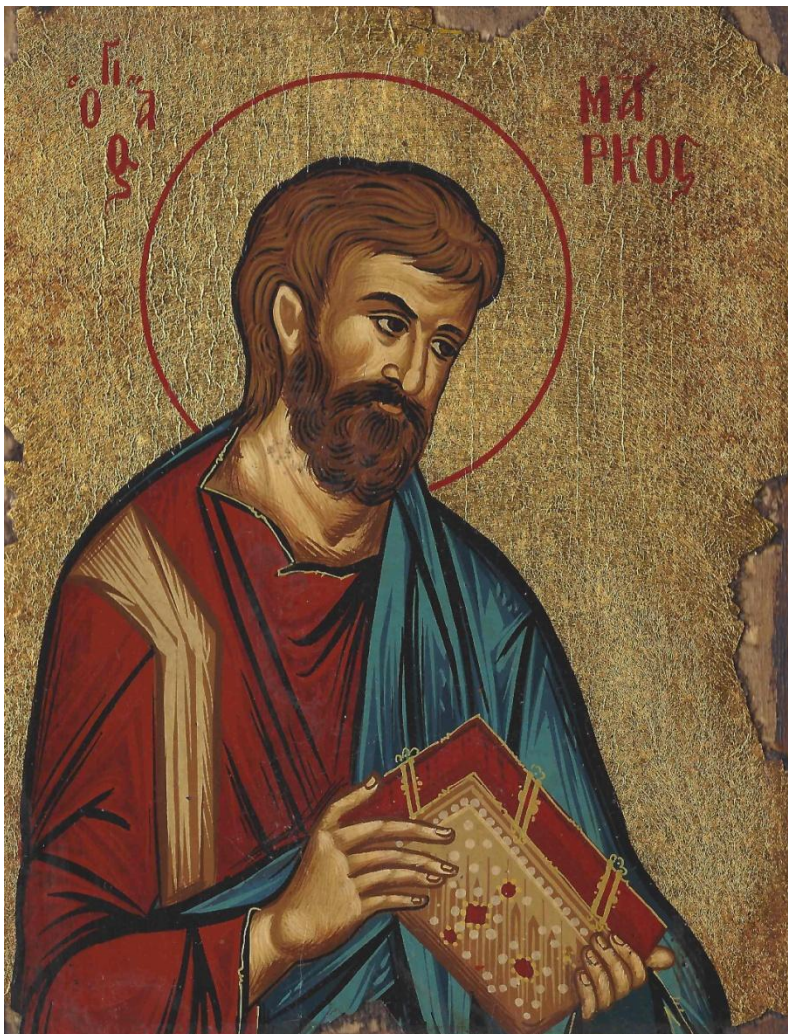


THE BIBLE FACTOR

Introductions to the literary, historical and religious impact
of the Holy Scriptures



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All illustrations were prepared by Annie Vallotton to accompany the text of the *Good News Bible* (1966-1979)

*Dismiss your own opinions and feelings,
and think of the Scriptures as the loftiest
and noblest of holy things,
as the richest of mines
which can never be sufficiently explored,
in order that you may find that divine wisdom
which God here lays before you
in such simple guise as to quench all pride.*

— Martin Luther



APPROPRIATING THE TEXTS

It is one thing to read and understand the ancient biblical documents in their historical and literary contexts.

It is another thing to appropriate their insights for modern living and to formulate a meaningful response to their impact.

We can use one of the response sheets in the back of this booklet to select a given text from our chosen reading, list the chief themes and topics in our selection, and then note applications gleaned from our reading.

The results may apply to our personal and family lives or to larger issues in our community and our broader society.

INVITATION TO *THE BIBLE FACTOR*

For 2,000 years the one book which has had more impact than any other writing on the history of the world has been the Bible. The stories, legends, poems, sermons and letters collected in this book have captured the imagination of men and women and invited their response.

For better or worse, the Bible remains a formidable factor in the cultural make-up of the modern world. No well-educated person in the 21st century can afford not to be familiar with the Bible's teachings. Yet too few of us have a working knowledge of the biblical literature.

