**The books in the Bible**

**by T. Pandit**

### Foreword

This small book was prepared several years ago for laypersons in India who had very little knowledge of the Bible. It is written for church groups (cell groups and youth groups) but can also be used for individual studies – or as part of an introductory course at a Bible school.

The questions after each unit can be used for group discussions. Each group should have 4–7 members. Do not have larger groups. Try to involve all the group members in the discussions. The Bible quotations are based on the World English Bible (WEB) translation.

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### Introduction

The Bible is not only one book. It is a whole library consisting of 66 books. These books represent different types of literature. The word “Bible” comes from a Greek word that means “books.” In a public library we find different kinds of literature placed on different shelves. Books with poetry are found on one shelf. History books on another shelf, and so on. Also in the Bible the books have – to some extent – been placed according to their kind (their genre).

The Old Testament

The Old Testament contains four main kinds of literature forms (genres).

1. The first section contains the law, also called “the Five Books of Moses.” But the content of these five books is not quite the same, as we in India would call “law.” The Hebrew word is torah and it actually contains more guidance and instruction than commands and regulations. These five books are called Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.
2. The second kind of literature in the Old Testament is what is called history. Here we find two series of historical books.
* The first series is a direct continuation of Deuteronomy. It contains the following books: Joshua, Judges, First and Second Samuel and First and Second Kings. The focus in these books is on the prophets and the kings of both Judah and Israel. The book of Ruth contains an independent story and is not part of this historical work.
* The second series of historical books contains the following books: First and Second Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah. It starts with nine chapters of genealogy. The focus is on the kings of Judah, the temple and the priests. It also tells us about the return of the people from their exile in Babylon and the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. Again there is one book – Esther – that contains an independent story and is not part of this historical work.
1. Then we find poetry and wisdom. Five books belong to this section: Job, the Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. In these books we find wonderful poetry and profound wisdom. King David and his son king Solomon are important persons in these books.
2. Finally we find large group of prophetic books. Many of the well-known Old Testament prophets have books that carry their names such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Jonah and Amos. There are 17 books in this group – 16 of them named after prophets.

In summary we can say that the Old Testament is like a National Archives for the people of Israel. The different books – with their different perspectives – present the background and the explanation why the nation of Israel was formed and how the Jewish people were chosen and directed by God through the centuries.

The texts in Old Testament books were written over a period of perhaps 1500 years. Almost everything was written in the Hebrew language, which was the ancient language of the people of Israel (or the Jews, as they are called nowadays). A few texts were written in Aramaic, the international language of those days. None of these texts have been preserved to our time in their original form. But they have been copied by generations of scholars and scribes. Later these 39 books were compiled into one book by Jewish scribes. This work was probably completed about 200 BC.

The New Testament

The New Testament can also be looked upon as an “archives.” But here the perspective is not national but international. Here we find literature that shows how God’s purpose with the people of Israel reaches its completion. These texts describe how the message that God gave to the people of Israel to hold in trust is conveyed to all other peoples of the earth. The New Testament consists of three sections from a literary point view.

1. First we find five historical books. The four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – tell us the story about Jesus. Luke’s gospel is continued in the book of Acts, which tells us story of the early church and its ongoing ministry to spread the gospel about Jesus.
2. In the second group we find letters.
* First come 13 letters by the apostle Paul.
* Then we have Hebrews and then the so-called general letters: James, First and Second Peter, John’s three letters and finally Jude.
1. The third group consists of only one book, Revelation. This prophetic book concludes the Biblical drama. Genesis describes how man opened the door for evil to enter into our world. Revelation describes how God finally conquers evil and shuts it out forever from his creation.

The New Testament books were written during the second half of the first century AD – not very long after the death and resurrection of Jesus and the establishing of the first churches in the Holy Land and throughout the Roman Empire. They were all written in the in the common dialect of the Greek language, which was in widespread use in the Greek and Roman empires during a few centuries before and after the birth of Christ. No originals of these books have been preserved to our time. But hundreds of early copies have been preserved – more than of any other ancient book in the whole world! Many other Christian books were also written at about the same time, but most of them contained false doctrines. Through the guidance of the Holy Spirit Christian leaders in the early church selected these 27 books and used them in the ministry to teach the believers about Jesus Christ and how to live lives pleasing to God. Later these books, which had all been written by apostles and others who were inspired by the Holy Spirit, were compiled into our New Testament. This compilation work was completed in the fourth century AD.

Questions

1. Which are the four kinds of literature found in the Old Testament?
2. What does it mean that the Old Testament is like the “National Archives” for the people of Israel? Think and discuss!
3. What are the original languages of the Old Testament books?
4. When was the compilation of the Old Testament books completed?
5. Which are the three groups of literary texts in the New Testament?
6. What is the original language of the New Testament books?
7. When was the compilation of the New Testament books completed?
8. Why were these 27 books chosen to be part of the New Testament – and not other Christian books from the early church? Think and discuss!
9. What is the connection between Genesis and Revelation? Think and discuss!
10. Write down 5 questions based on the information in this Introduction. Then ask a friend to write down the answers. Finally mark his/her answers – 10 points for each correct answer; give fewer points if the answer is only partly correct. Give “Pass” for 25-34 points. Give “Distinction” for 35-50 points.

# The Old Testament

## Part 1: The Pentateuch (or the five books of Moses)

The first five books of the Bible make up what the people of Israel call “the Law.” Pentateuch means “the five scrolls.” They can be considered a single book, even if they actually contain many kinds of literature: stories, laws, rules for sacrifices and religious ceremonies, speeches, sermons and genealogical tables.

One central theme runs through the Pentateuch: The concept of a society that obeys God’s will.

The first 11 chapters of Genesis have an “international” perspective. But from Genesis chapter 12, the story is about the history of the people of God from the call of Abraham (probably more than 2000 years before the birth of Christ) to the death of Moses (around 1400 years BC).

Genesis

The name of the book reveals to us what it is all about – it is a book about the origin of everything. It tells us about how God created the world, It also tells us about how man and woman were created and how they were disobedient to God, which was the beginning of sin and suffering. Then we can read about Noah and the flood – and the tower of Babel. In this first section if the book (chapters 1–11) the focus is on all mankind.

Then follows the origin of the people of Israel through the stories about the patriarchs – the founding fathers of the Jewish people (chapters 12–50). The first patriarch was Abraham, who trusted in God and obeyed him. So God chose him to establish the nation of Israel. Then we can read about his son Isaac and his grandson Jacob (also called Israel). Jacob had twelve sons, from whom the twelve tribes of Israel have descended. The story focuses on one of the sons, Joseph, who is sold by his brothers as a slave to Egypt. Later his whole family joins him in Egypt. Throughout the book it is God who acts: He judges and punishes those who sin. He leads and protects his people – and he shapes their history.

From a literary point of view it is possible to divide the book of Genesis into ten parts that follow on the introduction in 1:1–2:3. Each of these ten parts starts with the same Hebrew word in the original text. This word means “continuation story” and is found ten times (2:4, 5:1, 6:9, 10:1, 11:10, 11:27, 25:12, 25:19, 36:1 and 37:2) in the Hebrew text. So the book of Genesis encourages the readers to continue reading the whole book and then continue on into the rest of the Bible. In this way Genesis becomes an introduction to the whole Bible.

Genesis can be structured like this:

1. The creation and the fall (chapters 1–3)
2. Noah and the flood (chapters 7–9)
3. The tower of Babel (chapter 11)
4. The story about Abraham (chapters 12–25)
5. The story about Isaac (chapters 21, 22, 24, 26, 27, 28)
6. The story about Jacob (Israel) (chapters 25, 27–35, 48, 49)
7. The story about Joseph (chapters 37–52)

Exodus

Moses is the main person in the remaining “four books of Moses.” In the beginning of Exodus the Israelites have become slaves under the Egyptians. Then we read about how Moses was saved by Pharaoh’s daughter from being killed and how he was brought up in the royal palace, where he lived for 40 years as a prince. But after having killed an Egyptian slave driver as he was protecting one of his real countrymen, he was forced to run away. This is the beginning of the next 40-year period in his life. He is now a fugitive in the country of Midian.

At the end of these 40 years, God speaks to Moses through a burning bush and calls him to lead the people of Israel out of their captivity in Egypt and into the Promised Land of Canaan. After some hesitation Moses and his brother Aaron become the leaders of the people. Finally – but only after the ten plagues – Pharaoh lets the people of Israel leave Egypt. This deliverance from Egypt has given the name to the book. But because of the lack of faith among the people, their journey through the wilderness lasted for 40 years.

The second part of the book of Exodus (chapters 19–24) is about how God reveals himself at Mount Sinai during the beginning of the journey through the wilderness. Here we are told that God makes a covenant with the people of Israel and gives the law to them through Moses. While Moses is away on the mountain, the people turn away from God and make a golden calf, which they worship (chapter 32). The laws that God gives the people are for them to live by during their years in the wilderness – but also after their arrival to the Promised Land. The laws are summarized in the Ten Commandments (chapter 20). They are about how the people should live in community together with each other – but also how they should relate to God.

Then God gives them detailed instructions how to build them the tabernacle (chapters 25 and following). The tabernacle was a portable temple in the form of a tent, where the people could worship God through sacrifices. The book ends with the glory of God filling the newly constructed tabernacle.

Exodus can be structured like this:

1. God delivers the people of Israel from their captivity in Egypt (chapters 1–18)
2. God enters into a covenant with the people of Israel and gives them his law (chapters 19–24)
3. God instructs the people to build a tabernacle and he fills it with his glory (chapters 25–40)

Leviticus

This is one of the books of the Bible that initially seems difficult to understand because of all the detailed information found in it. The name of the book refers to the sons of Levi, who were serving as priests in the tabernacle. The book is a compilation of all the laws and rules that regulated their service. But we also find laws and regulations about purity and holiness for the whole nation of Israel.

We can say that the book of Leviticus is an exposition of the word in Exodus 19:6, where God tells the people as he makes his covenant with them, “but you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

The people of Israel were appointed to bear witness about the living God to all the nations on the earth. The book of Leviticus presents both the framework and the focus for this commission. The framework is described in the purity regulations and the holiness laws (chapters 11–27). The focus can be found in the Day of Atonement, which was to be celebrated every year with sacrifices to cleanse the people from their sins (chapter 16).

The laws in Leviticus can be grouped like this:

1. Offerings or sacrifices (chapters 1–7)
2. The ministry of the priests (chapters 8–10)
3. Purity rules for daily life (chapters 11–15)
4. Holiness, regulations for offerings and annual feasts, blessings and curses etc. (chapters 17–27)

Numbers

The English name “Numbers” refers to the counting of the people (a census), at the beginning as well as at the end of the book.

The name of the book in Kannada refers to the 40 (or more correctly 38 years) of the journey through the wilderness from Mount Sinai to the plains of Moab. The story starts two years after the people have fled from Egypt and ends just before their entering into Canaan, the land that God had promised to give them.

This long journey was the consequence of the lack of faith the people of Israel showed. Joshua and Caleb returned from their scouting of the Promised Land and they encouraged the people to enter into it, because it was a good and fertile country. Instead the people followed the advice of the other ten scouts and so they rebelled against God. Numbers is a sad story about the grumblings and discontent of the people. Each time they encountered difficulties, they rebelled against God and their leader Moses. In spite of the disobedience of the people, God continued to protect his people. But only two of all the people that fled from Egypt were allowed to enter into the Promised Land – Caleb and Joshua.

During these long wanderings through the wilderness many well-known happenings take place, such as the story about Aaron’s staff (chapter 17), the bronze serpent (chapter 21) and Balaam’s donkey (chapter 22).

