

Overview of the Books of the Bible

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The Old Testament

This introduction is a brief description of each of the forty-nine books of the Old Testament. It is helpful to keep in mind that, like the earliest Christian community, the Orthodox Church of today continued using the Greek version of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint (LXX). The Septuagint - referencing the finest seventy Hebrew scholars, from all twelve Hebrew tribes, who made the translation from the Hebrew into Greek - became the universally accepted version of the Old Testament since the time of its appearance some three centuries before the birth of Christ. Our Lord Jesus Christ, together with His apostles and evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and also Peter and Paul, used this Greek version when quoting the Old Testament in their gospels and epistles. These inspired Old Testament books tell the story of God's dealings with ancient Israel, from approximately 2000 BC until the time of Jesus.

A study of the Old Testament in the light of the authentic apostolic tradition will lead the reader to Him Who fulfilled the Law and the Prophets as He promised: Our Lord and God and Savior, Jesus Christ. The collection of forty-nine Old Testament books is traditionally subdivided into four sections:

1. the five books of the Law
2. the books of history
3. the books of wisdom
4. the books of prophecy

The Five Books of the Law

First there are the books of the Law: *Genesis*, meaning "beginning", since it recounts the beginning of God's creation; *Exodus*, which means "exit" or "departure", referring to the journey of the Hebrews from out of slavery in Egypt; *Leviticus*, a book detailing worship as led by the priests ordained from the tribe of Levi; *Numbers*, whose title is derived from the book's opening account of the census or numbering of the people of Israel; *Deuteronomy*, meaning "second law", since it gives a detailed listing of the additional laws given by God through Moses.

The first five books of the Old Testament, known jointly as the Pentateuch (*penta* means "five" in Greek) describe God's creation of the world, the rebellion of Adam and Eve and the fall of man, and the history of God's people from the days of Abraham, about 2000 BC, through the days of Moses, dated by many scholars at approximately 1250 BC.

The Books of History

The second section of the LXX Old Testament is known as the historical books. This group begins with the book of *Joshua*, the leader of the children of Israel following the death of Moses, who brings God's people into the promised land after their forty years of wandering in the wilderness. *Judges* relates to the traditions of the various Hebrew tribes and the exploits of their own particular heroes, the Judges of whom the title speaks, who ruled the nation. The book of *Ruth* is the charming and heroic account of a Gentile woman who placed herself under the protection of the one true God, and in the process became an ancestor of King David, and his descendant, Jesus Christ, the Messiah of Israel.

First and Second Kingdoms (First and Second Samuel), whose principle characters are Samuel the faithful prophet, Saul the first king to rule over God's people, and David, Saul's successor and the first king of Judah in the south of Palestine, and Israel to the north. The books of *Third and Fourth Kingdoms* (First and Second

Kings) opens with the enthronement of David's son Solomon and ends with the fall of the kingdom, including the destruction of its capital city Jerusalem, and the exile of God's people from Palestine to Babylon.

First and Second Chronicles (First and Second Paraleipomenon) expand on the history recorded in *Third and Fourth Kingdoms*. The word *Paraleipomenon* is transliterated from the Greek and means "that which is omitted" in the two preceding books. The books of *First and Second Ezra* and *Nehemiah* continue this chronicle of divine history, focusing on the Jewish religious community after its return to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon.

The final books in the historical section of the Old Testament reveal the stories of people who lived heroic and God-directed lives under foreign domination and during the exile: *Tobit*, who was taken into captivity by the Assyrians; *Judith*, the pious and beautiful widow who saved her people from massacre by the invading Assyrian general; *Esther*, the Jewish queen of Persia who achieved the revocation of Haman's decree that would have allowed the persecution and mass murder of God's people; and the *Maccabees*, the family of the Hasmoneans and their followers, the faithful people who began the revolt and fought the wars of independence against foreign armies occupying their land.