The Bible Factor is a resource which will help us appreciate the literary shape of the biblical texts, the historical background in which they were written, and the religious impact they can make on us as they continue to critique and encourage modern readers.

THE VARIETY OF BIBLICAL LITERATURES

The **Jewish scriptures**, originally written in Hebrew and Aramaic, are the sacred literature of the Jewish people. They tell how the nation of Israel was chosen by God to serve as his people, how he made a covenant with them, how he punished them when they broke it, and how he repeatedly restored them when they repented.

The **Apocryphal books** are also part of the Jewish legacy, but were not included within their final collection of official writings.

The **Christian scriptures**, originally written in Greek, are the writings of the early church. They affirm that God's fullest revelation is to be found in Jesus. His self-giving style of living and dying show that God's love and forgiveness are for all men and women everywhere.

In the process of collecting these documents, the Jewish and the Christian communities preserved a fascinating variety of writings. While the texts deal with a common core of themes which touch on the depths of human experience, they often offer disparate, even conflicting perspectives. Thus the biblical literature embodies a number of tensions:

- between the all-powerful God who controls all of creation, and the vulnerable God who identifies with our human history;
- between a human condition that is rightly centered in its relationships, and the predicament of men and women who have lost their integrity;
- between God's conditional demands for improvement, and God's unconditional offers of grace and acceptance.

EXPLORING THE TEXTS

Since the 1800s scholars have developed two broad approaches for studying the biblical texts.

Traditional *historical criticism* examines a text against the historical context in which it originated, paying special attention to its author, recipients, occasion and purpose, in order to understand how the text was understood by its original recipients.

Historical analysis is not just about critiquing the biblical text; more importantly historical studies help us critique *our own understanding* of the texts. This keeps us from imposing our 21st century values and perspectives on ancient documents which are some 2000 to 3000 years old, and which are so culturally removed from us that we can scarcely imagine ourselves back in their world. Questions such as these will help us assess the texts' historical dimension.

- Do we know who wrote this document? When? Where? Why?
To whom?
- Are there any important discrepancies in the text, or alternate translations?
- Did the author make use of other sources or materials?
- What social values or cultural traditions lie behind this text?
- Does it agree with, or contradict, secular writings from the same time and place?
- How would this writing have been used in the ancient Jewish or early Christian communities?

Contemporary *literary criticism* examines a text against the literary context it makes for itself, paying special attention to its inherent rhetorical, poetical, structural, and symbolic devices, in order to understand how the text continues to function and affect modern readers.

The Bible contains three basic kinds of literature: narrative, discursive, and poetic.

Much of the material is *narrative*; it tells the overall story of how God deals with people. The three essential ingredients in any story are character, plot and setting. "Someone has to do something somewhere."

So questions like these will be helpful when we read stories:

- Who are the main characters in this story?
- Who are the protagonists, the heroes?
- Who are the opponents or villains?
- With which character would you identify?
- What is the plot of this narrative?
- Is this a story of conflict, or journey, or psychological growth?
- How does the setting affect the emotional tone of the story?
- Is the story tragic, or comedic?

In the case of *discursive materials*, these sorts of questions will help us better understand the content of the message:

- How can we outline the author's argument?
- What supporting evidence is used?
- Does the author appeal to personal experiences?
- Are quotations from the Old Testament brought into play?
- Can we detect any Greco-Roman or Jewish rhetorical devices?

LIVELY CONVERSATIONS

Also, a controversial topic will be proposed with each book of the Bible.

While it may not be the central theme of the book, it will be based on a key teaching or event.

It is calculated to stimulate thought and provoke discussion for those who study *The Bible Factor* together in a group.

In the case of *poetic material*, questions like these will be helpful:

- What images does the poet use here?
- Do the lines balance each other?
If so, in what ways?
- How do any metaphors or comparisons picture God and creation and our situation?

Using both historical and literary approaches helps us interpret not only "the world behind the text," that is, the significance it once had for its original author and audience, but also "the world in front of the text," that is, the meaning it continues to have for us today.