The text of the book of Numbers can be grouped geographically like this:

1. The people of Israel at Mount Sinai (1:1–10:10)
2. The people of Israel in the area of Kadesh (10:11–20:13)
3. The people of Israel journey from Kadesh to the Plains of Moab (20:14–22:1)
4. The people of Israel on the Plains of Moab (22:2–36:13)

But we can also divide the book into the two generations of people like this:

1. The end for the old generation, those who did not want to believe in God’s promise (chapters 1–25)
2. The birth of the new generation, those who would enter into the Promised Land (chapters 26–36)

Deuteronomy

When this book begins, the journey through the wilderness has reached its completion. The people of Israel have now gathered on the plains of Moab on the east side of the river Jordan. This book contains the speeches, which Moses delivers to the people just before they entered into the Promised Land. Moses is speaking to a complete new generation of people, and he is looking at the past as well as into the future.

The book is sometimes divided into three speeches like this:

1. Moses’ first speech (1:1–4:43)
2. Moses’ second speech (4:44–28:68)
3. Moses’ third speech (chapters 29–33) followed by Moses’ death (chapter 34)

Looking back Moses repeats the Ten Commandments (chapter 5). This is the second time these important words from God are told in the Bible. That is why the book is called “Deuteronomy” (from a Greek word that mean “the second law”) in English. Looking forward, Moses exhorts the new generation of the people of Israel to be faithful to God’s covenant. By doing so they would choose the way leading to life and to blessings (chapters 27–28; 30:19). Moses now appoints Joshua as his successor.

The whole book of Deuteronomy has a structure, which reminds us of the covenants made between the high king and his subordinate kings during this period in history. Archaeologists have found covenants of this type. They contain four parts and we can find these four parts also in Deuteronomy, like this:

1. A historical introduction (chapters 1–3)
2. Conditions (chapters 4–26)
3. Documentation (chapter 27)
4. Blessings and curses (chapter 28)

The main theme of the book is that God has saved and blessed his people. So they must always remember this – and love and serve him. The commandment that Jesus says is the greatest comes from this book (6:5): “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might.”

At the end of the book we find an account of Moses’ final exhortations to his servant Joshua and his “farewell song” (chapters 31–34). So in this way the “five books of Moses” come to a definite conclusion. But at the same time there is an expectation, and an opening to the future: What will now happen to the people of Israel?

Questions to the Pentateuch

1. What do the people of Israel call the first five books of the Bible?
2. What is the meaning of the name “Pentateuch”?
3. Explain why these five books have been given their Kannada names. Think and discuss!
4. What are their names in English? Explain these names.
5. How many years are there approximately between the call of Abraham and the death of Moses?
6. What is the central theme that runs through the Pentateuch? Think and discuss!
7. In which book (or books) do we read about these event?
8. The flood
9. The bronze serpent
10. The Ten Commandments
11. The tower of Babel
12. The Day of Atonement
13. Moses’ death
14. The golden calf
15. Abraham
16. How to make the tabernacle
17. Joseph
18. Write down 5 questions about the five books in this section of the Old Testament. Then ask a friend to write down the answers. Finally mark his/her answers – 10 points for each correct answer; give fewer points if the answer is only partly correct. Give “Pass” for 25–34 points. Give “Distinction” for 35–50 points.

## Part 2: Historical books

This section of the Old Testament contains the books from Joshua to Esther (12 books). It covers the historical period of the people of Israel from the conquering of the Promised Land (around 1400 BC) to their return from captivity in Babylonia and the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem and of the walls around the city (around 440 BC). As we saw earlier there are two series of books. The first series contains Joshua, Judges, First and Second Samuel and First and Second Kings – and the independent story about Ruth. The second series contains First and Second Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah – and the independent story about Esther. These books were written not only to describe the history of the people of Israel, but also to show how God’s plans and his message are embodied in the life of the nation.

Joshua

The book of Joshua carries on where Deuteronomy ends. Joshua has become the leader of the people. He will now take the people of Israel into the Promised Land (Canaan), conquer some of the nations who live there and distribute the land between the tribes of Israel.

Some well-known stories can be found in this book: The story about the crossing of the river Jordan (chapters 3-4); the story about the fall of the walls of Jericho (chapter 6); the story about when the sun stood still, while the people were fighting in the battle in the valley of Aijalon (chapter 10); the story about Joshua at the end of the book asking the people to choose which God they wanted to follow (chapter 24). But Joshua himself had already made this decision, “but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (24:15). The covenant between God and the people is renewed. Joshua is buried in the Promised Land.

The 24 chapters of the book of Joshua have a clear structure, like this:

1. The country is occupied (chapters 1–12)
2. The country is divided between the tribes of Israel (chapters 13–24)

Judges

The book of Judges contains a collection of stories from the lawless centuries after the conquest of Canaan by the Israelites up to the time just before the establishment of the kingdom (between around 1400 BC and 1050 BC). Not long after the people of Israel had settled down in their new country, they started turning away from God. As a result they were oppressed by other nations. And so they turned back to God and asked him for deliverance. But as soon as the danger was averted, the people again turned away from God. This book shows us how this pattern is repeated again and again.

During this period only their common faith in God kept the tribes together. As soon as they started to worship local idols, they were divided. They became weak and were easily defeated by their enemies. But even as the Israelites were unfaithful to God, he was always ready to intervene on their behalf – as soon as they turned back to him.

The “judges” were local chieftains in Israel, usually military leaders, who were sent by God to save the people from their enemies. Some of them, for instance Deborah (chapters 4–5), Gideon (chapters 6–8) and Samson (chapters 13–16), are among the most well known persons in the Old Testament.

The structure of the book is based on the pattern mentioned above. Chapters 1–16 repeat it again and again. The concluding chapters 17–21 describe some episodes of religious and moral disorder during this time when the people of Israel turned away from God.

Ruth

This small book with only four chapters contains a great story. It is a peaceful story that takes place during the violent times of the Judges. The main character of the book is Ruth. She is a Moabite woman, who gets to know the God of Israel through her marriage to an Israelite whose family has settled down in her country. After the death of their husbands, Naomi, Ruth’s mother-in-law, wants to return to Israel. Ruth shows an unexpected loyalty to her and insists on going with her to Israel. She tells her, “Your people will be my people, and your God my God” (1:16). In Israel she finds a new husband in Boas, who is a relative of her dead husband. So she becomes the ancestress of king David – and of Jesus. God is a God not only to the Jews but also to all Gentile nations. This is something we can learn from the book of Ruth.

First Samuel

It was the great German reformer Martin Luther who gave this book its present name. Earlier the two books of Samuel were called “First and Second book of Kings” and the two following books in the Bible were called “Third and fourth book of Kings.” In the Hebrew Bible First and Second Samuel form one single book. The events take place around 1075–975 BC.

In the beginning of this book, the prophet Samuel, who also is the last of the judges, is in the main character. Through him the word of God again becomes known in Israel. He is also the person through whom the kingdom is introduced in Israel. Samuel anoints first Saul (chapters 9–10) and then David (chapter16) as kings of Israel. Saul gradually falls away from faith in the Lord. He gets jealous of David and persecutes him, because he realizes that God has chosen David to be king in his place.

The first book of Samuel can be structured by the lives of Samuel and Saul, like this:

1. Samuel’s life as a prophet, judge and priest (chapters 1–7)
2. The story about Saul, the first king of Israel (chapters 8–15)
3. The relationship between Saul and David (chapters 16–30)
4. The tragic death of Saul and his sons (chapter 31)

Second Samuel

This book begins after the death of Saul. David can now ascend to the throne and start to reign. First he is king only over Judah in the south (chapters 1–4) and then over the whole nation of Israel. We read about how David expands his kingdom and becomes a mighty ruler. He is deeply rooted in his faith in God and becomes very popular with the people. But sometimes he is ruthless and implements his own plans, for example when has one of his generals killed so that he can marry his wife Bathsheba (chapter 11).

The book can be structured like this:

1. David’s reign is successful and results in national expansion (chapters 1–10)
2. Troubles and problems during king David’s rule (chapters 11–24)

First Kings

First and Second Kings form one single book in the Hebrew Bible. They depict 400 years of the history of Israel, from the death of David around 970 BC to the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC. In these books the Israelite kings are evaluated by their faithfulness to God. A good king is a king who is faithful to God. A bad king is a king who worships the Gentile gods. The nation is successful, when the kings are faithful to God. When the kings turn to other gods, they fail. By this standard all the kings of the northern kingdom are bad rulers. But a few of the kings of the southern kingdom are good rulers.

The third king of Israel, Solomon, is the main character in the first part of First Kings (chapters 1–11). His reign (around 970–930 BC) is described as glorious and he himself as filled with wisdom. He also builds the temple in Jerusalem. But this beautiful picture is not without some smudges. We read how Solomon is led into spiritual degradation (by his wives and concubines) and how the country suffers under high taxes.

The second part of the book (chapters 12–22) describes how the country after the death of Solomon is divided into the Northern Kingdom (Israel) and the Southern Kingdom (Judah). The story now focuses more on the prophets than on the kings. The prophets pass judgment on many of the kings, who do not follow the Lord. They also boldly proclaim God at a time in history when the people turn away from him and worship idols. Elijah is the greatest of these prophets. His contest with the prophets of Baal is found in chapter 18.

First Kings can be structured like this:

1. Solomon’s reign (chapters 1–11)
2. Some of the kings succeeding Solomon in Israel and Judah (chapters 12–16)
3. The ministry of Elijah (chapters 17–22)

Second Kings

This book continues where First Kings ends. In the second chapter we find the well-known story about Elijah ascending to heaven (2:1-18). Then his successor the prophet Elisha becomes God’s spokesman to the kings in Israel in the north as well as in Judah in the south. His miracles (as many as 18 are mentioned) are described more than his teaching. In spite of all the warnings, the kings in both Israel and Judah remain wicked. This results in the conquering of the Northern Kingdom (Israel) by the Assyrians in 722 BC and of the Southern Kingdom (Judah) by the Babylonians in 587 BC. And with that the book ends.

The fall of Jerusalem and the deportation of many Israelites into captivity became a decisive turning point in the history of Israel. There is a crucial question, which these four historical books (First and Second Samuel and First and Second Kings) try to address. That question is, “Why has this disaster happened to the people of Israel?” And this is the answer they give, “This disaster is only what can be expected, when the people without heeding the warnings of the prophets repeatedly turn away from their covenant with God!”

Second Kings can be structured into three parts, like this:

1. The ministry of Elisha and his miracles (chapters 1–10)
2. The decline and destruction of the Northern Kingdom Israel (chapters 11–17)
3. The decline of the Southern Kingdom Judah ending in the destruction of the Jerusalem temple and the deportation of the people into captivity (chapters 18–25)

First Chronicles

At first we get the impression that First and Second Chronicles repeat the contents of the previous four books (First and Second Samuel and First and Second Kings) in a more boring way. The background is that the author is re-telling the history of Israel to people who already knew these other books. And he has two reasons for doing so.:

1. He wants to show that God in spite of the disasters kept his promise to take care of his people. He emphasizes the success of the nation during the good governments of David, Solomon, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah and Josiah.
2. He wants to describe the origin of the temple service in Jerusalem, show the duties of the priests and the Levites and explain how David was the one who actually laid the foundation of the temple,, even if it was Solomon who later built it. The author probably had in mind the Israelites who were returning from the exile to rebuild temple in Jerusalem. They needed to understand their past history. The author points out that faithfulness to God was the condition for the success of the nation.

In the Hebrew Bible the two books of Chronicles constituted one single book. First Chronicles begins with the creation. The account of the period from Adam to king Saul is mainly in the form of genealogies. There is a reason for this: These books were written after the Babylonian captivity, and the returning people needed to know more about their roots and their family histories.

After the genealogies the story centers on king David and his preparations for the building of the temple in Jerusalem. Here David is pictured much more positively than in First and Second Samuel. For instance his adultery with Bathsheba is not mentioned at all.