The Books of Wisdom

The third section of the Old Testament is known as the books of Wisdom. The magnificent *Psalms* is the hymnal of both ancient Israel and of the Church. The book of *Job*, which in the canonical Greek LXX comes between *Psalms* and *Proverbs*, probes the depths of a man's unshakable faith in the face of tragedy and innocent suffering. *Proverbs* is a collection of moral and religious instruction taught to young people after their return from exile in Babylon. *Ecclesiastes* tells of the preacher who philosophically seeks to understand the meaning of human existence that the good man can find in this life. The moving *Song of Songs* by Solomon is a collection of lyric poems, written in the language of human love and courtship, which also speaks prophetically of God's love for His beloved Bride, His Church. The *Wisdom of Solomon* promises reward and immortality to the righteous, praises wisdom and condemns the folly of idolatry. The *Wisdom of Sirach* consists of lectures to young people on ethical and religious themes.

These seven books of Wisdom literature- *The Psalms*, *Job*, *Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes*, the *Song of Songs*, the *Wisdom of Solomon*, and the *Wisdom of Sirach* -proclaim that happiness (or "blessedness," in the language of the Bible) is possible only through faith in and obedience to the one true God.

The Books of Prophecy

The fourth and final section of the LXX Old Testament includes the books of prophecy, which appear in an order different from the Hebrew and Vulgate collections.

Hosea gives a message to God's own redeeming love for His chosen people, even when they spurn Him and prostitute themselves to false gods. *Amos* is the simple shepherd called by God to denounce a self-satisfied nation for its grave social injustice, abhorrent immortality and its shallow and meaningless piety. *Micah* foretells the day when nations shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. He speaks of peace reigning over all who do justice, who love kindness, and who walk humbly with God. *Joel* is the prophet who foretells the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon all flesh. *Obadiah* prophesies the return of the exiles from Babylon. *Jonah* unwillingly accepts God's command to preach His mercy and forgiveness to a foreign nation.

Nahum prophesies the defeat of the powerful Assyrian enemy. *Habakkuk* deals with the perennial question, "How long, O Lord, shall I cry out to You, and You will not hear me?" (Hab 1:2). *Zephaniah* prophesies the dark days of Judah's destruction, but promises comfort and conciliation to those who wait patiently for the Lord and serve Him. *Haggai*, following the return of the exiles, exhorts them to rebuild the destroyed temple in order to unify their disrupted religious life and, more importantly, to prepare for the coming of the long awaited Messiah.

Zechariah prophesies the image of the messianic Prince of Peace, the Good Shepherd who would lay down His life for the flock. *Malachi* exhorts God's people to faithfulness and asserts the fatherhood of God over all nations. He foretells that God will appoint a forerunner, similar to the ancient prophet Elijah (or Elias) who will appear before the Messiah and prepare the world for the coming day of the Lord.

Isaiah exhorts the people of God to place their confidence in the Lord, and to lead private and public lives which manifest this reliance. From *Isaiah*, we hear the prophecies of a Son to be born of a virgin, and of the Suffering Servant -the Messiah- who would be led as an innocent sheep to the slaughter, and by whose stripes - we would be healed. *Jeremiah* severely criticizes God's people for abandoning the one true God and turning instead to the worship of idols. *Baruch* was appointed to be read on feast days as a confession of sins. In *Lamentations*, the author Jeremiah mourns the destruction of the holy city of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. The *Epistle of Jeremiah* is addressed to those about to be carried off into exile in Babylon.

Ezekiel, the prophet of the exiles, assures his hearers of the abiding presence of God among them, even in exile and servitude. Finally, *Daniel* writes an apocalyptic or mystical end-time prophecy which is filled with difficult and often obscure signs and symbols. In the Greek LXX, Daniel begins with the heroic story of Susanna and ends with the fascinating account of Bel and the Serpent.

These forty-nine God-inspired Old Testament books divided into four sections - books of the Law, of History, of Wisdom, and of Prophecy -which serve as an introduction to John the Baptist's preparation of the world for the coming of the Messiah, who is *Isaiah's* Suffering Servant, *Zechariah's* Prince of Peace, and the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the flock.