To start looking at a text historically, try asking:

- Which people, places, events or customs need to be explained?

To start looking at the literary dimensions of any biblical passage ask:

- What sort of writing is this? Its genre?
How is it structured or outlined?

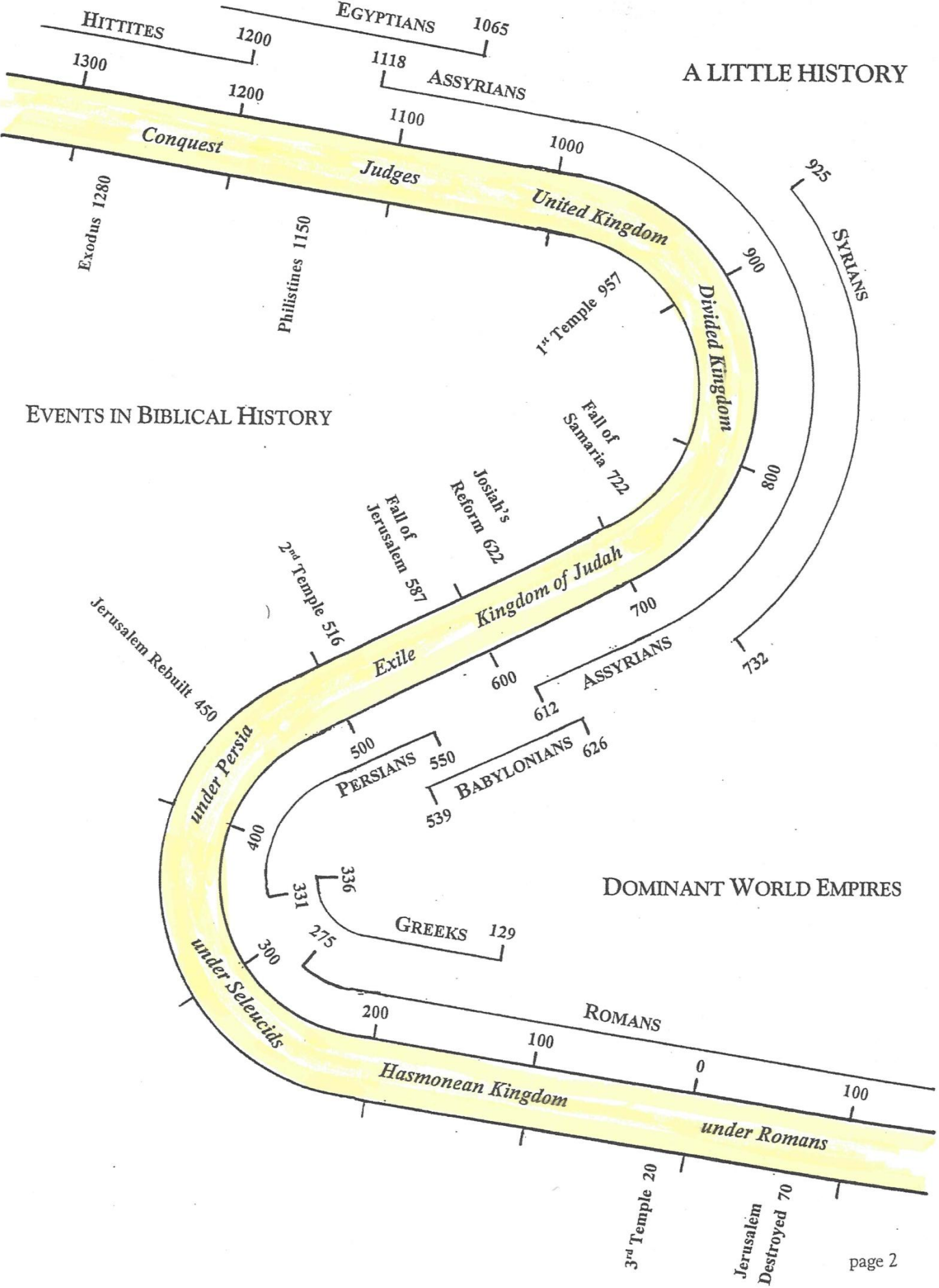
READING GUIDE

The guide which is also appended to this booklet offers an alternative program for reading the biblical literature. Starting from Genesis and going through to Revelation has sometimes proven to be discouraging and self-defeating.