First Chronicles has two main parts, like this:

1. Genealogies (chapters 1–9)
2. Accounts of king David’s life (chapters 10–29)

Second Chronicles

The first part of this book (chapters 1–9) gives a grand account of how Solomon builds, furnishes and dedicates the first temple in Jerusalem. In First and Second Chronicles the temple plays a very important part. This shows that – as they describe the history of the people of Israel – they put more emphasis on religious matters than on political. The priests are given more prominent place in the accounts – instead of the prophets.

The second part of the book (chapters 10-36) is almost exclusively about the subsequent history of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The accounts of the kings who follow God’s will, such as Jehoshaphat. Uzziah, Hezekiah and Josiah, are described more in detail.

Ezra

This book takes up the story where Second Chronicles ends. But it does not present a continuous historical account. Instead it only mentions the essential events during the approximate time period 538–457 BC. Some of the text has been written by Ezra, the scribe.

The first six chapters are about the return of captives from Babylon to Jerusalem, which took place in 538 BC. Jeshua the priest arranges for the altar for sacrifices to be rebuilt. Then Zerubbabel, the governor, initiates the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. But the building project is very slow. Only when the prophets Haggai and Zechariah encourage the people to get on with the building work, do they complete the temple in 516 BC.

The remaining four chapters (7-10) resume the story about 60 years later and tell us about Ezra and his role in the historical events. The time gap is shown in the text in verse 7:1, which begins “Now after these things …”. Ezra is the leader of the second wave of returning captives. After having reached Jerusalem, Ezra accomplishes an extensive reformation of the temple rituals as well as the spiritual life of the people.

Nehemiah

The main event in the book of Ezra was the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple. The main event in the book of Nehemiah is the rebuilding of the city walls of Jerusalem. Here we meet a third wave of returning captives from Babylon in 445 BC. This time Nehemiah is their leader. The book is written by him as a recollection of the events he has experienced.

In the second part of the book (chapters 8-12) we find an account about a second reformation. Once again Ezra is the key person. He reads the law to the people and as a result they confess their sins and turn to God. In chapter 9 we find one of the longest prayers in the Bible.

Esther

The last historical book in the Old Testament is an independent story from the Persian Empire at the beginning of the fifth century BC. Esther is a Jewish woman who becomes the queen of Persia. In this story, which is very lively and easy to read, she saves her people, the Jews, from destruction.

Esther’s uncle Mordecai has refused to bow down before Haman, the second in command in the empire. Haman is furious and he asks the king for permission to eradicate all the Jews. Queen Esther risks her own life to come before the king and appeal to him to save her people. The story explains the origin of the Jewish Purim festival, which is celebrated in commemoration of the salvation of the Jews.

The book of Esther can be divided into three parts, like this:

1. Esther becomes queen of Persia (chapters 1–2)
2. Haman makes plans to eradicate the Jewish people (chapters 3–5)
3. Mordecai and the Jewish people are saved but Haman loses his life (chapters 6–10)

Questions to the 12 historical books of the Old Testament

1. Which are the historical books of the Old Testament?
2. These twelve books can be divided into two groups:
* The first series of historical books. Which are they?
* The second series of historical books. Which are they?
1. What are the differences between these two series of historical books? Think and discuss before give your answer.
2. What role did the following persons play in the history of the people of Israel?
3. Joshua
4. Samuel
5. David
6. Solomon
7. Ezra
8. What is the story in the book of Ruth? During which period in Israelite history does it take place? Tell the story to the other persons in your group?
9. What is the story in the book of Esther? During which period in Israelite history does it take place? Tell the story to the other persons in your group?
10. Here are some important dates in the history of Israel. What happened then?
11. Around 1400 BC
12. Around 1000 BC
13. 722 BC
14. 587 BC
15. 538 BC
16. 516 BC
17. In which historical book (or books) can we read about the following persons?
18. Deborah
19. Boaz
20. Elijah
21. Elisha
22. King David
23. King Solomon
24. Ezra
25. Mordecai
26. Write down 10 questions about the 12 books in this section of the Old Testament. Then ask a friend to write down the answers. Finally mark his/her answers – 10 points for each correct answer; give fewer points if the answer is only partly correct. Give “Pass” for 50–69 points. Give “Distinction” for 70–100 points.

## Part 3: Books of poetry and wisdom

There are five books in this section with poetical and wisdom books. They contain a variety of texts: philosophical debates, proverbs, rules of conduct, love poetry, songs, hymns and prayers. Some of the texts are about everyday life and good conduct: virtues are praised and vices are blamed. Much of the advice is based on common sense and experience (Proverbs). Other texts deal with profound issues, such as the suffering of the righteous (Job). Still others are prayers for protection, songs of praise and thankfulness (Psalms).

Hebrew poetry often makes use of metaphors and parallelism:

1. Metaphors and other figures of speech. It is important for us as readers that we do not take such expressions in a literal sense. Here are three examples:

Psalm 98:8

Let the rivers clap their hands,
let the mountains sing together for joy.

Proverbs 9:1-2

Wisdom has built her house.
She has carved out her seven pillars.
She has prepared her meat
and mixed her wine.
She has also set her table.

Ecclesiastes 11:1

Cast your bread on the waters.
For you will find it after many days.

Exercise: Explain the meaning of these three metaphors. Discuss your answers with the other persons in your group.

1. Parallelism: Most Old Testament poetic and wisdom texts are arranged in various types of parallelism. The most common type is called synonymous parallelism. This means that one thought is presented twice in the same verse but with other words in the second line. It is as if the second line echoes the first line. We should not to try to read two different meanings into these lines. Here is one example from the Psalm 54:2:

Hear my prayer, O God.
Listen to the words of my mouth.

Exercise 1: Explain to the other persons in your group in what way these two line say the same thing.

Exercise 2: Find at least 10 examples of parallelism from 10 different Psalms. Study them and explain how the same thought is presented in two different ways. Discuss your findings with a friend.

Job

This book is an example of wisdom literature in poetical form. By using poetical language it deals with the problems of the suffering of a righteous person. The story takes place during the time of the patriarchs, but the book has probably been written much later. Job is a good man, who is hit by total disaster.

The book starts with a prologue (chapters 1–2), where Job as a result of a conversation between God and Satan is exposed to all kinds of sufferings through Satan. He loses all his children and all his property, and he is struck by a terrible disease. The purpose is to test Job to find out if his life is truly founded on the will of God, or if he is only putting on a show of godliness.

Then follow conversations between Job and his friends, who have come to comfort him and to give their explanations to why he is suffering (chapters 3–37). They claim that Job must have sinned and that his sufferings are punishment for his sins. But Job cannot understand how God can allow a good person to suffer like this.

In the last chapters (38–42) God speaks to Job and reveals himself to him. Job, who has been questioning God all this time, now finds that he has nothing to say. Confronted with the greatness of God’s creation, Job keeps quiet. He humbles himself, surrenders to God and finds solace and rest in God. At the end of the book, God condemns the explanations that Job’s friends had presented (42:7–17). In the epilogue God restores Job completely.

Psalms

This is the hymnbook of the Bible. It is divided into five “books” (1–41, 42–72, 73–89, 90–106, 107–150). The probable reason for this is that it was used as a hymnbook in Jewish synagogue service and that the five “books” reflected the Pentateuch, “the five books of Moses.”

The book of Psalms is a collection of hymns, prayers and poems. They were written by various authors over a long time period. Already during the time of king David there must have been a collection of psalms and later (up to the time of the return from the exile in Babylon) many more psalms were added to this collection. According to Jewish traditions, Ezra was the one who made the final compilation of the book. The psalms were read, sung and recited in the Jewish synagogue services.

There are various kinds of psalms in this book. There are prayers asking for God’s help and protection. There are songs of worship and praise to God. There are cries to God for forgiveness. There is thanksgiving to God for his goodness. There are requests to God to punish one’s enemies. There are expressions of personal feelings. There are prayers for the nation of Israel. A very common theme is God’s greatness expressed in his creation and his loving care for the people of Israel.

The Psalms express all kinds of human feelings and experiences. That is one reason why they have become so much read and loved by so many people all through history. Another reason is that they express a deep faith and a strong trust in the living God.

Psalms and Isaiah are the Old Testament books that are most frequently quoted in the New Testament. The reason for this is that as they contain many prophecies about the Messiah.

Proverbs

This book contains proverbs intended for a young man to help him lead a good and godly life. It starts with a section of praises to the blessings of wisdom (chapters 1–9). Then follow six collections of proverbs:

1. Proverbs of Solomon (10:1–22:16)
2. The thirty sayings of the wise (22:17–24:22)
3. Additional sayings of the wise (24:23-34)
4. Hezekiah’s collection of Solomon’s proverbs (chapters 25–29)
5. Sayings of Agur (chapter 30)
6. Sayings of king Lemuel (31:1–9)

The book ends with a description of the ideal wife.

The proverbs explain what is right and what is wrong. They are based on the insight that the fear of the Lord is the source of true wisdom. This insight is then applied to every area of life: marriage, home, justice, decision-making – yes everything that human beings do, say and think. This wisdom has been gained through life experience.

The brief proverbs reflect the expectations that the Israelite teachers on the people and their behavior in different situations. They emphasize personal qualities such as humility, patience, concern for the poor, industriousness, loyalty to friends and respect for family members. They do not provide any conclusive answers to the big questions of life, but they offer concrete and practical advice on how we can face the problems that we encounter in our everyday lives.

Ecclesiastes

This book is composed like a piece of music, where the same theme comes back again and again. This theme is “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity,” and the word “vanity” is found almost 40 times in the 12 chapters. This expression refers to the fact that most of what man does in life is “a chasing after wind” (an expression is found 9 times). The situation is that of an old teacher (“ecclesiastes” means “teacher”) instructing a young student about life. The teacher himself has sought the meaning of life and often experienced that he found only emptiness, meaninglessness, or vanity. He has sought the meaning of life in knowledge (chapter 1). He has also sought the meaning of life in pleasures, wealth and hard work (chapter 2). But all this has only made him more confused and pessimistic.

In spite of all this negativism, the “teacher” has come to the conclusion is that only a life with God has meaning and purpose. So the final advice that the teacher gives to the young man is to “fear God and keep his commandments” (12:13).

Song of Songs

This book is a collection of poems about love. The scene is springtime in Israel. The poems are filled with the lust and joy of human love. In a very frank way they express the delight of physical attraction between a man and a woman. This is how wisdom describes an amorous courtship. The Bible speaks of both wisdom and love as gifts of God – gifts to be received with gratitude and celebration.

Both Jews and Christians have throughout history interpreted this book as a symbolic description of God’s love for Israel or Christ’s love for his church (or the love between Jesus and the believer). But there is nothing in the text of the book itself – or anywhere else in the Bible – that gives support to such an interpretation.

Questions to the five poetical books of the Old Testament

1. Why are these five Old Testament books called “poetical books”? Think and discuss with the persons in your group!
2. Why are these five Old Testament books called “wisdom books”? Think and discuss with the persons in your group!
3. Three of these five books are not read very much by most believers.
* Which books?
* Try to explain why they as not as popular as the other two. Discuss this with the other persons in your group.
1. Which are the two main ways of understanding “Song of Songs”? Think and discuss in your group.
2. Think and discuss with the other persons in your group before your decide on answers to these two question:
* What is the limitation in the scope of the book of Proverbs?
* Why could it be unwise to base our life as believers mainly on the proverbs of the book of Proverbs?
1. What different kind of psalms do we find in the book of Psalms? Think and discuss with the persons in your group.
2. Write down 5 questions about the five books in this section of the Old Testament. Then ask a friend to write down the answers. Finally mark his/her answers – 10 points for each correct answer; give fewer points if the answer is only partly correct. Give “Pass” for 25–34 points. Give “Distinction” for 35–50 points.

