

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

OVERVIEW

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Introduction

This Bible study series was first prepared in 2005 by Dr Paul B Coulter, and has since been revised to the current edition. It was originally designed to introduce students and scholars from mainland China to the message of the Bible in a format that is culturally relevant to them, but can be used with any group of people who have little background knowledge of the Bible or Christian faith. It begins with God and His creation, centres on Christ the promised Saviour, and ends with the challenge to be a follower of Jesus in the 21st Century. The author's prayer is that through following this series you may grow in your knowledge about God, but also that through this process you will come to seek Him and to know Him as more than a distant, unknown creator. I hope that you may know and trust Him as the One who saves, leads and keeps you.

So, you see, it is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to Him must believe that there is a God and that He rewards those who sincerely seek Him

Hebrews Chapter 11 verse 6

Layout of studies

These studies are divided into three modules covering three major sections of the Bible and the story of God's plan for human beings. The studies assume that God exists and that the Bible contains His revelation of Himself to us. Each of the three modules contains eight studies accompanied by a section of *Study Aids* which are designed to give greater historical or factual detail for students who wish to take their studies of the Bible further. The materials are in English, but a glossary of difficult words with Chinese translations can be found in the *Appendix*. Pages in each module and the *Study Aids* sections are numbered as follows:

- *Overview* pages numbered 0.0, 0.1, 0.2 etc.
- *Module 1 – Old Testament* pages numbered 1.0, 1.1, 1.3 etc.
- *Module 1 – Old Testament, Study Aids* pages numbered 1S.0, 1S.1, 1S.2 etc.
- *Module 2 – Jesus* pages numbered 2.0, 2.1, 2.3 etc.
- *Module 2 – Jesus, Study Aids* pages numbered 2S.0, 2S.1, 2S.2 etc.
- *Module 3 – New Testament* pages numbered 3.0, 3.1, 3.3 etc.
- *Module 3 – New Testament, Study Aids* pages numbered 3S.0, 3S.1, 3S.2 etc.
- *Appendix* pages numbered X.0, X.1, X.2 etc.

Finding your way around the Bible

The Bible contains 66 books, and is separated into two sections – the Old Testament (39 books) and the New Testament (27 books). The Bible was originally written in Hebrew and Aramaic (the Old Testament) and in Greek (the New Testament), and editions of the Bible in any other language are, therefore, translations. In English there are many different translations of the Bible, and some of these are more accurate than others, while some use more formal English than others. Quotations in these studies have been based on the *New Living Translation*, published by Tyndale House Publishers, because the author believes that in most places it strikes a good balance between accuracy to the original meaning and ease of understanding for people whose first language is not English. Other excellent English Bible translations which may be useful, especially to readers with a good standard of English, include the *New International Version* (© 1973, 1978, 1984, International Bible Society) and the *English Standard Version* (© 2001, Crossway Bibles). The author would also recommend that students whose first language is not English obtain a Bible in their own language so that they can learn Biblical terms in their heart language.

When you are new to the Bible it can be difficult to find your way around it – the names of people and places are mainly from Hebrew or Greek, and often the names of people are unfamiliar as they are no longer commonly used today. The studies in this book are based mainly on a limited number of Bible books, so you might become familiar with finding these books as you study the series. If you are not sure where to find a particular Bible book, you can look up the index of Bible books at the beginning of your Bible. All Bible books have been divided into Chapters which are subdivided into verses to make it easier to find particular references. A typical Bible reference would be:

Book (Chapter):(verse) – for example, John 11:35

This reference directs us to the book of John, Chapter 11 and verse 35. This is the shortest verse in the Bible – it simply says "*Then Jesus wept*". Based on this knowledge and using the index of books at the front of your Bible you can soon find your way to any passage referred to in the studies.

Overview of Series

Module 1: The Old Testament

This eight-part series examines the message of the Old Testament, beginning with the Creation of the universe by God and the rejection by man of God's rule, then following the story of God's covenant relationship with the people of Israel.

Part 1	The Kingdom of God	Page 1.1
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Part 3	Judgement and Grace, Sacrifice and Covenant	Page 1.5
Part 4	The Old Covenant 1 – God's people	Page 1.7
Part 5	The Old Covenant 2 – God's rule	Page 1.9
Part 6	The Old Covenant 3 – God's land	Page 1.11
Part 7	God Speaks to His People	Page 1.13
Part 8	Exile and Return to the Land	Page 1.15

Suggested movie finale: *The Jesus Film* (www.jesustfilm.org)

Module 2: The Life of Jesus

This eight-part series examines the birth, life, teaching, miracles, death and resurrection of Jesus. It introduces us to who He claimed to be and how others reacted to Him, and challenges us to respond to Him.

Part 9	The Silence is Broken	Page 2.1
Part 10	The Birth of Jesus	Page 2.3
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Part 13	The Message of Jesus	Page 2.9
Part 14	Responses to Jesus	Page 2.11
Part 15	One Week in Jerusalem	Page 2.13
Part 16	Resurrection and Ascension	Page 2.15

Suggested movie finale: *The Passion of the Christ*

Module 3: The New Testament

This eight-part series follows the spread of the gospel message from Jerusalem across the world including China. It combines studies in the lives of two of Jesus' apostles and examinations of important New Testament teachings, as well as helping us to understand what it means to be a Christian in the 21st century.