A LITTLE HISTORY

EVENTS IN BIBLICAL HISTORY

DOMINANT WORLD EMPIRES



A BIBLICAL CHRONOLOGY

The biblical record is not an abstract timeless message but is firmly rooted in the overarching sweep of human history. At its core is the story of the people of God: first the migrations of the Hebrew people, then the nations of the Israelite tribes and the Jewish state, and finally the mission of the Christian church. The creation and flood myths, of course, are not amenable to historical analysis. Bronze Age events are somewhat speculative; some cannot be confirmed by archeological studies or by extra-biblical sources.

Late Bronze Age

- 1900 Abraham migrates from Mesopotamia to Canaan
- 1280 Moses leads Exodus out of Egypt under Pharaoh Ramses II
- 1275 Egyptians battle Hittites at Qadesh
- 1225 Joshua leads Hebrew invasion of Canaan from the east
- 1200 Hebrew songs, tales and laws begin to develop
- 1150 Philistine invaders from Crete enter Canaan from the western sea

Iron Age

- 1020 Saul becomes king and unites Israelite tribes
- 1002 David establishes capital at Jerusalem
- 1000 Historical traditions are gathered, "J" in the north and "E" in the south
- 959 Solomon dedicates temple to Yahweh
- 931 Northern Israel splits from southern Judah
- 926 Pharaoh Shishak despoils Jerusalem
- 880 Omri makes Samaria capital of northern Israel
- 874 Ahab's queen Jezebel introduces Baal worship
- 865 Elijah sparks revival of Yahwism in Israel
- 853 Ahab and Syrians battle Assyrian king Shalmaneser III at Qarqar
- 755 Amos and Hosea prophecy in northern Israel
- 734 Isaiah prophesies during Syro-Ephraimitic War
- 722 Samaria falls to Assyrian king Shalmaneser V
- 710 Hezekiah leads reforms in Judah
- 701 Assyrian king Sennacherib invades Judah
- 663 Ashurbanipal adds Egypt to Assyrian empire
- 623 Josiah discovers Deuteronomic *Book of the Law*
- 612 Nahum prophesies fall of Nineveh
- 605 Nebuchadnezzar defeats Pharaoh Neco at Carchemish
- 603 Jeremiah dictates oracles to Baruch
- 597 Nebuchadnezzar captures Jerusalem and takes leaders into exile
- 593 Ezekiel prophesies to exiles in Babylon
- 586 Nebuchadnezzar destroys Jerusalem and temple

Persian Period

- 539 Cyrus the Persian easily captures Babylon
- 538 Sheshbazzar leads Jewish remnant of to Judea
- 525 Jewish colony established at Elephantine, Egypt
- 516 Zerubbabel completes rebuilding second temple
- 450 Priestly editors reinterpret the writings