## Part 4: Prophetic books

These are the last 17 books of the Old Testament – from Isaiah to Malachi. They are named after 16 Jewish prophets. “Lamentations” is placed in this group, although it is a different kind of book. There are four “big” prophets. They are called so because these books are bigger. The last 12 prophets are called “minor” or “small” because these books are smaller.

The prophetic books have been written during a period of about 300 years, from the golden age of the two Israelite kingdoms to the return of the people from the exile. Amos and Hosea are among the earliest. They ministered in the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the eighth century BC. Most of the prophets ministered in the Southern Kingdom of Judah – Isaiah and Micah around 700 BC, more than 100 years before the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC. Jeremiah, Habakkuk and Zephaniah delivered their prophesies shortly before the fall of the city and during the captivity. Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi prophesied at the time of the return in 538 BC and later. Some of the prophets had messages to other people. Jonah received a special assignment from God to preach to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, which was destroyed in BC 612. Daniel ministered in Babylon and Ezekiel spoke to the Jewish captives in that country. Obadiah prophesied to Edom, the old enemy of Israel’s.

Often the prophets brought a final word of warning to the people, who had turned their back to God and did not heed his law. They foretold God’s punishment, which would be executed by foreign Gentile nations. They invited the people of Israel to repent and to change their ways. But after punishment and destruction had befallen on the two Israelite nations, the prophets proclaimed God’s enduring love. All the prophets were convinced that they were bringing forth messages from God himself.

Isaiah

The prophet Isaiah ministered during the eighth century BC. His book is one of the most magnificent books in the Old Testament. It has a fantastic message of God’s power and of God’s design for a great future for his people. Isaiah’s own call to become a prophet is told in chapter 6. He ministered in the Southern kingdom of Judah for more than 40 years.

The book can be divided into two main parts:

Chapters 1–39, which are sometimes called “the book of judgment”, contain mainly the prophetic warnings that Isaiah delivered to the kings of Israel and Judah, at a time in history when they were threatened by the Assyrians, the dominant empire of those days. Again and again he urges the kings to repent of their sins and their disobedience to God so that they would not perish. The prophet calls the nation to turn back to God and to restore righteousness and justice in the country. Otherwise they would be struck by destruction. But in this part of the book we can also find many promises: The people of God will be saved through their trials, and peace would be restored. A descendant of king David would rule the nation and implement God’s will.

The second part of the book (chapters 40–66) is sometimes called the “book of comfort”. It contains powerful revelations about the future. It speaks to the people of Israel providing consolation to them during the hardships of their exile in Babylon. The difficult times for the people will come to an end and their transgressions will be pardoned. But not only that: We also find predictions about the future of the whole world – a time when everything will be perfected and return to the paradisical state described in the story of the garden in Eden in the book of Genesis.

The prophesies of Isaiah are often referred to in the New Testament. There, the various authors show how Jesus is the final fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecies about the coming Messiah. So the Christian church finds the messages of Christmas (7:14; 9:1–7), Good Friday and Easter (42:1–4; 49:1–6; 52:13–53:12) as well as of Pentecost (55:1) foretold in the book of Isaiah.

Jeremiah

Jeremiah, who came from a priestly family near Jerusalem, ministered at the turn of the seventh and sixth centuries BC. This is about 100 years after Isaiah. During Jeremiah’s time the Assyrian empire had been crushed by the Babylonians, who had become the new threat to the kingdom of Judah. He belongs to those Old Testament prophets, who experienced that the king or the people never listened to their messages from God. Jeremiah is often called “the weeping prophet”. He was persecuted. His life was threatened. He was called a traitor and was despised in every way. He had hardly any friends. But in spite of all these difficulties he did not keep quiet.

His ministry lasted for over 40 years. This was a stormy and difficult period. There were constant wars between the empires of Assyria, Babylon and Egypt, which seriously affected – and even destroyed – many of the smaller countries, including Judah. The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem in BC 605, attacked it again in BC 597 and finally destroyed it in BC 587. Jeremiah was personally involved in the political developments in Judah during these years. He was not taken to Babylon but fled to Egypt, where he according to Jewish tradition was stoned.

Just like Isaiah, Jeremiah also looks into the future through his messages. He is the first Old Testament prophet that in clear way speaks of a new covenant (chapter 31). Jesus refers to this expression, when he institutes the Lord’s Supper: “This cup is the new covenant in my blood” (Luk 22:20).

Jeremiah, which is the longest book in the Bible, can be structured like this:

1. Call of the prophet (chapter 1)
2. Warnings and exhortations to Judah (chapters 2–35)
3. Sufferings and persecution of the prophet (chapters 36–38)
4. The fall of Jerusalem and what happened afterwards (chapters 39–45)
5. Judgment on the nations (chapters 46–51)
6. Historical appendix (chapter 52)

Lamentations

This book contains five independent songs, which tradition claims were written by Jeremiah. That is why we have Jeremiah’s name attached to it in your Kannada Bibles, even if the author is unknown. And there are many similarities between the book of Jeremiah and Lamentations. The anguish and the concern for the people are the same in both books.

The situation of these songs is that the kingdom Judah has been conquered by Babylon. They express the grief and distress of the people, who believe that God had delivered them into the hands of the enemy. Each song also contains a confession of sin. But we can also find promises that give hope for the future. These texts are still read out in the Jewish synagogues during the month of July, when the Jews recall the destruction of the Jerusalem temple – first in 587 BC by the Babylonians, then in AD 70 by the Romans.

The first four songs are so called “alphabetic”. This means that the first letter of each verse follows the order of the Hebrew alphabet. The alphabet has 22 letters, so chapter 1, 2 and 4 each have 22 verses. Chapter 3 has 66 verses: It consists of 22 stanzas following the order of the Hebrew alphabet, each stanza has three verses starting with the same letter

Ezekiel

Ezekiel, who ministered in the first part of the sixth century BC, was to some extent a contemporary of Jeremiah. He was among those Jews who were taken to captivity in Babylon. His explanation of the reason for the exile is the same as Jeremiah’s: The people had deserted God, and now God’s punishment had come through the Babylonians. This Ezekiel demonstrated by acting out symbolic dramas (for example in chapter 4).

The book begins with the call of the prophet at the age of 30, and the intense vision of the glory of the Lord (chapters 1–3). Chapters 4–24 contain warnings to Israel. God will punish them, and the temple will be destroyed. Ezekiel also received messages for the nations who were threatening his own people (chapters 25–32).

After the fall of Jerusalem the tone of Ezekiel’s prophecies changed. He now consoles the people and conveys hope to them about their future (chapters 33–39). God would surely restore his people. At the end of the book we find Ezekiel’s vision of a time when God’s people would worship the Lord in a new temple (chapters 40–48).

Ezekiel taught that people are individually responsible to God. Each person needs an inner renewal through the transformation of the heart. Sanctification and holiness were constant themes in his messages.

Daniel

The book of Daniel is also associated with Babylon. The historical framework is found in the first part of the book (chapters 1–6). Daniel and his three friends have been taken as captives to Babylon. There they arrive at the royal court of king Nebuchadnezzar, where they stand up for their Jewish faith and way of life. Daniel, who in some ways is more of a statesman than a prophet, receives special wisdom from God. He “had insight into all visions and dreams” (1:17).

This wisdom and this understanding is the basis of Daniel’s interpretations of visions and dreams presented in the second half of the book (chapters 7–12). Through visions the fall of the great empires of the world is described. The establishment of the kingdom of God – a kingdom which will never be destroyed – will be established through “one like a son of man” (7:13-14). This passage has many literary points in common with the book of Revelation in the New Testament. The use of pictures, number and symbols are for example very similar. This type of text was later called apocalyptic, which means “revelation” or “disclosing.”

The theological theme of the book is God’s sovereignty (5:21). Daniel’s visions always show God as triumphant.

Parts of this book are written in Aramaic (chapters 2–8, which was the administrative language of that part of the world in those days.

The term “son of man”, which Jesus uses very often about himself in the gospel comes from the book of Daniel.

The book of Daniel consists of two parts:

1. Daniel at the Babylonian court
2. Daniel’s visions

Hosea

Hosea is perhaps the most dramatic of all the prophets. God told him live out his message – and not only proclaim it – and to marry a prostitute woman. He was contemporary with Isaiah during the eighth century BC, but he had his ministry in the Northern Kingdom of Israel (Isaiah ministered in Judah). He delivered his prophecies during a period of 40 years before the conquest of Samaria by the Assyrians in 722 BC. Those were turbulent times, and Israel had six kings in just over 20 years. They were unfaithful to God and often worshiped foreign idols.

Hosea’s wife was repeatedly unfaithful to him, which wounded him very much. At the same time he kept on loving his unfaithful wife, forgiving and restoring her again and again. Through this Hosea presented a prophetic message about God’s unfailing love for his people. God is wounded when his people turn away from him, but he longs to restore his unfaithful people to a renewed fellowship with him. In chapter 11 we find one of the most powerful statements in the Bible about God’s mercy (11:1-11).

Joel

We know nothing about when Joel lived. But we understand from the text that his ministry was in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. It could have been in the ninth century BC or in the fifth century BC. But the date does not really matter.

The book starts with a disaster, an invasion of locusts that devour the crops and bring devastating drought (chapter 1). This can be interpreted in two ways: either they were real locusts, a natural disaster – or the locusts symbolize enemy armies invading the country. In any case, this disaster is metaphor for the coming of “the day of the Lord” (2:1-17).

The message of Joel is that unless the people repent and turn to the Lord, the day of the Lord will strike them with destruction. But if they repent they will receive the blessings of the Lord (2:18–3:21). Peter refers to this blessing in his sermon in Jerusalem on the first day of Pentecost (Acts 2:16-21). God will pour his Spirit over people.

Amos

Amos was contemporary with Hosea in the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the eighth century BC. But he came from a shepherd family in the Southern Kingdom, where he had tended sheep and taken care of sycamore-fig trees (1:1; 7:14–15). At this time the kingdom of Israel is a wealthy and flourishing kingdom, and people have an outward appearance of religiosity. But Amos condemns their hypocrisy. They oppress the poor, and their religiosity is false. Amos is brave to expose all these things in the name of the God. He asks for rivers of justice and a mighty stream of righteousness (5:24). Thirty years later the Assyrians had destroyed Samaria and deported the people into captivity.

Amos can be divided into three distinct parts:

1. Eight oracles of judgment on the nation (chapters 1–2)
2. Three oracles of punishment against the people of Israel (chapters 3–6)
3. Five visions of divine retribution (chapters 7–9)

Obadiah

This is the shortest book in the Old Testament. It is unknown to us who Obadiah was and when his ministry took place. But the contents of his prophecies are very clear. They begin with a judgment of destruction against Edom, who in their arrogance had taken part in the plundering of Jerusalem (verses 1-6). The sin of the people of Edom – the descendants of Abraham’s son Esau – is very serious, because they were blood relatives to the Israelites. Later, in the fifth century BC, Edom was conquered by the Arabs.

The last five verses describe the future hope of Israel – “the kingdom will be the Lord’s” (verse 21).

Jonah

This book is different form the other prophetic books as it is written like a story and does not contain any prophetic oracles. It recounts how God calls Jonah to go to the Assyrian capital of Nineveh and warn the Ninevites of God’s impending judgment. Jonah does not accept the call but tries to run away from his assignment. While he is in the belly of the large fish, God rebukes him. So he finally goes to Nineveh. When the people there repent and turn to God, God decides not to punish them. This really upsets Jonah and he starts blaming God. Again God has to rebuke him.