Part 17	Simon Peter's Journey of Faith	Page 3.1
Part 18	Acts - the story of the Early Church	Page 3.3
Part 19	Paul's Journey of Faith	Page 3.5
Part 20	The New Covenant	Page 3.7
Part 21	The Church	Page 3.9
Part 22	Church History and Present	Page 3.11
Part 23	The End of the Ages	Page 3.13
Part 24	Living as a Christian	Page 3.15

Suggested movie finale: *Video of testimonies of believers from country of students*

The Kingdom of God

God's great desire is to have a group of people who will be His own people in His Kingdom. The Kingdom of God can be defined simply as: **God's people in God's place under God's rule**. God's rule is exercised through the authority of His word:

- ⇒ **Sin** is rebellion against God's rule marked by disobedience to His word.
- ⇒ **Faith** is submission to God's rule marked by obedience to His word

God's rule always brings blessings (good things) for His people

1. Creation – the Kingdom established

- God is King over the universe He creates by the power of His word (Genesis 1:1-25; Psalm 93:1&2)
- God created man in His own image to rule over the earth under Him (Genesis 1:26-31)
- God gave man freedom within the limits of obedience to Him (Genesis 2:15-17)
- There was harmony between mankind and God, man and woman, and mankind and the earth

God established His perfect Kingdom with mankind on a perfect earth

2. The Fall – the Kingdom rejected

- The snake (Satan) tempted the woman by twisting and then denying God's word (Genesis 3:1-5)
- Man and woman rejected God as their King and chose to live their own way – this is sin (Genesis 3:6)
- Sin led to shame and an unsuccessful attempt to hide from God, but God remains as King (Genesis 3:7-11)
- Man's harmony with God, one another, and the earth was broken – death rules (Genesis 3:12-24)

Adam and Eve reject God's rule, and so God's Kingdom on earth was spoilt

3. The Flood – the Kingdom promised

- Sin increased so much on earth that God decided to judge by destroying all life (Genesis 6:1-7)
- God judged the world through the Flood, but saved Noah who was living by faith (Genesis 6:8-22)
- God established a covenant with Noah and all creation (Genesis 9:1-17)
- Noah's family were God's people in God's earth under His rule, but not for long (Babel – Genesis 11:1-9)

God did not destroy the earth – He promised to renew His Kingdom with human beings

4. The Old Covenant – the Kingdom pre-figured

- **Abraham** – God promised to make a great nation from Abraham whose descendants would live in Canaan and would bring His blessings to all nations (Genesis 17:1-22) – Abraham lives by faith in God's word (Genesis 15:6)
- **Moses** – God gave Moses His Law – it showed the people their sin and their need of a sacrifice to bring forgiveness (Exodus 2:24; 6:2-8; 24) – through the Law God would rule over His people by His word
- **David** – God gave David a promise that His descendants would be kings forever on His throne (II Samuel 7:12-16)
- The Old Covenant failed because of sin: no king could fully obey God and no sacrifice could fully pay for sin
- The prophets pointed forward to a coming Saviour for all nations and a New Covenant God would make

God chose one nation to be His special people – He gave them the pattern for His Kingdom

5. Jesus – the Kingdom present

- John the Baptist called people to repent because the Kingdom of God was at hand (Matthew 3:2)
- Jesus taught about God's Kingdom and performed miracles to authenticate it (Mark 1:15)
- Jesus died for sins and rose from the dead, proving that He is really God the King (I Corinthians 15:3&4)
- **Jesus fulfilled the Old Covenant**: He was the perfect sacrifice for sins because He was human but sinless and He was the King who was descended from David who reigns through His word
- **Jesus declared the beginning of a New Covenant** sealed with His blood (Luke 22:20)

Jesus, the promised King, came into the world – He declared that the Kingdom was present

6. The Church – the Kingdom proclaimed

- The church spread the good news about Jesus (Matthew 28:19&20)
- The apostles continued to proclaim the Kingdom of God (Acts 28:31)
- In the New Covenant there is forgiveness for sins and the indwelling Holy Spirit – we are changed from the inside out – becoming a new person so that we can do the good things God wants us to do (Hebrews 8:7-13)

Christians proclaim the good news that God's Kingdom can be entered through Jesus

7. The New Creation – the Kingdom fulfilled

- The Old and New Testaments look forward to a new, perfect creation (Isaiah 65:17; II Peter 3:13)
- Christ will return as King to bring in this New Creation – He will judge all people (II Timothy 4:1)
- In the New Creation, sin, the curse on the earth and death will be no more (Revelation 21-22)
- There will be harmony between man and God, man and woman, and man and the earth

God will fulfil His Kingdom in a perfect new creation where His people will live forever

We must respond to this message by recognising God as the true King over our lives. We must:

Turn away from our sin and **Trust** in Jesus as the only One who can save us (Mark 1:15)

The Kingdom of God throughout the Bible

God's people living in God's place under His rule enjoying His blessings

	CREATION	THE FALL	THE FLOOD	THE OLD COVENANT	JESUS	THE CHURCH	THE NEW CREATION
Bible Section	Genesis 1-2	Genesis 3-4	Genesis 5-10	Genesis 11- Malachi	Matthew – John	Acts - Jude	Revelation
The Kingdom of God ...	Established	<i>Rejected [sin]</i>	Promised	Pre-figured	Present	Proclaimed	Fulfilled
God's People	Adam and Eve	<i>No-one</i>	Noah	The Israelites (descendants of Abraham)	Jesus Christ and those who followed Him	All Christians united in Christ	Multi-national family of God
God's Place (God with His people)	The Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:15)	<i>Excluded from the Garden (Genesis 3:24)</i>	The Ark (Noah's boat) (Genesis 7:1)	The land of Canaan & the Temple in Jerusalem (Genesis 17:7&8)	Jesus Christ – God present on earth (Matthew 1:23; John 1:14)	The individual Christian & the church (I Corinthians 6:19; Ephesians 2:21)	New earth, new Jerusalem, new Temple (Revelation 21:1-4, 22-27)
God's Rule	God's word – not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil	<i>Disobedience</i>	Obedience to God's word – to build the Ark	God's Law given through Moses Later the rule of the Kings	The teaching of Jesus	Christ the head of the Church	Throne of God and the Lamb (Jesus)
The Blessing	Perfect relationships: 1. With God 2. With others 3. With the earth (Genesis 1:31)	<i>Curse, not blessing – relationships spoiled (Genesis 3:14-19)</i>	Saved in the Ark – new promises (Genesis 9:1-17)	To live in a land of great blessing (Leviticus 20:24)	Eternal life (John 5:24)	New Covenant: 1. God's people 2. Indwelling Holy Spirit 3. Sins Forgiven (Hebrews 8:7-13)	Perfect relationships restored (Revelation 22:1-5)

Is the Bible Reliable?