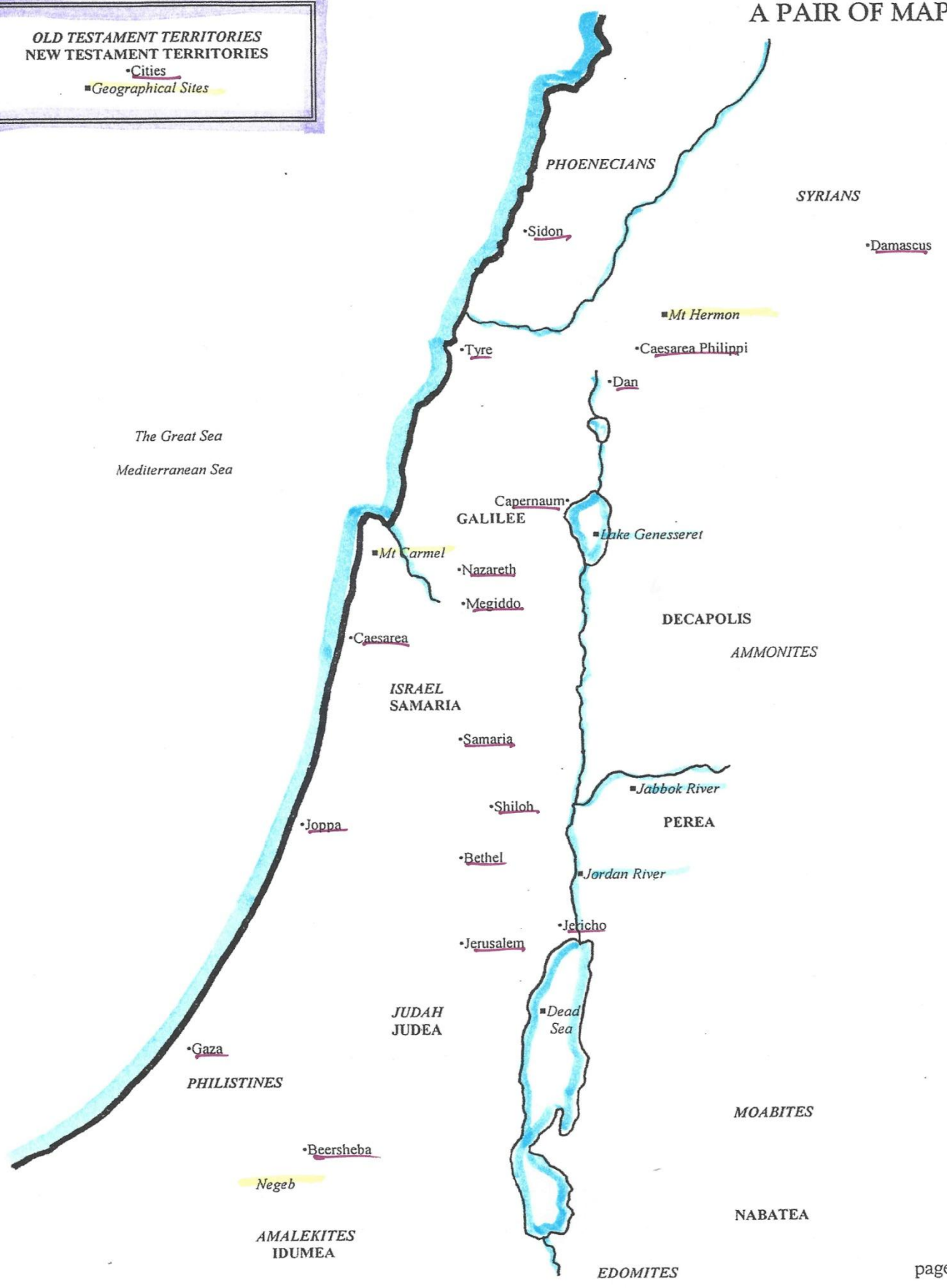
- 445 Nehemiah appointed new governor of Judea
- 397 Ezra establishes the Law as Jewish constitution