The book of Jonah is difficult to date. Many scholars think that it was written towards the end of the eighth century BC. Nineveh was finally destroyed in 612 BC, when the Babylonians conquered Assyria.

The book shows God’s love and concern. He would rather forgive and save than punish and destroy.

Micah

Micah lived partly at the same time as Isaiah, Amos as Hosea during the end of the eighth century BC. He may even have been Isaiah’s disciple, as their style of writing is similar.

His ministry is in the Southern Kingdom of Judah, but he prophesies to both Israel and Judah. Like Amos he exposes kings, priests and prophets, accusing them of exploiting the poor and the defenseless through financial and religious deceit. God’s punishment would strike both Samaria and Jerusalem.

But Micah also preaches a message of hope. He promises that God would bring peace to the whole world through a great king from the line of David.

Micah can be divided into four parts:

1. Judgment against Israel and Judah (chapters 1–3)
2. Hope for Israel and Judah (chapters 4–5)
3. The Lord’s case against Israel (chapter 6)
4. Sadness turns into triumph (chapter 7)

Nahum

This book is a poem about the judgment and fall of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire. This happened in 612 BC. The name of the prophet means “comforter,” and he really comforts the people of the kingdom of Judah, who live in constant fear of the Assyrians. Nahum probably ministered in Judah during the second half of the seventh century BC.

Habakkuk

This book is different from the other prophetic books. It does not contain any oracle. Instead it is a dialogue between the prophet Habakkuk and God. Habakkuk was ministering in the kingdom of Judah at the end of the seventh century BC. He was a contemporary of Jeremiah, but we do not know much about him.

Habakkuk can be structured like this:

1. Habakkuk’s first complaint: Why doesn’t God punish the evil of Judah? (1:2-4)
2. God’s answer: The Babylonians will punish Judah (1:5-11)
3. Habakkuk’s second complaint: How can a just God use wicked Babylon to punish a people who are more righteous than the Babylonians? (1:12–2:1)
4. God’s answer: Babylon will be punished, and faith will be rewarded (2:2-20)
5. Habakkuk’s prayer: He praises God, who is in control of everything (chapter 3)

Zephaniah

Zephaniah, who was of royal descent, ministered in the kingdom of Judah during the reign of his relative king Josiah (the second half of the seventh century BC). He was a contemporary of Habakkuk.

Zephaniah prophesies about God’s approaching judgment against the kingdom of Judah. His main theme is the coming of the Lord, when God will severely punish the nations. Also Judah, who have turned away from him, will be punished. This is described in very strong and graphic language.

But the day of the Lord is also a day when the remnant – those who have remained faithful to God – will be restored and there will be gladness and joy in the city of Jerusalem. And the nation will be restored (3:9-20).

Haggai

Three of the Old Testament prophets had their ministry after the exile in Babylonia. Haggai is the first of them. His book consists of four speeches delivered on four different occasions during a four-month period in 520 BC:

1. The call (delivered at the Feast of the New Moon) to rebuild the temple (chapter 1). The work of rebuilding the temple should be taken up again. Then God’s blessings would return to the people.
2. The word (delivered at the Feast of the Tabernacles later the same year) about the promised glory of the new temple (2:2-10).
3. The word (the first of two speeches delivered on the 24th day of the 9th month the same year) about the defiled people who will be purified and blessed (2:11-20). God’s blessing will now rest on the people, as they have again started work on building the temple.
4. God’s promise (the second of two speeches delivered on the 24th day of the 9th month the same year) to Zerubbabel (2:21-24). Zerubbabel was one of the leaders for the Jews that returned to Jerusalem from the Babylonian captivity. He belonged to the royal line of David and was the Persian governor over Judah.

Zechariah

Zechariah, who came from a priestly family, ministered in Jerusalem during the same period as Haggai (the last decades of the sixth century BC). He too was involved in the rebuilding of the temple, which was completed in BC 516.

The first part of the book (chapters 1–8) contains a number of visions about the restoration of Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the temple.

The second part (chapters 9-14) contains two prophetic oracles about the coming of the future Messiah. Here we find many of the texts that are quoted in the gospels in connection with Jesus’ life. The expression “See, you king comes to you” is found in 9:9 (compare Matt 26:15). In 11:13 we find the “thirty pieces of silver”.

Malachi

Malachi lived in the fifth century BC. By this time about 100 years had passed since the Jews returned from their captivity in Babylon.

This book is written in the form of a dialogue. The prophet brings the questions of the people to God and then delivers God’s answers to the people.

The times are difficult. The people are suffering and they are disappointed with God. Gradually the people as well as the priest have been losing their faith in God. The prophet reminds them of God’s love. He urges the priests and the people to respect God and to follow his law. They should bring full tithes to the temple and live righteous lives. Then God would surely bless them. God would send his messenger (that is also the meaning of the prophet’s name “Malachi”) to prepare a way for himself (3:1). So the people should have hope and wait for the day when the Messiah would come with judgment for the sinners but with healing for those who honor his name: “But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness will arise with healing in its wings” (4:2).

In this way the Old Testament ends with the people of Israel waiting for God’s Messiah to come!

Questions to the prophetical books of the Old Testament

1. Who are the “big” prophets? And why are they called so?
2. Who are the “minor’” or “small” prophets? And why are they called so?
3. There is one book in this section of the Old Testament that does not really carry the name of a prophet. Which book is that? Why does it have Jeremiah’s name attached to it in your Kannada Bibles? Think and discuss!
4. There are 16 prophets that have given name to 16 (of the totally 17) books in this section of the Old Testament. Discuss with the other persons in your group before your write down the answers!
	1. Only two of them had their ministry in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Who were they?
	2. Six (or perhaps seven) of them had their ministry in the Southern Kingdom of Judah before the exile to Babylon. Who were they?
	3. One of them had his ministry either in the north or in the south – we don’t know where. Who was he?
	4. Two of them had their ministry in Babylon during the exile. Who were they?
	5. Three of them had their ministry in Jerusalem after the exile. Who were they?
	6. One of them went to a faraway country to minister to the people in a big city? Who was he?
5. Five of these prophetic books have clear prophecies about the coming Messiah. Which five? Think and discuss!
6. Which prophet has prophecies about inner renewal through the transformation of the heart? Think and discuss!
7. Which prophet has prophecy about God pouring his Spirit over people?
8. Explain briefly the important messages of these prophetic books. Discuss with the other persons in your group before your write down the answers!
	1. Amos
	2. Zephaniah
	3. Hosea
	4. Malachi
	5. Joel
9. Write down 10 questions about the 17 books in this section of the Old Testament. Then ask a friend to write down the answers. Finally mark his/her answers – 10 points for each correct answer; give fewer points if the answer is only partly correct. Give “Pass” for 50–69 points. Give “Distinction” for 70–100 points.

# The New Testament

## Part 1: Gospels and Acts

The New Testament has five historical books. First come the four gospels that tell us about the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. Three of them – Matthew, Mark and Luke – have a similar structure and have many stories and teachings in common. They are often called the “synoptic gospels”. This means that they “see together” or have the “same viewpoint”. John’s gospel is quite different and more philosophical. The reason for the differences between the four gospels is that they are written from different perspectives and addressed to different groups of readers.

Then comes the book called Acts of the Apostles, which describes the early church and how the gospel about Jesus Christ spread from Jerusalem in Palestine to Rome, the capital of the great Roman Empire. In the first part of the book Peter is the main character. In the second part Paul is the main character.

Matthew’s gospel

The author of this gospel has not disclosed his name, but very early traditions claim that the author was the Matthew, mentioned in the gospels as a tax collector who became one of Jesus’ disciples.

Matthew wrote to people who belonged to the Jewish culture This is evident from the fact that he uses the title “Son of David” – which is a title for the Messiah – as many as nine times. It is hardly used at all in the other gospels. Mathew also prefers the expression “kingdom of heaven” instead of the more common “kingdom of God”. The reason for this is that Jews avoided pronouncing the name of God, as it was considered a blasphemy. Instead they used other expressions, for example “heaven.”

Matthew’s main purpose is to prove to his Jewish readers that Jesus is their Messiah. He does this by showing how Jesus in his life and ministry fulfilled the promises of the Old Testament writings. Matthew has nine unique texts (they are not found in the other gospels) to prove this: 1:22–23, 2:15, 2:17–18, 2:23, 4:14–16, 8:17, 12:17–21; 13:35 and 27:9–10. This is also one reason why Matthew emphasizes that Jesus came from the family line of king David.

The Jewish link back to the Pentateuch or the “five books of Moses” can be found in the way in which Matthew has structured his story about the life of Jesus around five big speeches that Jesus delivers to the people or to the disciples

1. The Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5–7)
2. The instructions to the disciples before they are sent out to preach (chapter 10)
3. Parables about the kingdom of heaven (chapter 13)
4. Exposition on what it means to follow Jesus (chapter 18)
5. Jesus predicting the destruction of Jerusalem, the end of this age and coming of a new age (chapters 24–25)

Matthew contains many well-known stories – especially parables – that are not found in the other gospels:

* The visit of the magi (chapter 2)
* The escape to Egypt (chapter 2)
* The narrow and wide gates (chapter 7)
* The parable of the weeds (chapter 13)
* The parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl (chapter 13)
* The parable of the net (chapter 13)
* The parable of the unmerciful servant (chapter 18)
* The parable of the workers in the vineyard (chapter 20)
* The parable of the two sons (chapter 21)
* The parable of the ten virgins (chapter 25)
* The sheep and the goats (chapter 25)

Matthew can be divided into three parts based on the expression “From that time” found twice in the text (4:17 and 16:21):

1. Jesus – the Son of David – is introduced (1:1–4:16)
2. Jesus – the Son of David – ministers (4:17–16:20)
3. Jesus – the Son of David – suffers, dies and rises from the dead

Mark’s gospel

Mark it the shortest of the gospels. It is probably also the oldest. The author does not mention his name, but tradition says that it was written by John Mark, who is mentioned in the book of Acts, was related to Barnabas and traveled with Paul in the beginning of his first missionary journey. Mark is said to have based his story on information he received from the apostle Peter.

It is interesting to note that 90 % of Mark’s text is also found in Matthew, and more than 50 % of the text is also found in Luke. Even then there is one parable in Mark that is not found in any other gospel: The parable of the growing seed (chapter 4)

Mark’s gospel focuses much on what Jesus did. Sometimes it has been called “the gospel of acts” in contrast to Matthew, which has been called “the gospel of speeches.” The first recipients of this gospel was most probably Gentile believes in Rome. That is the reason why Jewish customs are explained (see for example 7:3) and why all Aramaic expressions are translated into Greek (see for example 3:17, 5:41 and 7:34). Aramaic (and not Hebrew) was the language spoken in the Holy Land by the Jews of this time.

Mark pictures Jesus as a man of action and a man with authority. His teaching is powerful. He has authority of evil spirits and he is able to forgive people their sins.

There is something of a secret about Jesus in Mark’s story. The evil spirits, which Jesus casts out, are not permitted to speak about him (1:34). The same applies to people who have been healed (1:44). Even Jesus’ own disciples are told not to disclose who Jesus is (8:30). Also, in this gospel no person says that Jesus is the Son of God – not until the Roman officer does it at Jesus’ cross (15:39).

The reason why Mark presents his story in this way is probably to stress the importance of Jesus’ death. His death is a death for the ransom of many (10:45). So only at the cross the secret about Jesus is revealed, and at the cross it becomes evident what he as the Son of God really achieves.

Mark’s gospel can be divided into two clear parts:

1. Jesus performs miracles and signs in Galilee (1–8:30)
2. Jesus teaches about his suffering as he is walking towards his death in Jerusalem (8:31–16:20)

Luke’s gospel

This gospel has the same author as the book of Acts, and both books were written for a Roman official called Theophilus (1:3 and Acts 1:1). The author does not reveal his name, but much evidence points to Luke, who was a doctor and one of the apostle Paul’s travel companions and closest friends. He was probably a Gentile by birth – in that case the only non-Jewish author of any of the books of the Bible! He must have had a good education and was well versed in Greek culture.