The Bible's uniqueness

The Bible is a unique book for several reasons:

- **Continuity:** The Bible contains 66 books written over a period of 1500 years by over 40 different writers (including kings, peasants, philosophers, fishermen, statesmen and scholars) in different locations and cultures using three different languages (Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek) and in different emotional moods (from misery and depression to joy and thanksgiving), yet the whole book has a tremendous continuity and tells one story – of the God's plans for mankind.
- **Circulation:** The Bible is the number one best seller of all time. It has been translated into more languages than any other book, and was the first major book ever to be printed in the West.
- **Survival:** Through many different periods of history the Bible has faced opposition and criticism but it has survived and is still read today by millions of people across the world.
- **Content:** The Bible contains amazing prophecies, and is one of the best available sources for studying ancient history. The lives of the people we read about in the Bible can easily be related to our own experiences, and there is great honesty about the weaknesses of the authors. Some of the teachings recorded in the Bible are among the most radical the world has ever heard.
- **Influence:** No other book has been more quoted in the literature of the Western world and the Old Testament laws have shaped our modern legal system. More importantly, millions of people worldwide say that the Bible has transformed their lives.

How we got our Bible

People often ask the question: who decided which books should be included in the Bible? How did we end up with the 66 books that are recognised as forming the Bible?

A] The Old Testament (OT)

The Old Testament is the first part of the Bible (containing 39 books), and is recognised as God's word by Jews as well as Christians. These books were written down by Jewish people who trusted God and were preserved within the Israelite nation by faithful Jews. Copies of the individual books were made and distributed, with scrolls containing whole copies of many of them being kept in each Jewish meeting place (synagogue). After AD 70, when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans, a group of leading Jewish scholars met to confirm which books were already generally accepted as being inspired by God. They produced a list identical to our Old Testament except in a different order. Jesus recognised the Old Testament as God's word, including the three major divisions of the Old Testament: Law, Psalms and Prophets (see Luke 24:44, Luke 11:51). The New Testament writers also repeatedly claim that the Old Testament is historically accurate and the word of God (see for example Matthew 21:42, 22:29, 26:54, 56; Luke 24; John 5:39, 7:38, 10:35; Acts 17:2, 11, 18:28; Romans 1:2, 4:3, 9:17, 10:11, 11:2, 15:4, 16:26; I Corinthians 15:3&4; Galatians 3:8, 22, 4:30; I Timothy 5:18; II Timothy 3:16; II Peter 1:20, 21, 3:16).

B] The New Testament (NT)

The New Testament is the second section of the Bible (containing 27 books), and is also accepted by Christians as God's word. The New Testament books were first listed by a group of Church leaders at a meeting called the Synod of Hippo in AD 393, but this was only a confirmation of those books that met two criteria:

- They were written by the apostles or people in their circle of authority.* The primary principle for including these books was that they were written by apostles of Christ who knew Him and followed Him closely and had been given authority by Him. The exception to this rule is Paul, who did not know Christ during His life on earth but is described as an apostle in the NT. Peter confirmed the status of Paul's writings as being Scripture equal to the OT in authority (II Peter 3:16).
- They had already been widely accepted throughout the Church as God's word.* As one scholar, Donald Guthrie, writes, "*The content of the Canon was determined by general usage, not by authoritarian pronouncement.*"

Did the New Testament authors record the faith accurately?

If we are to accept the New Testament as a reliable record of the Christian faith we must know that the people who wrote it were in a position to know what the early Christian faith was. We have two types of evidence to support the claim that they did record the faith and the historical events it is based on accurately:

Internal evidence (evidence in the New Testament itself):

- **John** (writer of John's Gospel, Revelation and the three letters I, II and III John) and **Peter** (writer of the letters I and I Peter) were both eyewitnesses of the things they wrote about (see John 19:35, II Peter 1:16, I John 1:3)
- **Matthew** (writer of Matthew's Gospel) was also one of the twelve closest followers of Jesus
- When writing his Gospel, **Luke** interviewed eyewitnesses and investigated the details of the events he recorded (see Luke 1:1-4). He also wrote the book of Acts and was an eyewitness to many of the events recorded in it.
- Peter was able to challenge the Jews on the Day of Pentecost by saying, "*As you yourselves know*" (Acts 2:22). In other words, many of these people (who were not Christians) had been eyewitnesses to the life and ministry of Jesus – if anything Peter said was false they could easily have challenged him.
- Another fact that suggests that the Gospels are accurate records is the honesty of their record about the failings of the apostles (especially Peter, who was their leader) and their in-fighting. There is no attempt to glorify them at all. The Gospels are also very frank about Jesus' own pain and mental anguish, and about the rejection He faced from many people – some of whom even said He was mad! If the books were written at a later date to strengthen the leadership of the Church or to make Jesus seem very powerful they would not have included such honest descriptions.

External evidence (evidence from other writers):

- **Papias of Hierapolis** (AD 130) was a friend of the apostle John, and said that Mark in his Gospel recorded Peter's record of the life of Jesus.
- **Ireneus of Lyons** (AD 180) was a student of **Polycarp of Smyrna**, who himself was a disciple of the apostle John. He tells us that Matthew wrote his gospel very early (around AD 63), Mark wrote down Peter's teaching and John wrote his Gospel in Ephesus.
- Other external evidence includes archaeological details in the Old Testament and New Testament records that have since been proven to be accurate, the cultural and geographical detail of the records, the fulfilment of certain OT prophecies and other early writings of Jews and Gentiles. We shall deal with each of these briefly below.