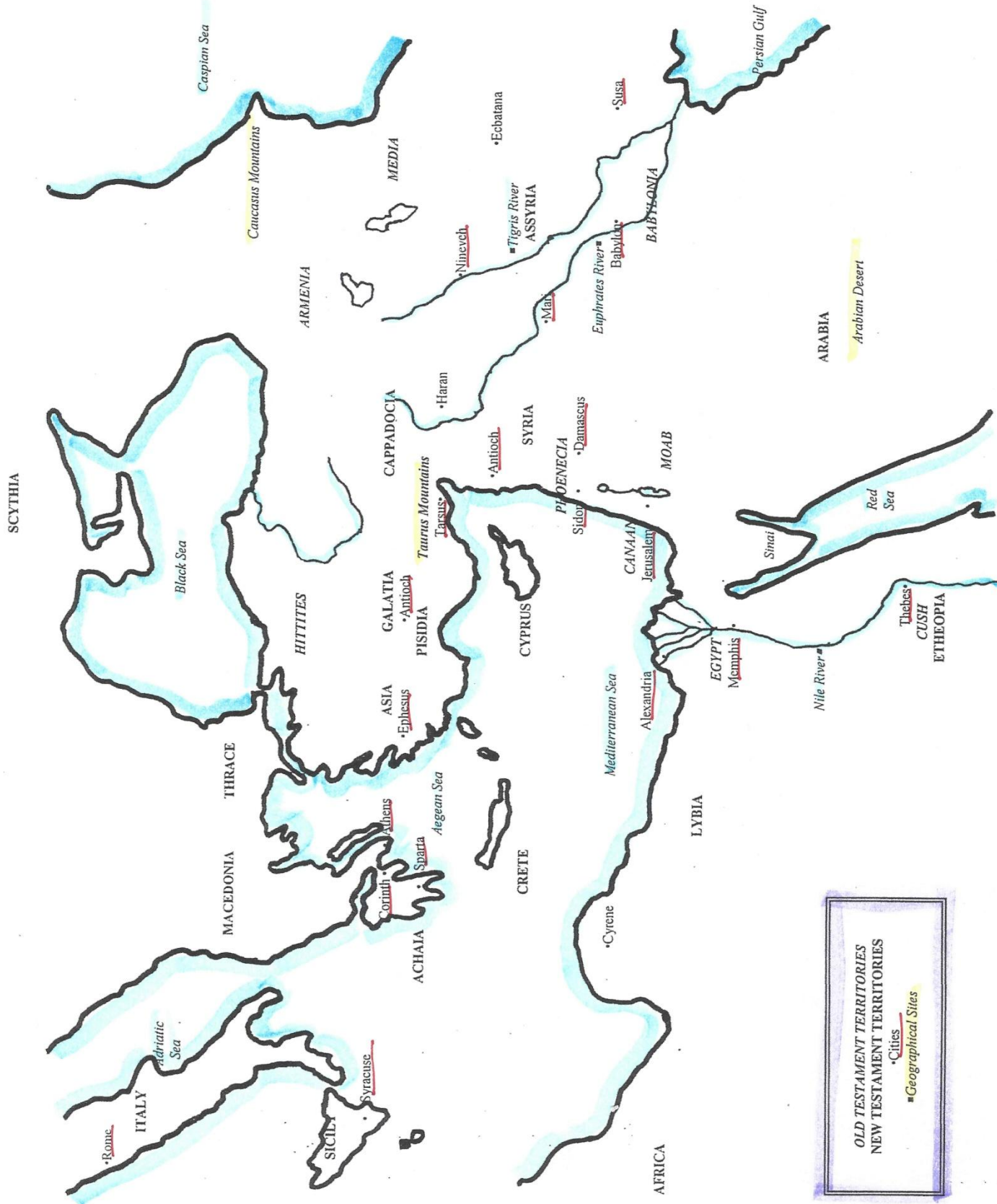
Greco-Roman Era

- 332 Alexander conquers Syria-Palestine and Egypt
- 320 Seleucids and Ptolemies battle over control of Palestine
- 250 Septuagint translated in Alexandria, Egypt
- 175 Antiochus IV Epiphanes deposes high priest
- 164 Judas Maccabeus rededicates Jerusalem temple
- 152 Jonathan assumes role of high priest
- 150 Qumran community formed by dissident priests
- 134 John Hyrcanus succeeds Simon as king of Judea
- 63 Roman general Pompeii captures Jerusalem
- 40 Herod the Great becomes king of the Jews
- 31 Octavius (later Caesar Augustus) defeats Antony
- 20 Rebuilding of Herod's Temple begun
- 7 BCE Jesus of Nazareth is born
- 4 BCE Herod Antipas becomes tetrarch of Galilee
- 26 CE Pontius Pilate becomes prefect of Judea
- 28 John the Baptist begins prophesying in Judea
- 30 Jesus is crucified on Friday, April 7
- 33 Saul/Paul converted near Damascus
- 49 Council at Jerusalem approves Gentile mission
- 64 Peter and Paul martyred at Rome under Nero
- 70 Titus razes Jerusalem and destroys temple
- 74 Massada fortress falls to Roman legions
- 88 Clement becomes bishop of Rome
- 90 Jewish rabbis at Jamnia close Hebrew canon
- 93 Josephus composes the *Antiquities of the Jews*
- 135 Romans crush Simon bar Kochba's revolt
- 144 Marcion excommunicated; rejects OT, uses only Luke and some of Paul
- 155 Polycarp martyred at Smyrna
- 185 Iranaeus writes *Against Heresies* of Gnostics
- 200 Jewish Mishnah begun to be codified and Masoretic text defined
- 303 Emperor Diocletian persecutes church and destroys biblical documents
- 312 Constantine becomes emperor; Christianity becomes official religion
- 325 Council of Nicaea condemns Arianism
- 328 Athanasius becomes bishop of Alexandria
- 381 Council of Constantinople condemns Apollinarianism
- 382 Jerome begins translating Latin *Vulgate*
- 400 Augustine writes his *Confessions*
- 410 Rome falls to the Goths