Luke presents Jesus as the promised savior of Israel. But he is also the savior of the whole world.

In his gospel Luke writes about many different things and gives much detailed information about many matters. He emphasizes the poor, the rejected and the women that surrounded Jesus (see for example 7:36-50, 18:9-14). Angels play an important role (2:9-13). Special emphasis is given to praise and prayer see (for example 1:67-79). The Holy Spirit is very much part of the story – not only in Acts but also in the gospel (2:25-32). The parables of Jesus have a prominent place in the gospel (see for example chapter 15). Many stories have connection with Jerusalem and the temple.

Luke contains many well-known stories and parables that are not found in the other gospels, for example

* + The birth of Jesus (chapter 2)
	+ Jesus presented in the temple (chapter 2)
	+ The boy Jesus in the temple (chapter 2)
	+ The crippled woman healed on the Sabbath (chapter 13)
	+ The parable of the lost coin (chapter 15)
	+ The parable of the lost son (chapter 15)
	+ The parable of the shrewd manager (chapter 16)
	+ The rich man and Lazarus (chapter 16)
	+ Ten healed of leprosy (chapter 17)
	+ The parable of the persistent widow (chapter 18)
	+ The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (chapter 18)
	+ Zacchaeaus the tax collector (chapter 19)
	+ The disciples on the road to Emmaus (chapter 24)
	+ The disciples told to wait in Jerusalem until they had received power (chapter 24)

Luke’s gospel can be structured like this:

1. John the Baptist and Jesus are introduced (1–4:13)
2. Jesus’ ministry in Galilee (4:1–9:50)
3. Jesus journeying towards Jerusalem (9:51–19:40)
4. Jesus spends time in the Jerusalem temple before his suffering and death. The disciples gather in Jerusalem after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

John’s gospel

This gospel contains material and information, which was written down and preserved by the disciple John, who was one of Jesus’ closest friends. His name is not mentioned in the gospel but he is called “the disciple whom Jesus loved”. Then some other persons (or perhaps a “secretary”) seem to have “published” his material (see 21:24).

John’s gospel is quite different from the other three gospels. A very limited number of words are used again and again – in a very symbolic and reflective way. John speaks about believe, eternal life, glory, testimony, sign, light and truth – just to mention a few central concepts – in such a way that the reader never really gets done with the text. Each time the reader meditates on a passage from John he discovers new angles and new depths.

The gospel starts by presenting Jesus as God’s “word” who existed before all time but who was born as a human child into this time and this world. This “word was God” (1:1, 9)

The relationship between God and Jesus is constantly described through the combination “the Father” and “the Son”. This emphasizes their unity – and the fact that Jesus conclusively and definitely has revealed to mankind who God is (1:18). This emphasis is strengthened even further by the seven well-known “I am” words throughout the text of the gospel (6:35, 8:12, 10:7, 10:11, 11:25, 14:6 and 15:1), which point back to God’s name as presented in Exodus 3:14–15.

John has a marked purpose with his text. The gospel is written that the reader might “believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing … have life in his name” (20:31).

It is interesting to note that this gospel does not contain any parables. But there are many well-known stories found only in John and not in the other gospels, for example:

* + Jesus makes water into wine (chapter 2)
	+ The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus (chapter 3)
	+ Jesus and the Samaritan woman (chapter 4)
	+ The long discourse about Jesus as the bread of life (chapter 6)
	+ The woman caught in adultery (chapter 8)
	+ Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead (chapter 11)
	+ Jesus washes the feet of his disciples (chapter 13)
	+ Jesus teaching about the Holy Spirit (chapters 14 and 16)
	+ Jesus teaching about the vine and the branches (chapter 15)
	+ Jesus’ prayer for his disciples and for all believers (chapter 17)
	+ Jesus appears after his resurrection to seven disciples while fishing (chapter 21)

John’s gospel can be structured into two parts like this:

1. Jesus addresses the people: The public testimony of Jesus (chapters 1–12). He performs seven “signs” (this is the term that John uses for Jesus’ miracles). The signs reveal who Jesus is. Each sign is followed by explanations and discussions.
2. Jesus addresses the disciples (chapters 13-21): Jesus spends time with his disciples teaching them and encouraging them with the purpose of deepening their faith in him. This faith is often called “love”

Acts of the apostles

This book begins where Luke’ gospel ends. In his gospel Luke leads the readers up to Jerusalem. In the book of Acts he instead leads his readers from Jerusalem “to the ends of the earth” (1:8). This book is the story about how Jesus’ followers took the gospel about Jesus to the Gentile nations.

The apostle Peter is the central character in the first part of the book (chapters 1–12) and the apostle Paul in the second part (chapters 13–28). The last chapters contain the defense speeches that Paul made before various people in authority on his way to Rome after he had been taken captive in Jerusalem. A time period of about 30 years is covered – from the birth of the church in Jerusalem (around AD 30) to Paul’s imprisonment in Rome (AD 60–62).

One of the purposes that Luke probably had with his two New Testament books – the gospel and the book of Acts – was that they could form some kind of documentation to be used at Paul’s trial before the emperor of Rome. That would provide a natural explanation for the sudden ending of the book of Acts with Paul’s arrival in Rome. The readers are never informed about the outcome of Paul’s trial. It is interesting to note that Luke presents the Christian faith is such a way that it does not pose any threat to the Roman Empire!

But the main purpose of Acts must have been to proclaim the good news (the gospel) about Jesus. This proclamation is emphasized all through the book. This gospel is not only for the Jews – but also for the Gentile nations. This gospel is spread through people, who were filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit plays such an important part this book that it has often been called “the acts of the Holy Spirit.”

Acts can be structured geographically based on the words of Jesus in 1:8: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. You will be witnesses to me in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the uttermost pRTS of the earth,” like this:

1. Jerusalem (chapter 1–7)
2. Judea and Samaria (chapter 8–12)
3. To the ends of the earth (chapters 13–28)

Questions to the New Testament historical books

1. Why do we have four gospels in the New Testament? Think and discuss.
2. Three of the gospels are similar and they are called the “synoptic gospels.” What does “synoptic” mean?
3. What are the differences between the three synoptic gospels? Think and discuss together with the other persons in your group. List as many differences as can.
4. One of the gospels does not contain any parables? Which one?
5. What is the term that John’s gospel uses for Jesus’ miracles? Why? Think and discuss together with the other persons in your group.
6. In which gospel (or gospels) can we find the following? Discuss with the other persons in your group before you write down the answers!
	1. Accounts of the birth of Jesus
	2. Jesus in the temple at the age of 12
	3. The parable about the valuable pearl
	4. The story about Zacchaeus
	5. Lazarus raised from the dead
	6. The Good Samaritan
	7. The lost son
	8. The parable of the ten virgins
	9. Jesus teaching about the Holy Spirit
	10. Jesus appearing after his resurrection to the disciples fishing
7. Who is the author of the book of Acts?
8. Why did he write this book? Discuss with the other persons in your group before you write down the answers.
9. How can the book of Acts be structured from a geographical point of view?
10. Write down 10 questions about the 5 books in this section of the New Testament. Then ask a friend to write down the answers. Finally mark his/her answers – 10 points for each correct answer; give fewer points if the answer is only partly correct. Give “Pass” for 50–69 points. Give “Distinction” for 70–100 points.

## Part 2: Paul’s letters

Paul wrote many letters to churches and church leaders in the early church. Thirteen such letters are included in the New Testament. In these letters Paul writes about important matters concerning the Christian faith and how the believers should live their lives as God’s people.

The letters are arranged according to two principles:

* First come the 9 letters written to churches. Then come the 4 letters written to individuals.
* Within each group the letters are placed according to size with the longest first. We should note that the letters are not placed according to when they were written or according their importance.

On the following page you will find a chronology of Paul’s life and ministry. But we need to note that Bible scholars do not agree on all the details of Paul’s life and journeys.

Paul’s letters have also been included in this chronology. Again Bible scholars do not agree on everything. The biggest issue is the dating of Galatians: Was it written during Paul’s second journey (which would be before the meeting of the apostles in Jerusalem recorded inActs chapter 15)? Or during Paul’s third journey (which took place after Acts chapter 15)?

Paul’s letters

Romans

When Paul’s third missionary journey (recorded in Acts 18:23–20:16) is coming to its end, Paul writes his letter to Rome from Corinth. For a long time he had planned to visit the capital of the Roman Empire and now he sees an opportunity to do so (1:10–13). But Paul has even greater plans. From Rome he wants to travel to Spain (15:23).

So Romans is in one way an introduction letter, in which Paul presents his gospel. Here we find a detailed exposition of the main points in the gospel. The doctrine of justification by faith – based on the death and resurrection of Jesus – as the foundation for man’s fellowship with God, is presented in Romans (3:21–26) in an absolutely fantastic way.

As most of Paul’s letters, Romans is divided into one part where doctrine is expounded (chapters 1–11) and one part with exhortations (chapter 12–16).

There was a practical problem in the church in Rome, which Paul deals with throughout his letter – the tension between those believers who had a Gentile background and those who had a Jewish background. The Jewish believers (together with all other Jews) had been sent away from Rome through a decision by emperor Claudius (Acts 18:1), and they were not allowed to return until after the death of the emperor in AD 54. So the return of these Jewish background believers to Rome only a couple of years before Paul wrote Romans had caused a tense situation in the church. Each group looked down on the other group. So Paul uses his teaching about justification by grace to admonish both groups: Before God nobody has anything that he can boast about!

Romans can be structured as follows:

1. The unrighteousness of all mankind. God’s righteousness can be received only through faith (chapters 1–5)
2. The new life through Christ Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit (chapters 6–8)
3. God’s intention for Israel and the Jews (chapters 9–11)
4. The new lifestyle: righteousness practiced (chapters 12–15)

First Corinthians

In the course of his second missionary journey, Paul ministered in Corinth for at least one and a half years (Acts chapter 18). Later, during his third missionary journey he uses Ephesus as his base for three years. During that time Paul writes four (or perhaps five) letters to the church in Corinth. Two of these letters have survived and are included in the New Testament.

Corinth was a populous Greek city inhabited by people of all nationalities. It was well known for its trade, its culture and its many religions – but also for its immorality.

First Corinthians gives us as readers insight into a church where there are many concrete problems to deal with. Among the solutions that Paul suggests to all the problems of the church we find one of the most well known texts in the Bible – the praise of Christian love (chapter 13).

First Corinthians can be structured from the problems that Paul writes about like this:

1. Division in the church (chapters 1–4)
2. Immoral behavior and lawsuits among believers (chapters 5–6)
3. Instruction on marriage (chapter 7)
4. Responsibility and freedom in the church (chapters 8–10)
5. Instruction on public worship (chapter 11)
6. The use of spiritual gifts (chapters 12–14)
7. Instruction on the resurrection (chapter 15)
8. The collection for God’s people in Jerusalem and personal greetings (chapter 16)

Second Corinthians

This letter of Paul’s gives us an insight into his apostolic ministry. As a matter of fact, it can be seen as Paul’s defense written to the people in Corinth who are questioning his ministry. By this time the relationship between Paul and the church in Corinth has reached a critical stage, and some of the believers were vehemently opposing him.

In the first part of the letter (chapters 1–7) Paul explains his conduct and his apostolic ministry. The main commission of an apostle is to be faithful to and to preserve the message of reconciliation – that God’s righteousness has been revealed in Jesus for the salvation of mankind (5:18–20).