Has the Bible been accurately preserved?

If we are to accept the Bible as a trustworthy account we must know not only that the authors accurately recorded what happened and what Jesus taught, but that the Bible we have today has not changed significantly since it was first written. We will consider the Old and New Testaments separately:

Old Testament (OT)

The OT was completed by around 400 BC. Before the 1950s, the oldest complete Hebrew manuscript of the OT was from 900 AD (1300 years after completion). This does not necessarily imply that this manuscript was not accurate, as the Jewish tradition of copying the scriptures followed very strict rules designed to ensure that there were no errors, with a very high respect for what was being copied. However, when the *Dead Sea Scrolls* were found in a cave near the Dead Sea by a Palestinian shepherd boy in the 1950s, two complete copies of the book of Isaiah which were dated to 1000 years before the previous oldest known copy were among the scrolls. When these were compared with the previous oldest manuscript they were over 95% identical, with the other 5% being mainly due to obvious slips of the pen or variations in spelling. Taking Isaiah chapter 53 as an example:

- Of 166 words in the chapter only 17 letters were different
- 10 of these were spelling differences only and 4 were stylistic changes
- The other 3 form the word "*light*" which had been added in verse 11
- In other words, there was actually only one word out of 166 in question, and it does not change the meaning of the verse or Chapter!

These amazing statistics prove just how accurate the scribes who copied the OT throughout the years were, and suggest that our present OT is an authentic representation of the original writings.

New Testament (NT)

The NT was completed by around 100 AD. We have over 5300 Greek manuscripts of the NT, over 10,000 Latin manuscripts and 9,300 other early versions, equalling a total of over 24,000 manuscripts. The earliest copies of whole NT books are from the 4th Century (250-300 years after they were written) and the earliest fragment is from 125 AD (25 years after completion). Comparing all of these manuscripts, only 40 lines of the NT are seriously debated (none of which cast doubt on major doctrines) – that is only 0.5% of the NT. We can compare this with the Greek classic story, the Iliad, which was written by Homer in around 900 BC.

There are 643 surviving manuscripts, the earliest of which is from 400 BC, 500 years after writing. 764 lines of the Iliad are in question – that is 5% of it.

Other ancient writings fall well behind this;

Caesar's Gallic Wars	earliest copy 1000 years after written	10 copies
Plato's Tetralogies	earliest copy 1200 years after written	7 copies
Greek historian, Herodotus	earliest copy 1300 years after written	8 copies
Greek playwright Sophocles	earliest copy 1400 years after written	193 copies

No one seriously doubts the authenticity of the Iliad or these other ancient works, so why should they doubt that the NT we have today is the authentic NT as originally written, since the body of manuscripts is so much bigger and stronger. In addition to this evidence, Sir David Dalrymple found that all but 11 verses of the NT are quoted in the writings of the early Church leaders who lived in the 2nd and 3rd Centuries AD.

Old Testament prophecies fulfilled in history

The fulfilment of prophecies made many years before the events happened is one of the most powerful proofs that the Bible is a special book and deserves to be accepted as the word of God. The following are just three examples:

- 1) **Isaiah 44:28, 54:1** – Isaiah, writing in BC 700, named Cyrus as the king who would allow the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. When Isaiah was writing the Temple hadn't even been destroyed yet – it was destroyed by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar in BC 586, and it was not until some time after BC 539 that Persian King Cyrus gave a decree to rebuild it (160 years after Isaiah) just as Isaiah had predicted.
- 2) **Daniel 9:24-27** – see *Understanding Christianity Part 7* for a detailed examination.
- 3) **Prophecies about the destruction of several cities** – for example, in Ezekiel chapter 26 (written 592-570 BC) seven specific predictions about the future of Tyre are recorded. Every one was fulfilled exactly by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon (573 BC) and Alexander the Great of Macedonia (332 BC). The probability of this happening by chance has been calculated as 1:75,000,000.

The Jewish people

The Jewish nation has retained its identity more distinctly than any other nation over a longer period of time despite being scattered across many different countries and facing the greatest persecution. This is just as the OT predicted and promised. In addition, the Jews have made huge contributions to human society far beyond their numbers. If we think of the leading or pioneering thinkers in many disciplines we will find many Jews among them, and in commerce they have also contributed hugely to the development of society. The Jewish people are one of the greatest proofs that the Bible is worth reading, since it helps us to understand their history and why they are so successful

Accurate Cultural Details

The Gospels are full of references to, and inferences from, cultural practices of Jewish society in the 1st Century AD. These details are so accurate when compared with other sources and current Jewish culture that it is difficult to believe that anyone at a later date not living within that culture could have written so convincingly.

Archaeological evidence for Old Testament

Many people have dismissed the OT on the basis of references to cities, people or nations whose names have never been found outside the Bible text or because of details that seem to contraindicate the archaeological record. Over time, however, as more archaeological evidence has been unearthed it is amazing just how many of these objections have been dismissed. The following are just a few examples:

Could Moses write? Archaeologists once claimed that the first five books of the OT couldn't have been written by Moses as writing hadn't been invented in Moses' day. They have since discovered written records of ancient laws written at least 300 years before Moses!

The Hittites: The OT describes this nation living in the Ancient Middle East around the time of Abraham. Archaeologists once claimed there had never been any such nation, but later finds have revealed hundreds of references to a Hittite civilisation lasting for over 1200 years!

David's conquest of Jerusalem: II Samuel 5:6-10 and I Chronicles 11:6 tell us how David conquered the city of Jerusalem from the Jebusites using the water supply. Excavations in the city have unearthed an

ancient tunnel bringing water from a spring outside the city walls to a point inside the city. It was through this tunnel that Joab and David's men captured the city.

Daniel: This OT book is full of detail about ancient Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar. These details are in perfect keeping with the archaeological evidence, and it is hard to believe that any later writer could have painted such an accurate picture.