A PAIR OF MAPS

OLD TESTAMENT TERRITORIES
NEW TESTAMENT TERRITORIES
• Cities
■ Geographical Sites





OLD TESTAMENT TERRITORIES
NEW TESTAMENT TERRITORIES
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HALF A DOZEN TRANSLATIONS

The Jewish scriptures were originally written in Hebrew, the Christian scriptures in Greek. Most of us must therefore depend on English translations. In recent centuries well over a hundred have been printed. Some include the whole Bible; others, just a portion or a book or two. Some were excellent literary productions, others, more mediocre. Some were done by committees of scholars; others were private productions by a single translator.

The major English versions used today are all committee translations. Each has its own style which makes it special.

RDV

The *Rheims-Douay Version* of 1610 was produced by Roman Catholic translators. During the 1500s half a dozen English translations had been put on the market, but they were all by Protestants. So church officials authorized an official translation for Catholics to offset the suspect Protestant versions. This version is named after the French cities where most of the translating was done. It is based on the official Latin version of the Bible known as the Vulgate. For centuries it was the official Catholic translation for English-speaking readers. It includes the Apocryphal books within the Old Testament.

**KJV
AV**

The most popular Bible in English-speaking circles has been the *King James Version* of 1611. King James I, who had even attempted some Bible translating himself, wanted a version which all the churches in his realm would use. He gathered a team of scholars which included Presbyterians from Scotland plus Anglicans and Puritans from England who worked at Westminster and at Oxford and Cambridge universities. When they finished, their translation became the *Authorized Version* for all English churches. For 400 years the KJV, with its quaint Elizabethan flavor, has been an all time best-seller.

During the past 400 years better manuscripts have been discovered, and scholars have improved their understanding of ancient history and languages. Also, for many modern readers the obsolete words and archaic *thee's* and *thou's* in the Rheims-Douay and King James versions made them difficult to understand.

**RSV
NRSV**

The most widely used edition in mainline churches is the *Revised Standard Version*, published in 1946 and 1952 by a team of over thirty British and American scholars, most of them Protestants. Their job was to touch up the KJV by correcting some mistakes and putting it into 20th century English. Actually they did more than merely revise the KJV. They consulted the original Hebrew and Greek texts so much that the RSV is for all practical purposes a new translation. One improvement is that poetic passages look like poetry, and longer prose sections are put in solid paragraphs instead of being divided into little verses. An updated and more gender-neutral *New Revised Standard Version* was issued in 1990.

**JB
NJB**

In the 1950s a group of French Catholic scholars, who were not content to depend on the venerable Latin Vulgate, started a new translation in French based on the original Hebrew and Greek texts. Their work was so well done it inspired American Catholic scholars to duplicate it. The result, known as the *Jerusalem Bible*, was published in 1966. The footnotes were taken over from the French edition, but the biblical text itself was based on the original languages. It is one of the few Bibles to print God's name as "Yahweh" instead of as "the LORD." A revised version, the *New Jerusalem Bible*, was published in 1985.