The New Testament

The Four Gospels

Matthew, *Mark*, *Luke*, and *John* recall the events in the life of Jesus Christ, Son of God, and Son of Man. The first three are called the Synoptic Gospels, in that they set forth a "common viewpoint" of the chronology of the events and the message of Christ in His life and ministry. *Matthew* addresses his gospel primarily to fellow Jews. *Mark* is likely the first gospel to be written, and speaks of Christ as a servant of all (Mk 10:45). *Luke*, himself a physician, reveals the Incarnate Christ and His earthly ancestry. This Son of Man saves and heals the fallen race.

John, the last of the four gospels to be written, emphasizes the divinity of Christ, the eternal Son and Word of God, who became Man. John's gospel further reveals seven miracles of Christ, not all of them in chronological order.

Acts

Written by St. Luke, these are the *Acts* (or accomplishments) of the *Apostles*, but mainly of Peter (chapters 1-12) and Paul (chapters 13-28) *Acts* chronicles the earliest history of the Church from Pentecost through approximately AD 65.

The Letters (or Epistles) of St. Paul

The first nine of Paul's letters are written to churches. *Romans*, which begins this section, was the only letter Paul wrote to a community he had not previously visited. Thus, the implication is that much of what he wrote to the church at Rome he preached in other places.

Most prominent of the cities of first century Greece was Corinth, a center of commerce, immortality and false religion. Predictably, this fledgling church would have to deal with these same matters. *First Corinthians* is therefore a corrective epistle for unity, virtue, forbearance, Eucharistic order and proper use of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In contrast, *Second Corinthians* recognizes the repentance within the church on the part of many,

and St. Paul defends his apostolic authority.

In *Galatians*, Paul addresses several churches in Asia Minor, defending his apostleship and calling the faithful to live their lives in the strength of the Holy Spirit instead of in submission to the laws of the old covenant. *Ephesians* is a marvelous discourse on how the church should conduct itself. This community is rich in its dedication to Christ. Yet, just a few decades after the Lord tells them, "you have left your first love" (Rev 2:4)

Philippians is the epistle of joy. Paul writes from a Roman prison, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!" (Php 4:4). *Colossians* presents Christ as "the head of the body, the church..." (Col 1:18), preeminent in all things.

First Thessalonians, the first letter St. Paul penned, was written to the believers at Thessalonica, a beautiful coastal city of Greece in about AD 51, shortly after Paul planted that Church. This is a letter of encouragement. *Second Thessalonians* acknowledges persecution and warns of lawlessness, urging the Christians to "stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught..." (2Th 2:15).

Next, Paul addresses the following letters to individuals. In *First Timothy*, the aging apostle speaks to his youthful understudy about effective oversight of the Church. In *Second Timothy*, the last letter St. Paul wrote (see 2Ti 4:6-8), he encourages Timothy to "be strong in the grace that is Christ Jesus" (2Ti 2:1). Paul is already in prison in Rome (1:8) awaiting martyrdom.

Titus is sent by Paul to Crete to set the church "in order," and "appoint elders in every city" (Tts 1:5) If this sounds like the work of the Bishop, it is (Tts 1:7,8), and Titus is consistently named in early Church records as the first bishop of Crete. *Philemon* is a Christian slave-holder, and Paul writes him to receive back Onesimus (Phm 10-16), his runaway slave, who has become a Christian with Paul in Rome.

Hebrews is the last of the epistles attributed to St. Paul, but with little evidence it was actually written by Paul. It is a letter to Jewish believers in Christ to continue on in the Faith. It assures them that Christ, the great High Priest in the heavenlies (Heb 8:1), is their once for all sacrifice for sin (Heb 10:10) and victor over death (Heb 12:1, 2).

The General Epistles

James, the brother of the Lord and first bishop of Jerusalem, writes to fellow Jews, "the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad" (Jam 1:1). His message? "Faith without works is dead" (Jam 1:20). Christianity is a belief that behaves.

First Peter, written by the first among the apostles, urges obedience to God and man, willingness to suffer for Christ's sake, and effective pastoring of the flock. In *Second Peter*, the apostle discusses divine power for the faithful (deification), divine judgement for false teachers and the Day of the Lord.

Next, John the Theologian offers three general epistles. *First John* is a stirring personal testimonial to God's forgiveness, His love for His children and His gift of eternal life. In *Second John*, he addresses an "elect lady and her children" (v.1), urging them to obey the Lord's commands and beware of deceivers. *Third John* commends Gaius and Demetrius, and warns against Diotrephes.