The cities of the plain: The existence of these five cities mentioned in Genesis chapter 14 was denied by many archaeologists until tablets were found in northern Syria at the site of the ancient city of Ebla that contained written references to them.

Patriarchal Culture: The culture of the time of Abraham as described in Genesis (especially customs of marriage and death) is very similar to that recorded on various tablets found in several locations in the Middle East.

Camels: Some archaeologists claimed that the camel had not been domesticated as long ago as the Genesis stories of Abraham. However, texts from ancient Sumeria talk about drinking camel's milk, which would be quite difficult if they weren't domesticated!

Isn't the Bible full of contradictions?

People often make this claim, but when asked to point out even one of these contradictions they aren't able to. It is often a defence offered by people who have never read the Bible when confronted with some of the Bible's more challenging claims. There are some passages in the Bible which seem at first glance to be contradictory, but with further thought or investigation it becomes clear that there is not necessarily any contradiction. This is particularly true of the four Gospels, which often record the same event from different perspectives or record similar but distinct events in the life of Jesus. The differences between these records do not imply inaccuracy or fabrication, but actually complement each other to build a more accurate and clearer record of the life of Christ as seen through four different pairs of eyes, just as four different biographies about one celebrity could be quite different but all true. Other apparent contradictions can be dismissed if we understand the original Greek or Hebrew version of the text. The apparent differences appear because of inaccurate or difficult translations into English. Still others are due to a poor understanding of the culture or literary style in which the Bible was written.

Evidence for New Testament from early Jewish writers

A) Rabbinical Writings

The writings of early Jewish Rabbis (teachers) who followed on from the teaching of the Pharisees include references to Christ. To quote the late Professor FF Bruce, they tell us that:

Jesus of Nazareth was a transgressor in Israel, who practised magic, scorned the words of the wise, led the people astray, and claimed that He had not come to destroy the Law but to add to it. He was hanged on Passover Eve for heresy and misleading the people. His disciples, of whom five are named, healed the sick in his name. It is clear that this is just such a portrayal as we might expect from those elements in the Pharisaic party which were opposed to Him.

B) Flavius Josephus

Josephus was a Jewish historian born around 37 AD into a priestly family. He became a Pharisee and later wrote histories of the Jewish people. His writings mention many of the same characters we read about in the NT, including the Herods, Roman Emperors, Quirinius (governor of Syria), Pilate, Felix and Festus (procurators of Judaea), the high priests Annas and Caiaphas and the Sadducees and Pharisees. He confirms several historical references in the NT, for example the sudden death of Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:19-23), the rebellion of Judas the Galilean (Acts 5:37) and the famine in the time of Claudius (Acts 11:28). Josephus also mentions John the Baptist and James, the brother of Jesus, but the most startling passage in his writings reads as follows:

And there arose about this time a source of new troubles, one Jesus, a wise man. He was a doer of marvellous deeds, a teacher of men who receive strange things with pleasure. He led away many Jews, and also many of the Greeks. This man was the so-called Christ. And when Pilate had condemned him to the cross on his impeachment by the chief men among us, those who had loved him at first did not cease; for he appeared to them, as they said, on the third day alive again, the divine prophets having spoken these and thousands of other wonderful things about him: and even now the tribe of Christians, so named after him, has not yet died out.

This passage is startling, especially remembering that Josephus was a Jew and had nothing to gain from falsely supporting the early Christian claims about Jesus.

Evidence for New Testament from early non-Jewish writers

1. **Thallus** (writing c. 52 AD) – Julius Africanus (writing in 221 AD) quotes from Thallus's explanation that the darkness that covered the land during Christ's resurrection was due to an eclipse of the sun (an explanation that Africanus did not accept as reasonable). Unfortunately, the writings of Thallus have been lost, but this quote makes it clear that people in Rome knew about the Christian story as early as 52 AD.
2. **Cornelius Tacitus** (writing c. 113 AD) – described how the Roman Emperor Nero blamed the "Christians" for causing the great fire that destroyed Rome in 64 AD to remove attention from himself after a rumour suggested that he had started it. Tacitus says that, "*Christus, from whom they got their name, had been executed by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate when Tiberius was Emperor ...*"
3. **Suetonius** (writing c. 120 AD) – again confirmed persecution of "*Christians, a class of men addicted to a novel and mischievous superstition,*" by Nero.
4. **Pliny the Younger** (writing c. 112 AD) – this Roman governor of Bithynia (in the province of Asia Minor – modern day Turkey) wrote a letter to the Emperor Trajan asking for advice on how to deal with Christians.

Unfortunately many other records that may have given more evidence of early Christianity (for example, Pilate's official records) are no longer available to us. There are also early references to three high class Romans, including the Emperor Domitian's cousin and his wife, who were persecuted for following a "foreign superstition." Evidence from early Christian cemeteries in Rome suggests that they may have been Christians.

Conclusion

No one could ever prove by argument that the Bible is God's word to mankind – to believe that is a matter of faith based on a personal decision, as is the belief that it is not His word. However, as we have seen, the Bible is special and it is reliable as a historical text. Understanding this is only the beginning to taking the Bible seriously. You must still read the Bible for yourself – to consider its claims and to make your own decision about them. One thing you should not do is to simply ignore the Bible. The evidence presented here should at least enable you to see that the Bible is not a book of myths (stories made up to teach important truths), but a historically accurate record of events. The question is what these events mean for you.

HOW TO READ THE BIBLE

The Bible is a collection of 66 books, yet it forms one book with a story (the story of God's relationship with mankind) that develops over time. There are three key principles that apply to reading any part of the Bible:

- A – Ask God** to help you to understand and live it. The Holy Spirit inspired the Bible, and He can help you to understand it and to live it out in your life. The Bible was not written to give us a lot of theoretical knowledge but to teach us how to know God and to live for Him.
- B – Be thoughtful** as you read. Take time to think over the meaning and meditate on it.
- C – Context is vital** to understanding Scripture. Think of the historical and cultural context, and also the context of each verse in the section, book, and whole Bible. When you find one part of the Bible difficult to understand let what you have learned from other parts help you to get the true meaning. Remember that the whole Bible is God's word and tells one story.