In the second part (chapters 8–9) Paul goes on to encourage the believers in Corinth to take part in a collection of money for the church in Jerusalem, which Paul was undertaking. Here we find essential teaching about the importance of giving and of sharing of our resources with people in need.

In the third part of the letter (chapters 10–13) Paul uses strong words to defend himself against those who had criticized him. Here we find the well-known text about the “thorn in his flesh”, about something that is tormenting him (12:7).

Galatians

Bible scholars disagree about when Paul’s letter to the Galatians was written. The reason for this is the discussion about the “Galatians.” Who were they? If they were the inhabitants of the Roman Province “Galatia” – then the letter could have been written immediately after his first missionary journey and before the Apostles’ Meeting in Jerusalem in AD 49. If they were the inhabitants of the old district of “Galatia” – then it must have been written after his second missionary journey.

But there is no disagreement about the occasion for the letter. Paul has heard that some teachers had come to the church claiming that all true believers must follow the Law of Moses and be circumcised. Paul is very upset about this teaching. He was afraid that this “different gospel” would lead the Galatians astray and that the believers would lose their freedom in Christ – a freedom, which Paul had brought to them through the gospel he preached. For Paul had taught that the new life in Christ was a gift from God available to anyone who believed. Man “is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ (2:16). Many had received this gospel of grace. And now teachers had come claiming that the Galatians had to follow the laws of the Old Testament. So the letter deals with one of the most important questions in the early church: Must believers of Gentile background adhere to the Law of Moses and undergo circumcision to be true Christians? Paul’s answer is a resounding “No!”

Galatians can be structured in this way:

1. The gospel has been revealed by God through Jesus Christ (chapters 1–2)
2. The freedom of the gospel comes through grace – not through the Law (chapters 3–4)
3. The power of the gospel comes from the Spirit (chapters 5–6)

Ephesians

Ephesians is one of the four so called prison letters written during Paul’s first imprisonment in Rome. The oldest manuscripts don’t have the words “in Ephesus” in the first verse. This fact – and the fact that Paul does not convey any personal greetings – could mean that the letter is a “circular letter”, intended for other churches in addition to the one in Ephesus.

One theme of this letter is “the church”, through which God’s plan is fulfilled – “to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ”. Paul uses seven metaphors to describe the church:

1. A body (1:22-23)
2. A country (2:19)
3. A household (2:19)
4. A building (2:20)
5. A temple (2:21)
6. A dwelling (2:22)
7. A bride (5:25)

But in spite of these metaphors, Christ is always presented as the power that holds the church together. He is the one who blesses (chapter 1), who makes us one (chapter 2), who makes known the mystery of God (chapter 3), who moulds the fellowship (chapter 4), who gives the light (chapter 5) and who provides the power (chapter 6).

Ephesians can be structured into two parts, like this:

1. The blessing in Christ. This is theology: God’s work through Christ (chapters 1–3)
2. The walk in Christ. This is ethics: The believer’s response to God’s work through Christ (chapters 4–6)

Philippians

Philippians is also one of the prison letters. It is much more personal than Ephesians and contains a lot details about the relationship between the church and Paul.

Philippi was the first city in Europe, where Paul established a church. This was during his second missionary journey (Acts chapter 16). That could be reason why he had such a warm and friendly relationship with this church.

The direct occasion of the letter is that Paul wants to thank for the gift and the support that he has received from the church. There is a feeling of gratitude and joy throughout the letter. At the same time Paul takes the opportunity to exhort the church. False teachers have come to this church as well and caused disunity between the believers (4:2). Paul encourages the Philippians not to be proud but to follow the example of Christ who “humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross” (2:8).

We can put the following headings on the four chapters:

1. Christ gives meaning and goal to our lives (chapter 1)
2. Christ is our model in humility and obedience (chapter 2)
3. Christ gives us a hope for the future (chapter 3)
4. Christ gives us strength in the various circumstances of our lives (chapter 4)

Colossians

Colossians is the third of the “prison letters”, and in many ways it is a parallel letter to Ephesians. But it is also similar to Romans as it is written to a church, which Paul had not established or even visited.

In this letter Christ is pictured not only as the Lord of the church (as in Ephesians), but he is also the Lord of all creation. Colosse was situated on the important trade route from Rome to the East. So many philosophers and religious teachers travelled along this Roman highway and stopped in Colosse to speak to the people there. Epaphras, the founder of the church, had come to Paul in Rome to report about the dangerous situation for the church in Colosse. The false teachers had created confusion among the believers. They taught that there was a need for “wisdom” and “fullness” in addition to the work of Christ. Through hard penance and severe asceticism and through the worship of angels they tried to control the cosmic powers (2:3, 8, 18, 20-23). As a result Christ had been degraded and was thought of as just one lord among many others.

This is the background of the letter, and the reason why Paul writes the way he does to the Colossians. His main point is that nothing can be added to the gospel about Jesus Christ. He is supreme over creation and he is the head of his body, the church.

Colossians consists of two main parts:

1. Theology: Teaching about what God has done through Jesus Christ and about Christ’s total supremacy (chapters 1–2)
2. Ethics: Exhortations to lead lives in accordance with what God has done through Jesus Christ (chapters 3–4)

First Thessalonians

During his second missionary journey Paul came to Thessalonica (Acts 17), the capital of the Roman Province of Macedonia. There he stayed for three weeks and spoke every Sabbath in the synagogue. Several Jews believed that Jesus was the Messiah of the Scriptures. Other Jews got furious and started a riot, so Paul had to leave the city very suddenly. Later when he came to Corinth, Paul got reports about the situation in the church in Thessalonica: The Jews were still causing problems because so many Gentiles had come to faith in Jesus. The believers also felt that they had been deserted by Paul. This letter – one of the very first that Paul wrote – was written as a response to the need for instruction for the church.

In this letter Paul writes for the first time about the three important Christian concepts “faith”, “hope” and “love”. It is possible to use these words to structure the letter, like this:

1. Faith among the believers in Thessalonica (chapter 1)
2. Love, mainly the love that Paul had shown in his ministry for the believers (chapters 2–3)
3. Hope: Practical exhortations connected with the hope of the second coming of Jesus (chapters 4–5)

Second Thessalonians

This letter seems to have been written very soon after First Thessalonians. The church had misunderstood Paul’s teaching about the second coming of Jesus. Some believers had even become lazy and stopped working – just waiting for Jesus’ return.

So now Paul’s provides further information about the second coming of Jesus – things that must happen before his coming.

This letter can be divided into three parts, like this:

1. Introduction and thanksgiving, focusing on the second coming of Jesus (chapter 1)
2. The man of lawlessness and the second coming of Jesus (chapter 2)
3. 3. Exhortations: call to prayer and orderly life (chapter 3)

First Timothy

This is the first of the three letters called “pastoral letters” – letters to pastors. They are letters that Paul wrote to co-workers who had been appointed to take care of the ministry for some time in a certain place. The events of these letters cannot be fit into the story of the book of Acts, which ends with Paul in prison in Rome. Now he is free again to travel and to minister. He first leaves Titus in Crete and then Timothy in Ephesus. Some time later during his journeys he writes a letter to Timothy (First Timothy) and then a letter to Titus. Paul ends up again in captivity in Rome. From there he writes another letter to Timothy (Second Timothy).

Timothy was a close friend and co-worker of Paul’s. His father was Greek and his mother Jewish and he was a native of Lystra in the Roman Province of Galatia. He travelled with Paul during his second and third missionary journeys. When Paul writes this letter, Timothy is pastoring the church in Ephesus. The occasion of the letter is to advice Timothy how to deal with false teachers and other problems in the church.

The letter can be divided into five parts, like this:

1. Exhortations to keep sound doctrine and to lead a healthy spiritual life (chapters 1–2)
2. Advice for appointing church leaders and deacons (chapter 3)
3. Personal instructions to Timothy (chapter 4)
4. Rules for the life of the church and recognition of widows (chapter 5)
5. Exhortations about wealth, money and Christians lifestyle (chapter 6)

Second Timothy

This letter is sometimes called “Paul’s last will and testament”. Paul knows that his life is almost over and that he is facing death in Rome (4:6–8). He wants Timothy to come and visit him soon and to be with him at this very difficult time of imprisonment. This is in contrast to his relatively easy “house arrest”, which is described in the last chapter of Acts. This time there are very few people to support him. Most of his old companions have deserted him, but not Luke. It is quite possible that it was Luke who helped Paul to write this letter (4:9–16). Now Paul is longing for his spiritual son Timothy.

But Paul’s main concern in this letter is that Timothy – before he comes to Rome – ensures that the gospel bout Jesus Christ is kept pure. So there are still problems with false teachers in the Ephesus church. Timothy seems to despair about the situation and is almost ready to give up. Paul encourages Timothy and advices him to hand over the teaching responsibility in the church to people that are trustworthy and “able to teach others” (2:2). Paul also tells Timothy to be prepared for hard work, suffering and persecution as he ministers and teaches. For this he needs to “be strengthened in the grace that is in Christ Jesus” (2:1).

This letter can be divided into two main parts, like this:

1. Timothy is urged to have perseverance and be bold in his ministry (1:1–4:5)
2. Paul’s farewell to Timothy (4:6–18)

Titus

Titus is not mentioned in the books of Acts as one of Paul’s co-workers. But we get information about him through Paul’s own account in Galatians. Titus was Greek – a Gentile believer – who had started to travel and minister with Paul quite early (Galatians 2:1).

During the journey, which is sometimes called “Paul’s fourth missionary journey” (the one he did after his first imprisonment in Rome), Titus was left on the island of Crete to finish the organizing of the churches there. There were many things for him to do. Also there were many trouble makers and false teachers, who wanted to create difficulties for Titus in the ministry.

This letter, which is quite similar to First Timothy, contains much practical advice from Paul to Titus. First Paul instructs Titus about how to organize the leadership of the church (1:1-16). Then he provides Titus with guidelines about his teaching ministry in the church. The teacher should address the various categories of people in the church (2:1-10). The teaching should convey God’s grace (2:11–15), it should be relevant to the social and political circumstances of the people (3:1–8) and it should avoid foolish controversies and endless discussions (3:9–11).

This letter can be structured in this way:

1. Advice on the appointment of church leaders (chapter 1)
2. Rules for church life (chapter 2)
3. Exhortations on the faith of the believers in this world (chapter 3)

Philemon

This short letter belongs to the four “prison letters” and is closely linked with Colossians. Philemon is a believer in Colosse, whose slave Onesimus has run away to Rome. There he met Paul and became a believer. Now Paul is sending Onesimus back to his master with this recommendation letter, asking Philemon to receive him “no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother” (v 16). The letter was probably sent with Onesimus to Colosse together with Paul’s letter to the Colossian church.

This letter gives us an example of how the Christian faith during the time of the early church tore down the value system of the Roman society with its inequalities between masters and slaves.

Questions to Paul’s 13 letters

1. We have 13 letters written by Paul in the New Testament. Explain why Romans is placed first and Philemon is placed last.
2. Which of Paul’s letters are called the prison letters? Why?
3. Which of Paul’s letters are called the pastoral letters? Why?
4. Which letter of Paul’s in the New Testament is probably the earliest?
5. Which is the latest? How do we know that?
6. Why did Paul write Romans? Discuss with the other persons in your group before you write down your answer.
7. There is one other letter of Paul’s, which is quite similar to Romans in its content. Which letter?
8. There is one other letter of Paul’s, which is quite similar to Colossians in its content. Which letter?
9. Several of Paul’s letters deal with the problem of false teachers in the church. Discuss with the other persons in your group before you write down your answer.
10. How many letters did Paul write to the church in Corinth? Think and discuss before you decide on a figure.
11. In which letters does Paul teach about the second coming of Jesus? Discuss with the other persons in your group before you write down your answer.
12. In which letters does Paul teach about the qualifications for church leaders? Discuss with the other persons in your group before you write down your answer.
13. How do we know that Paul must have done more missionary journeys apart from the three that are mentioned in the book of Acts? Discuss with the other persons in your group before you write down your answer!
14. Write down 10 questions about the 13 books in this section of the New Testament. Then ask a friend to write down the answers. Finally mark his/her answers – 10 points for each correct answer; give fewer points if the answer is only partly correct. Give “Pass” for 50–69 points. Give “Distinction” for 70–100 points.