Finally, *Jude*, the Lord's brother, writes a short letter exhorting the faithful to contend for the truth and to beware of the devil's servants. He finishes with a stunning benediction.

Revelation

Written by St. John the Theologian, he entitles his book "The Revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:1). What the book of Daniel is to the Old Testament, *Revelation* is to the New Testament. Another title is the *Apocalypse*, which is a transliteration of the Greek word for "revelation" or "unveiling." The book speaks prophetically both to current and future events, to judgement and salvation, and ends with the glorious New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven "as a bride adorned for her husband" (21:2).

The Old Testament Books Listed and Compared

Orthodox Old Testament

Genesis
 Exodus
 Leviticus
 Numbers
 Deuteronomy
 Joshua
 Judges
 Ruth
 1 Kingdoms (1 Samuel)
 2 Kingdoms (2 Samuel)
 3 Kingdoms (1 Kings)
 4 Kingdoms (2 Kings)
 1 Chronicles (1 Paraleipomenon)
 2 Chronicles (2 Paraleipomenon)
 *
 1 Ezra **
 2 Ezra ** (Ezra)
 Nehemiah
 Tobit
 Judith
 Esther
 1 Maccabees
 2 Maccabees
 3 Maccabees
 Psalms (151 in number)
 Job
 Proverbs of Solomon
 Ecclesiastes
 Song of Songs
 Wisdom of Solomon
 Wisdom of Sirach
 Hosea
 Amos
 Micah
 Joel
 Obadiah
 Jonah
 Nahum
 Habakkuk
 Zephaniah
 Haggai
 Zechariah
 Malachi
 Isaiah
 Jeremiah
 Baruch
 Lamentation of Jeremiah

Roman Catholic Old Testament

Genesis
 Exodus
 Leviticus
 Numbers
 Deuteronomy
 Joshua
 Judges
 Ruth
 1 Kings
 2 Kings
 3 Kings
 4 Kings
 1 Chronicles (1 Paraleipomenon)
 2 Chronicles (2 Paraleipomenon)
 1 Esdras
 2 Esdras (Nehemiah)
 Tobit
 Judith
 Esther
 1 Maccabees
 2 Maccabees
 Psalms (150 in number)
 Job
 Proverbs of Solomon
 Ecclesiastes
 Canticle of Canticles
 Wisdom of Solomon
 Ecclesiasticus (Sirach)
 Hosea
 Amos
 Micah
 Joel
 Obadiah
 Jonah
 Nahum
 Habakkuk
 Zephaniah
 Haggai
 Zechariah
 Malachi
 Isaiah
 Jeremiah
 Baruch *
 Lamentations
 Ezekiel
 Daniel

Protestant Old Testament

Genesis
 Exodus
 Leviticus
 Numbers
 Deuteronomy
 Joshua
 Judges
 Ruth
 1 Samuel
 2 Samuel
 1 Kings
 2 Kings
 1 Chronicles
 2 Chronicles
 Ezra
 Nehemiah
 Esther **
 Job
 Psalms (150 in number)
 Proverbs
 Ecclesiastes
 Song of Solomon
 Isaiah
 Lamentations
 Ezekiel
 Daniel **
 Hosea
 Joel
 Amos
 Obadiah
 Jonah
 Micah
 Nahum
 Habakkuk
 Haggai
 Zechariah
 Malachi

Orthodox Old Testament

Epistle of Jeremiah
Ezekiel
Daniel ***

* Includes the Prayer of
Manasseh
**Also known as 1 & 2 Esdras
*** "Susanna" is at the
beginning of Daniel,
"Bel and the Serpent" at the end.
Also includes the "Hymn of the
Three Young Men."

Roman Catholic Old Testament

* Includes Epistle of Jeremiah

Protestant Old Testamnt

* Esther does not include those
sections called "Additions to
Esther."

**Daniel here does not include
those sections separately labeled
as the "Hymn of the Three
Young Men," "Susanna," "Bel
and the Serpent."