In addition to these principles we must learn how to read the different kinds of literature in the Bible. The 66 books that form the Bible vary greatly in style because they were written using different types of literature. We are familiar with this in our own experience – just think about the difference between how you read a love letter, a novel, a textbook or a poem. Although the content of all four might be true they will be written in very different styles, and if you are going to get the message you will have to learn how to read that particular type of literature. If you read a poem literally you will be confused, as it is likely to use figurative language, and if you read a love letter like a textbook it will not have the intended effect on you of making you respond in love to the writer. The Bible contains several main types of literature, and you will find some helpful advice below about how to read each of these effectively:

1. Narrative (History)

These parts of the Bible record stories about people and events. They include over 40% of the Old Testament (Genesis, much of Exodus and Numbers, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, I & II Samuel, I & II Kings, I & II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and parts of the prophets including large parts of Daniel) and also the book of Acts in the New Testament. Key principles for reading these parts of the Bible include:

- Remember that it is historical – these books are not written as history books, but they do claim to be historically accurate, they are not myths or made up stories
- The stories are primarily intended to show us God's plan in working with people and to teach us what God is like, rather than as examples to us (however, we can learn a lot either positively or negatively from the examples of the people in the story)
- The stories record what actually happened, not what should have happened, so we should not always look for a moral (a teaching point for what we should do) in the story
- The stories do not aim to tell us everything that happened – they are interested in telling us the important things so that we can see how God worked through that situation
- We should be careful not to read the stories as allegories (in other words reflecting another meaning that is not in the text), but to try to understand the clear meaning of the text. However, some parts of Old Testament narrative have a typological significance – in other words, they point forward to Christ through example.

2. Law

These parts record the Law of God given to Israel by God, and include large parts of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Key principles for reading these parts of the Bible are:

- We should not read them as God's direct words to us, since they were given to the people of Israel and many parts no longer apply to Christians. Only those parts specifically renewed in the New Testament are binding on Christians (see *Part 13*).
- The Law can teach us a great deal about God – His holiness, justice, love and mercy (protecting innocent people) – and about ourselves – our sinfulness and need of a perfect sacrifice to receive forgiveness.
- The Old Testament Law centred on the principles of loving God with our entire being and loving others as we love ourselves – this was how Jesus summarised it – and these two cannot be separated. The core issue in sin is wrong worship, but this shows itself in wrong actions towards others.

3. Poetry

These parts of the Bible are poems or songs written to describe the experience of God's people or to praise Him. The key poetry book is the book of Psalms (a psalm is a kind of song intended for use in prayer and praise), but there is also some poetry in some of the prophetic and narrative books, and Song of Songs is a poetry book. Key principles for reading poetry are:

- Psalms include a range of emotional conditions and can be used to understand what a relationship with God looks like as well as what He is like. We can use psalms for three key purposes:

- a) As a guide to worship – they can teach us how to pray and sing praise
- b) As a guide to an honest relationship with God – the psalms show us that we can tell God exactly what we think and how we feel, even if it is not right
- c) As a reminder to reflect and meditate on what God has done and who He is
- Hebrew poetry does not rhyme, but uses parallels and repeated ideas for emphasis.
- We must be careful not to take individual verses out of the context of the whole psalm.
- Psalms may also contain prophecies about Christ.

4. Wisdom

The wisdom parts of the Old Testament include Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job as well as a few psalms. These books are intended to teach us how to make godly choices in life. Some important principles for reading the Wisdom books are:

- To understand a wisdom saying we must understand the terms used in it correctly (e.g. “fool” in Proverbs means someone who ignores God, not someone with a low intelligence).
- Wisdom statements tell us what should be, not always what actually is, the case. Often two extremes are presented in a wisdom statement, giving us a principle that we have to apply wisely in our decisions. These statements preserve the ideals and force us to make a choice.
- Wisdom teaches us firstly that God has created the Universe with moral order and that everything we do has consequences, with God ultimately in control, but secondly it also gives us skills for life.

5. Prophecy

This type of literature includes 16 Old Testament books (from Isaiah to Malachi) and the book of Revelation in the New Testament. The prophets were God’s spokespeople to the nation of Israel. These books record prophecies or visions given to the prophets by God for His people (some of the Old Testament books also include narrative portions telling about the prophet’s ministry – in the case of Jonah, virtually the whole book is narrative!) Some important principles for reading prophecy are:

- The words of the prophets are the words of God – He literally gave His words to them to proclaim to the people.
- The Old Testament prophets’ role was primarily to call the people back to obedience to the Old Covenant.
- Many of the Old Testament prophets also saw forward to the New Covenant and the Messiah. Sometimes they were not even aware of this, and the prophecies about the future can seem to merge with the prophecies about the immediate situation.
- Some parts of the prophets (e.g. Ezekiel or Revelation) are highly figurative and cannot be taken literally. However, the underlying reality they picture is true.
- The prophets only had incomplete glimpses of God’s overall plan – none of them claimed to record every detail of how God would work, and the ultimate hope of the Messiah and the New Heaven and New Earth was only seen partially by them.

6. Gospels

Four books in the New Testament are called Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. In fact these books are “*The gospel according to*” each of the four authors. They tell one story, the good news about Jesus, from four different perspectives. The books are written to record the life and teaching of Jesus in the context of leading up to the central focus on His death and resurrection. For more comment about the four Gospels see *The Life of Jesus Study Aids*.

