own. Is there a friend, a family member, a teacher, a neighbor, or someone else who can help you? Imagine a conversation you might have about this with such a person, and write it down.

▼ At the beginning of Exodus, the Israelites were in slavery in Egypt.

Scholars suggest that worship of the God named Yahweh was, in fact, unknown before the time of Moses. Although the early Israelites began to worship Yahweh within their own group, they did not necessarily see their people's God as the one and only God or as the God of all the nations. This belief came later on. The concerns of Moses' people probably did not extend much beyond their own families and tribes.

For Jews the name Yahweh stresses the unutterable mystery of God, and out of reverence they have preferred not to pronounce it. Instead they substitute titles such as Adonai, meaning "the Lord." Many Christian versions of the Bible have adopted the word *Lord* in their translations, meaning "divine sovereignty." This text will follow the same practice.

## "Let My People Go!"

In Egypt, Moses and Aaron give God's message to the Israelites, who exult because the Lord has seen their affliction. Yet Pharaoh, when told of God's command to "let my people go" (Exodus 5:1), is unmoved: Why should he heed a God of slaves? Isn't he, Pharaoh, a god also—son of the great god Ra? Besides, freeing his workforce would upset the system! Accusing Moses of luring the Israelites from their work, Pharaoh doubles their burden. The people cry out that Moses' promise of the Lord's protection has not freed them but only increased their sufferings. They want no more to do with the Lord. Now God promises to take action.

*Read Exodus 4:27–31, 5:1–23, 6:1.*

## The forgotten God

Notice that the Israelites have to be convinced of God's presence by miracles. They have been in Egypt for over four hundred years, and they no longer know their God. Yet God knows them.

## Pharaoh: Plagued by Plagues

Moses and Aaron return to Pharaoh and repeat their demand, Pharaoh ignores them, and then the ten plagues begin. Water turns to blood, frogs overrun the land, and gnats and flies torment the Egyptians. Sickness afflicts their cattle, boils plague the people, hail destroys the crops, and locusts eat what is left. Darkness covers the land, and Moses proclaims the final plague—death for



IMAGE: © BETTMANN/CORBIS

the firstborn of Egypt. Now Pharaoh will beg them to leave, Moses says—but Pharaoh is still adamant.

*Read Exodus 6:28–30, 7:1–25, 8:1–11, 11:1–10.*

### Pharaoh’s hardened heart

Pharaoh’s performance reads like that of a character in a TV soap opera. Note the following passages in Exodus:

- Pharaoh’s arrogance in 7:22–23
- his bargaining and going back on his word in 8:4–15
- his wavering in 8:21–28
- his pretended repentance in 9:27–28
- his craftiness in 9:33–35
- his ransom plan in 10:8–11
- his hypocrisy in 10:16

Did God harden Pharaoh’s heart, or was he naturally stubborn? The Scriptures say both things, ten times each, and both may be true. The human heart is hardened by flinging itself against the will of the loving God, and proud, powerful rulers do not give in easily, especially to slaves. The God of the lowly Israelites was in Pharaoh’s way.

### Preparation for the Passover

God gives Moses instructions in preparation for the journey out of Egypt. Every family is to slay and roast a yearling lamb or kid, eat it with unleavened bread—a yeast dough would take too long to rise—and be ready to leave. Then they are



IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

◀ In the Gospel of John, the Last Supper of Jesus was a Jewish Passover seder.

▶ Consider the “unutterable mystery of God.” Describe in writing one aspect of God that you think you understand. How have you come to know that about him? Find or create a picture or other artwork that represents to you the mystery of God.



▶ The people of Israel no longer knew their God. But God knew them. No matter how long we stay away from God, even if it is so long that we forget who he is, God never forgets us. Find a song or a poem that speaks of his abiding presence to us and bring it to class.



▼ A family in Israel celebrates the Passover seder.

to smear the top and posts of their doorway with the blood of the lamb so that the angel of God will *pass over* their home when striking down the firstborn of Egypt. The Israelites are to celebrate this meal every year as a perpetual reminder of the **Pesach**, or **Passover**.

*Read Exodus 12:1–14.*

### Jesus’ Last Supper

The memorial meal of the Israelites became the Passover **seder**, or ritual meal, of the Jewish People. The **Last Supper**, Jesus’ meal with his disciples the night before he died, was a seder. Jesus used the language, food, and ritual of the Passover to help his disciples understand



IMAGE: © RICHARD T. NOWITZ/COBIS