## Part 3: Other New Testament letters

The New Testament also contains eight letters written by other leaders in the early church. It is not known who wrote Hebrews. The remaining seven letters are often called “the general letters”, as they for the most part are addressed to general audiences rather than specific persons or local groups. They were written by James, the brother of Jesus (one letter), the apostle Peter (two letters), the apostle John (three letters) and Jude, another brother of Jesus (one letter).

Hebrews

The author of his letter is not known. This was one reason why there was disagreement in the early church whether to include Hebrews in the New Testament canon or not. Contents and literary style make it unlikely that Paul could be the author. Other names have been mentioned – Barnabas, Apollos, Luke and Silas – but Bible scholars have not come to an agreement about any of these names. From the letter itself it is, however, clear that the writer must have had authority in the early church, and that he must have been thoroughly familiar with the Old Testament. Most probably he was an intellectual Christian from a Jewish family.

The receivers of this letter are also not known. It has been discussed whether they had Jewish or Gentile background. Most probably they were people of Jewish background living in a society where the culture was Greek/Roman. The teaching of Hebrews is focused around sacrifices in the tabernacle as described in the Old Testament. But the letter is written in Greek, and not in the Hebrew language, and the Old Testament quotations are taken from the Greek translation Septuagint.

The purpose of the letter is to strengthen the faith of the receivers. The author affirms that Jesus is the only one who can truly and definitely reveal God to mankind.

The message of Hebrews is based on comparisons. What has come through Christ is compared with what was earlier. The conclusion is always the same: What Christ has brought is better! So the word “better” becomes a key word in this letter:

* Better things (6:9)
* A better hope (7:19)
* A better covenant (7:22)
* Better promises (8:6)
* Better sacrifices (9:23)
* Better possessions (10:34)
* A better country (11:16)
* A better resurrection (11:35)
* God had planned something better for us (11:40)
* A better word (12:24)

Hebrews can be structured like this:

1. Christ is compared with the angels and some Old Testament persons: Moses, Joshua, Aaron and Melchizedek (chapters 1–7)
2. The covenant with God that Christ has brought is compared with the earlier covenant in the Old Testament (chapters 8–10)
3. Those who believe in Christ are compared with the believers of the Old Testament (chapters 11–13)

James

Early Christian tradition points at James, the brother of Jesus who was one of the “pillars” of the Jerusalem church, as the author of this letter. This could be the earliest letter in the New Testament and written before the Apostles’ Meeting in Jerusalem AD 49, as it doesn’t mention this meeting. But perhaps it should not be called a letter. It is more like a written sermon.

The contents are also structured like a good sermon. There is one main point presented to the reader or listener: “Do not only listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” (1:22). This point is discussed from angles, such as: trials, favoritism, faith and deeds, slander and boasting.

First Peter

The author of this letter is the apostle Peter, who probably wrote it from Rome. He used Silas (or Silvanus, as he is often called), Paul’s travel companion during his second and third missionary journeys, as a secretary to write it down (5:12). This could explain why the Greek language is so excellent and why there are many similarities to Paul’s letters.

First Peter was written during times of persecution to believers scattered in five Roman provinces. Peter wants to encourage and strengthen them in their sufferings under the Roman authorities. He reminds them of the good news about Jesus Christ. Through him God the Father has given us a new life. He has “given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1:3). He asks them to look at their sufferings as trials that would strengthen their faith. The letter is full of comfort and encouragement to live lives worthy of Jesus. In spite of our trials and sufferings, God has everything under control: “Cast all your anxieties on him because he cares for you” (5:7).

First Peters can be structured like this:

1. Stand firm as Christians in the hope that you have received (chapter 1)
2. Live out your testimony about Jesus in the middle of the sufferings and struggles of everyday life (chapters 2–3)
3. Preserve the Christian fellowship (chapters 4–5)

Second Peter

Peter probably wrote this letter at the very end of his life (1:14). Tradition tells us that he was martyred in Rome under emperor Nero’s persecutions. It is Peter’s “last will and testament” just as Second Timothy is Paul’s. It is addressed to those who have received faith through the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

The purpose of this letter is for the addressees to be firmly established in the truth that they have received and to oppose the false teachers who are propagating heresies and a lifestyle contrary to godliness. They have also questioned the coming of the Lord.

Second Peter can be structured like this:

1. Exhortation to growth in the faith and in Christian values (chapter 1)
2. Warning against false teachers (chapter 2)
3. The certainty of Christ’s return (chapter 3)

First John

The author’s name is not mentioned in the letter. But early church traditions as well as similarities in style and theology with John’s gospel point to the apostle John as its author. Just like First and Second Peter this letter seems to have been a “circular letter” intended for several churches.

The purpose of the letter is to encourage the believers to live in fellowship with God and his Son and with one another. It also warns them against false teachers, who were propagating a special kind of “knowledge.” They believed that the physical world was evil, and that it was impossible for God to have become a human being in Jesus. This explains why John starts his letter with affirming the incarnation: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked at and touched with our hands – that is what we testify to proclaim: the Word of life” (1:1).

This personal knowledge of who Jesus really is has consequences for the way in which we live our lives: We love our brothers and we have fellowship with our fellow believers. And we walk daily in the light of Jesus, whose blood purifies us from all sin. If we do this, then we know that we have eternal life (5:12).

Second John

This is the shortest book in the whole Bible – 13 verses long. The author, who calls himself the elder, is the apostle John according to early church tradition. The addressees are “the chosen lady and her children,” probably referring to a church.

Second John was written to warn the church against travelling teachers, who might visit the church and speak heresies rather than the truth. The believers must walk in the truth acknowledging that Jesus has come in the flesh. That is: They must believe in the incarnation.

Third John

This letter is also written by “the elder” (the apostle John according to early church tradition) to a person called Gaius (whom we know nothing about). Gaius is encouraged to walk in the truth. He is also praised for his hospitality to travelling teachers, but he must be careful with Diotrephes, who was trying to boss over the church.

Jude

The author introduces himself as “Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James”. He was most likely one of the “pillars” of the early church in Jerusalem, a younger brother of Jesus and James. The letter is written to all believers. The purpose is to warn them against the false teachers – called godless and sinful men – who have secretly slipped in among the believers.

It is interesting to note that most of the contents of this letter is also found in Second Peter.

Questions to the other eight New Testament letters

1. Which are the “general letters”? Why have they been given this name?
2. What do we know about the authors of these letters? Discuss with the other persons in your group before you write down your answer.
3. What do we know about the person who wrote Hebrews? Think and discuss.
4. False teachers were evidently a problem in the early church. Which of the eight letters in this group warn against the heresies of false teachers? Discuss with the other persons in your group before you write down your answer.
5. What have you learnt about these heresies? Discuss with the other persons in your group before you write down your answer.
6. Which is probably the oldest letter in the New Testament? Why do we believe so? Think and discuss.
7. Write down 5 questions about the eight books in this section of the New Testament. Then ask a friend to write down the answers. Finally mark his/her answers – 10 points for each correct answer; give fewer points if the answer is only partly correct. Give “Pass” for 25–34 points. Give “Distinction” for 35–50 points.

## Part 4: Revelation

Revelation

The last book in the Bible is a prophetic book (1:3, 22:18). It can also be called a revelation (1:3) – and this has given the book its name. It contains visions that the apostle John saw when he was a prisoner on an island called Patmos. But it can also be considered a letter, as it is written to seven churches in Asia Minor (1:11, 2:1 etc.).

Four times the author identifies himself as John (1:1, 4, 9, 22:8). Early church tradition identifies this John with the apostle John, who also wrote John’s gospel and three New Testament letters. The book itself reveals that the author was a Jew, well acquainted with the Old Testament. He must also have been a church leader, who was well known to the seven churches in Asia Minor. He was evidently also a deeply religious person, who was fully convinced that the Christian faith would soon triumph over the demonic forces at work in the world.

Revelation was written at a time when the believers were facing persecution. This was a result of the enforcement of the cult of the Roman emperors. The believers, who worshiped Jesus Christ as Lord and not the emperor had to face more and more difficulties.

John writes to encourage the believers to be faithful and to resist the demands of emperor worship. Only God and Jesus – the Lamb that was slain (5:6) – are worthy of our worship. John informs his readers that the final showdown between God and Satan is imminent. Christ will soon return. Then the wicked will be destroyed forever and God’s people will enter an eternity of glory and blessings.

This book belongs to a special kind of literature called apocalyptic (this Greek word means revelation). It is a kind of literature, which is very symbolic and full of imagery. The earliest example of apocalyptic text is found in the book of Daniel in the Old Testament. Texts like these are written in such a way that they can only be understood by the addressees. Their enemies should not be able to understand the message.

Some of the visions in Revelation seem very strange to a modern reader. Fortunately the book provides a number of clues to help us with the interpretation, for example: star are angels (1:20), lampstands are churches (1:20), the great prostitute is Babylon – most probably Rome (17:1, 5, 18) and the heavenly Jerusalem is the wife of the Lamb – the church (21:9–10).

A distinctive feature is the frequent use of the number seven – as many as 52 times! There are seven beatitudes – “blessed” (1:3, 14:13, 16:15, 19:9, 20:6, 22:7, 14), seven churches (1:4, 11), seven spirits (1:4), seven golden lampstands (1:12), seven stars (1:16), seven seals (5:1), seven horns and seven eyes (5:6), seven trumpets (8:2), seven thunders (10:3), seven signs (12:1, 3, 13:13–14, 15:1,16:14, 19:20), seven crowns (12:3), seven plagues (15:6), seven golden bowls (15:7), seven hills (17:9) and seven kings (17:10) etc. Symbolically, the number seven stands for completeness.

Bible scholars do not agree about the interpretation of Revelation. There are four mains groups of interpreters:

1. Preterists say that most of the events have already taken place during the first century AD.
2. Historicists say that the book describes a long chain of events from John’s time on Patmos until the end of history.
3. Futurists say that most of the events will not take place until the end times.
4. Idealists say that the events are symbolical. They illustrate timeless truths such as the victory of good over evil.

Fortunately the basic truths of the book do not depend on adopting any particular interpretation. They are clear for everyone who will read the book for its overall message and resist the temptation to get too much caught up in all the details. The powerful message of Revelation is that all power belongs to God, and that Jesus is in control of the course of history. At the end of time, God will conclusively defeat all his enemies through Jesus Christ. Those who are faithful to Jesus will inherit the new heavens and the new earth. The purpose of the book is to encourage and give comfort to the persecuted church.

Revelation can be structured like this:

1. Introduction (1:1-8)
2. The call of John (1:9-20)
3. The letters to the seven churches (chapters 2–3)
4. The vision of the throne of God (chapters 4–5)
5. The seals, the trumpets and the bowls (chapters 6–16)
6. The judgment of Babylon, the prostitute (17:1–19:10)
7. God’s final victory in history: judgment and salvation. A new heaven and a new earth. Jerusalem, the bride of Lamb (19:11–22:5)
8. Conclusion (22:6–21)

Questions on Revelation

1. What is the occasion of this book? Discuss with the other persons in your group before you write down your answer.
2. What is the main message of this book? Discuss with the other persons in your group before you write down your answer.
3. Who was the author? Think and discuss.
4. What are some distinctive features of apocalyptic literature? Discuss with the other persons in your group before you write down your answer.

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