**NEB
REB**

In 1970 the *New English Bible* was completed by Protestant scholars. It had started out in the 1940s in Scotland when a church assembly resolved to get an entirely new translation in modern speech, not just a revision of the 17th century versions. It was intended not only for older church people but also for younger folks and for intelligent men and women who do not go to church. The NEB is noted for the high quality of its British English. It is one of the few versions which had on its translating committee professors of English literature in addition to the usual Greek and Hebrew scholars. The radically updated *Revised English Bible* appeared in 1987.

NAB	The <i>New American Bible</i> was also begun in the 1940s and finished in 1970. Instead of using the Latin Vulgate as their basis, its Roman Catholic translators used the original languages and made changes in the traditional text when necessary. The NAB is especially good at reproducing the different styles of speech found in the ancient translations. It does not try to smooth everything out and make it all look the same. In 1988 the NAB was reissued with significant revisions which use more traditional language to make it more suitable for public reading in worship settings.
TEV GNB CEV	<i>Today's English Version</i> , sometimes called the <i>Good News Bible</i> , was completed in 1976 and 1979. Instead of translating literally word-for-word, it puts the Hebrew and Greek into modern English thought-for-thought. The goal was to produce a Bible without heavy religious jargon for people who are just starting to read or for whom English is a second language. In 1995 the American Bible Society upgraded this project with the <i>Contemporary English Version</i> , which is designed to be read aloud and listened to with enjoyment and without misunderstanding.
NASB NIV TNIV	In response to charges that the RSV is not a faithful rendition of the Holy Bible, several more literal translations were produced. The first was the <i>New American Standard Bible</i> of 1971. The most popular is the <i>New International Version</i> of 1978, produced by a team of conservative Protestant scholars who hold to "a high view of Scriptures." The result is a fairly accurate and smooth reading translation that has sold well in many fundamentalist-leaning evangelical churches. In 2002 the International Bible Society introduced a more gender-inclusive edition, <i>Today's New International Version</i> .
NJV	The <i>New Jewish Version</i> of the Hebrew scriptures was finished in 1982, after twenty years work by representatives of the three major branches of Judaism in America. The result is a clear, readable translation which does not make any corrections or alterations in the ancient Hebrew text. The translators have found a way to put into good English passages which other versions had to guess at. The NJV is also called the <i>Tanakh</i> after the customary names for its three main divisions: the Torah (Law), the Nebiim (Prophets) and the Kethubim (Writings).
CEB	The <i>Common English Bible</i> , published in 2011 by an alliance of main-stream North American Protestant denominations, strives to "balance rigorous accuracy in the rendition of ancient texts with an equally passionate commitment of clarity of expression in the target language," especially when the Scriptures are read aloud in public worship.

For over a century numerous individuals and small groups of scholars have translated additional portions of the Bible into contemporary English. Some have been accepted as well-done literary productions; others were more narrowly sectarian translations.

- Richard Weymouth, *The Twentieth Century New Testament* (1901)
- James Moffatt, *The Bible: A New Translation* (1913, 1926, 1935)
- J. M. Powers Smith and Edgar J. Goodspeed, *The Bible: An American Translation* (1923-1939)
- Ronald Knox, *The Holy Bible: A Translation for Catholics* (1944, 1955)
- J. B. Phillips, *The New Testament in Modern English* (1947, 1958)
- S. H. Hooke, *The Bible in Basic English* (1950)
- Francis Siewart, *The Amplified Bible* (1958, 1965)
- The Jehovah's Witnesses' *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* (1961)
- Kenneth Taylor, *The Living Bible, a Paraphrase* (1962, 1971); revised as the *New Living Translation* (1996)
- William Beck, *The Holy Bible: An American Translation* (1963, 1976); revised as *God's Word* (1995)
- Eugene Peterson, *The Message* (1993-1995)

In addition, specialized translations of individual books of the Bible are included in many scholarly and popular commentaries. As the English language continues to grow and change, and as biblical scholars discover new insights into the ancient Hebrew and Greek texts, new and revised translations will no doubt be produced in the future.