7. Epistles (letters)

These books (from Romans to Jude in the New Testament) are letters written by apostles to individuals and churches to encourage and challenge them and to teach them the truth and correct wrong perceptions of the Christian message. Key principles for reading these letters are:

- As with any letter it is helpful to understand who is writing, who they are writing to and what caused them to write. We can usually see these three things by reading the letter carefully.
- To understand the letter correctly it is also helpful to ask what questions might have been in the minds of the readers causing the writer to give these answers (this is especially true for a book like I Corinthians which was written in reply to questions this church had asked).
- The apostles who wrote these books had the same authority that Christ had – He trained them and gave them authority to lay down the foundational teaching of the Church.
- We should not take verses from the epistles out of context, but must try to understand each phrase in the context of the book.
- Many of the points in the Gospels are directly applicable to us today, but some were specific to the culture of the time, and in these cases we must try to understand the underlying principle and apply it to our own cultural setting.

GOD REVEALING GOD

The belief that God is personal and reveals Himself to mankind is central to the Christian faith. We believe that God has been progressively revealing Himself to mankind throughout human history:

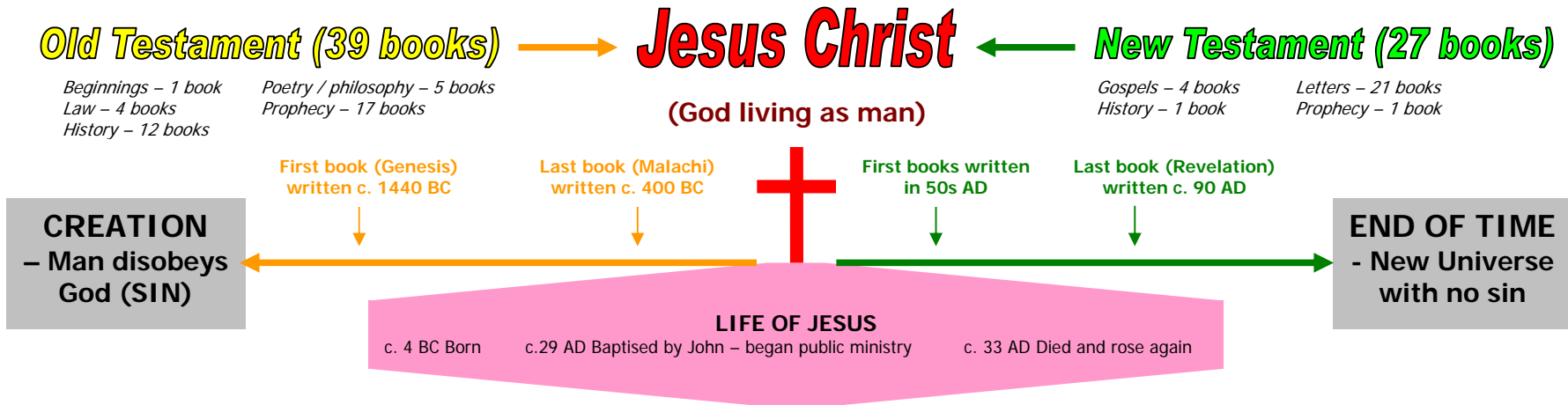
1. **Creation** – God created the Universe, and it bears the marks of His creativity. When we see the wonder of the Universe and the immense diversity and complexity of life it should lead us to understand that the creator God is power and above mankind. The more we discover about nature, the more we should marvel at the One who made it (see Romans 1:19-20).
2. **Conscience** – God has also written what we could call His “natural law” on the hearts of mankind. Mankind was made to know God and with the ability to make decisions based on foreseen consequences rather than simply on instinct. One factor in our decision making is our conscience, which is an internal voice that causes guilt when we do something wrong. This natural law has also shaped human culture, so that there are similarities between moral standards across very different cultures (see Romans 2:14&15).
3. **Covenant** – God spoke directly to one nation beginning with a man called Abraham. He revealed His Law to Moses and spoke repeatedly to the nation of Israel through prophets, who were His appointed spokespeople. The record of God's word given to the nation of Israel is contained in the Old Testament of the Bible. Through the Bible we can know what God is like and what He expects from us. Christians believe that the whole Bible is the inspired word of God, meaning that the Holy Spirit of God guided those people who wrote it to record His words (Hebrews 1:1).
4. **Christ** – the ultimate revelation of God to mankind was in Christ Jesus. Jesus was not merely a person who spoke about God or who brought a message from God (like the Old Testament prophets), He was God living as a human being. As such, He was the perfect revelation of God, and He can be called the “Word” (see John 1:1-18). He not only revealed the ultimate truth, He is the ultimate truth behind the Universe (see John 14:6)! Christ taught and gave authority to the apostles to lay down the foundational teaching of the Christian Church, and we have this recorded in the New Testament books. The Bible is now complete because the apostles have completed the teaching of Christ. The Holy Spirit now lives in Christians, representing Christ and making the truth of the Bible live in our lives.

So, then, God is the creator of all things, and is separate from His creation, independent of it in the sense that He does not need anything from it to sustain His being. However, He does not remain distant from His creation, but is active in the created universe and especially through human history and in the lives of individual human beings. This truth has other implications:

- **The Bible is the final authority for our beliefs and practice**
Because we believe that the Bible is God's word spoken through His people to His people Christians base their beliefs on the Bible. We read, study and teach the Bible and if we discover that the Bible teaches something different from our present idea or practice we should change in submission to its authority (see II Timothy 3:14-17).
- **We need to read every part of the Bible in the context of the whole Bible**
We have the complete Bible, and it would not make sense for us to read the Old Testament as if Christ had not lived. In fact, Christ is the key to the whole Bible in that the Old Testament looks forward to Him and the New Testament reveals and explains Him. When a Christian reads the Old Testament they look back through the lens of Christ. This means that we should try to understand the text as it was written but ultimately realise its place in preparing the scene for Jesus.
- **Christ is the only Saviour**
Christianity is an exclusive religion in that it claims that there is no other route to God other than through Christ Jesus. This should be obvious from the above understanding that Jesus was the ultimate revelation of God and when we grasp that His death was the only way for sin to be forgiven. In fact, Jesus Himself made the absolute claim that He is the Way, the Truth and the Life and no one can come to the Father except through Him (John 14:6). The apostle Peter could say: “*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved*” (Acts 4:12). This is not to say that everyone who will be saved will have known of and trusted in Jesus (Abraham, Moses and David, for example, will be saved but never heard His name), but that all who trust in God according to the revealed light about Him they have received will be saved because of the sacrificial death of Christ and no one who has rejected Him will be saved. This is why Christians preach the good news about Jesus to every nation on earth.

BIBLE TIMELINE

DATE	MAIN CHARACTER(S)	EVENTS	BIBLE BOOK(S) ABOUT PERIOD	BIBLE BOOKS WRITTEN IN PERIOD
???	Adam & Eve Cain & Abel	God creates the universe Mankind is disobedient to God Sin leads to death	↑ Genesis ↓	? Job ?
???	Noah	God judges the earth by a flood – Noah and his family are saved because Noah has faith in God		
???		The city of Babel is built for man's honour – God scatters the nations and confuses their languages		
2090BC	Abraham	God chooses Abraham because he has faith. He promises to make a great nation that will bless all nations and to give them the land of Canaan.	↓	Some psalms
1700BC	Isaac Jacob Joseph			
1500BC	Moses	The people of Israel are in Egypt for 400 years. God uses Moses to lead them out. God gives the people the feast of Passover and His Law. The Law shows them what is right and wrong and that they have sinned and need God's forgiveness.	Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy	
1405BC	Joshua	Joshua leads the people into the Promised land.	Joshua	
1380 – 1050BC	The judges Samuel	The nation of Israel is led by a series of Judges. God is their King. They live in the land of Canaan but are often oppressed by their enemies because they often forget God and worship false gods.	Judges Ruth I Samuel 1-7	
1050BC 1010BC 970BC	King Saul King David King Solomon	The people demand a King – God gives them their request, even though they are rejecting Him. The first three kings rule for 40 years each. God promises David that his descendants will be kings forever. David captures the city of Jerusalem, which becomes the capital of Israel. Solomon builds a Temple in Jerusalem where God will be worshipped.	I Samuel 8 onwards II Samuel I Kings 1-11 I Chronicles II Chronicles 1-9	Psalms (of David) Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs (by Solomon)
930BC	Kings of Israel and Judah	After Solomon's death the kingdom splits in two – Israel in the north and Judah in the south. There are a series of kings (in Judah they are all descendants of David, but in Israel they come from several families) – some good and some bad. The people tend to follow their king either to worship God or to turn away from Him. Over time they grow further away from God.	I Kings 12 onwards II Kings II Chronicles 10 onwards	Isaiah, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah,
722BC		Exile of Israel to Assyria (God judges them)		Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah
586BC		Exile of Judah to Babylon (God judges them)	Daniel	
538BC		Zerubbabel (the descendant of David) returns to Jerusalem – the Temple is rebuilt	Esther	Haggai, Zechariah
458BC		Ezra returns to Jerusalem – the Law is restored	Ezra	
432BC		Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem – the walls are rebuilt	Nehemiah	Malachi
6BC	Jesus, Mary	Jesus is born	↑	
29AD	John the Baptist 12 disciples	Jesus begins his three year public ministry – He performs many miracles and teaches many things. He trains twelve men to be apostles.	Matthew, Mark, Luke, John	
33AD		Jesus dies and rises again from the dead. He returns to heaven.	↓	
33 – c.90AD	Peter John Paul	The church is founded in Jerusalem and begins to spread across the world. The leaders of the church are 11 of the 12 men Jesus trained and one other man – Paul – who became a Christian after being an enemy of the Christians.	Acts	Letters of Paul (Romans – Philemon), Hebrews, James, Letters of Peter, Letters of John, Jude, Revelation (by John)
FUTURE	Jesus	Jesus returns to rule and to judge – a new universe with no more sin or death is revealed	Revelation	



OLD COVENANT – sign = Circumcision
 God's special relationship with the nation of Israel in three stages:

1. **Abraham** – c. 2000 BC
 - a) The land of Canaan (Palestine)
 - b) Many descendants
 - c) Through them all nations will be blessed
2. **Moses** – c. 1440 BC

The Law

 - Moral (right and wrong)
 - Ceremonial (how to worship God by sacrifice)
 - Civil (how to rule the nation of Israel)
3. **King David** – c. 1000 BC

David's family will be kings for ever

The people must respond to the Covenant in faith and obedience

NEW COVENANT – sign = Lord's Supper
 God's special relationship with all Christians revealed through Jesus.
 Jesus fulfilled the Old Covenant:

1. He is the descendant of Abraham who blesses all nations
2. He fulfilled the Law – He never did wrong and died as the perfect sacrifice for sin
3. He was the descendant of David who will be the King forever

Jesus established the New Covenant through His death and resurrection – it is a new kind of relationship with God based on the Holy Spirit who lives in all Christians. He changes Christians from the inside out to become more like Christ. The relationship begins when sins are forgiven through faith in Christ.

THREE KEY GROUPS OF PEOPLE IN ISRAEL

1. **Priests** – offered sacrifices to God on behalf of the people in the Temple. The people worshipped God through the priests.
2. **Prophets** – spoke the words of God directly to the people. God gave them many visions about the future, especially about His chosen One (Messiah) who would save His people.
3. **Kings** – God allowed Israel to have kings, but they were supposed to lead the people under God. David was their greatest king.

JESUS THE PRIEST, PROPHET AND KING

1. **Priest** – He offered Himself as the one sacrifice that could finally pay for all sins forever. He rose again, and because He is alive forever, through Him we can come to God and know Him.
2. **Prophet** – He was God's perfect word to us, and He fulfilled all the Old Testament promises about the coming Messiah.
3. **King** – He is the true King ruling in David's place. Through Him, God becomes the only King over His people again.