

Summary of the Canonical Books of the Bible

The Old Testament

hardly any of which was written down until the exile, perhaps 600 BC; before then the information was transmitted by oral tradition, and would not have been organized into “books” as we see it today. Oral transmission sounds unreliable to us, but in societies that rely on it, the transmission seems to be good. Today we have versions (which differ a little) in Hebrew and Greek; the earliest surviving manuscripts date from about 200 BC.

The Law

also known as “The Pentateuch” (the set of five) or “Torah”, the books most revered by the Jews. These are described as “the books of Moses” but he cannot have written all of them, because they describe his death and funeral. Nevertheless they contain what the Jews of Jesus’s time described as “The Law of Moses”, including the Ten Commandments.

- Genesis A wide-ranging book, starting with visions of the creation, Adam and Eve, Noah’s Flood and the development of human culture, and then focussing on the Aramaic desert nomads who became the Jews. The lives of patriarchs such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph are described at length, and it is interesting to consider how much (or little) they knew about God.
- Exodus After the death of Joseph, the Egyptians were less friendly, and God called upon Moses to lead the people out of Egypt and to the Promised Land. During their journey through the desert they were fed miraculously with Manna and Quails. Moses received the Ten Commandments and wrote the Law, but the people made a Golden Calf and worshipped that instead. When they arrived at the Promised Land, the people were afraid to go in, so they spent another 40 years wandering in the wilderness.
- Leviticus This appears to be the Law that Moses wrote to act like a constitution for the people. It seems primitive and brutal to modern ears, but it was more merciful than the contemporary Egyptian and Assyrian laws that Moses probably based it on.
- Numbers The book gets its name from a census of the people. The little tribe of Jacob that went to Egypt became a nation in the order of a million people.
- Deuteronomy The name Deuteronomy is from the Greek for “Second Law” and it appears to be a re-writing of Leviticus, dating from the Exile.

Historical Books

The history of the Jewish nation, told from various perspectives. The story starts with Joshua leading the invasion of the Promised Land. Once they were settled there, the people were at first led by prophets (“Judges”) but then demanded a king. But the country was never really united, and soon split into a southern kingdom “Judah” (the land occupied by the tribes Judah and Benjamin) and a northern kingdom “Israel” occupied by the other ten tribes. Both nations were eventually defeated by foreign powers and key people deported.

The prophetic books that follow cover the threat of deportment, life in exile, and the eventual return of Judah but not Israel.

- Joshua Joshua is the name of the leader who led the military campaign to conquer the Promised Land. He ordered that the people who had lived there before should be driven out or killed. The book then records the areas allocated to each tribe, and rules for adapting from a nomadic life to a settled one.
- Judges When the people were wandering in the wilderness in Exodus, people went to Moses to arbitrate in their disputes. This role was later taken on by “Judges”, people recognised as prophets. During this period the people were lawless, and were buffeted by more powerful nations around them. The people increasingly desired a king to be over them, which they thought would make them stronger.
- Ruth The first verse of this book says that it relates events in the time of the Judges; presumably that is why it is placed beside that book. It is a delightful story about a foreign woman becoming the great-grandmother of King David. It may have been included in scripture in order to counterbalance other books such as Ezra and Nehemiah which regard foreigners as impure.
- 1 Samuel The opening verses describe a time when the trappings of Judaism were well established (though worship was focussed on a tent containing the Ark of the Covenant, rather than Solomon’s stone temple) but society was lax. A boy called Samuel became an important prophet and leader. When the people demanded a king, Samuel warned them of the consequences, but eventually anointed King Saul. Saul was a disappointment, so Samuel anointed David as king in his place. After much confusion and fighting Saul was killed in battle.
- 2 Samuel After the death of Saul, David worked hard to establish himself as king over both the northern and southern parts of the kingdom. As part of this campaign he made Jerusalem the state capital, and moved the tent containing the Ark of the Covenant there. Throughout David’s life there was tension and fighting both within his family and with the nations nearby. God loved David despite the fact that he committed some serious sins.

- 1 Kings As King David was dying, Queen Bathsheba and the Prophet Nathan conspired to make his son Solomon king in his place, in the face of rival claims. On Solomon's death the northern kingdom Israel and southern kingdom Judah each appointed their own King, and both royal houses drifted away from God. The story becomes a complex sequence of short-lived kings in both the northern and southern kingdoms. Prophets in both kingdoms started giving warnings of defeat and exile, as recorded in the books from Isaiah onwards.
- 2 Kings As the kings became weaker, the prophets became the focus of historical attention. This book describes events in the life of the prophets Elijah and his successor Elisha, who put God's point of view despite physical threats, and their words were confirmed by many miracles. But their warnings were mostly ignored, and at the end of the book Jerusalem is besieged by the Babylonians. Money came into common use around this time, replacing bartering.
- 1 Chronicles The Chronicles summarize the events described in the books of Kings, omitting some events that show royalty in a bad light. They seem therefore to be an official version of the events of 1 and 2 Kings.
- 2 Chronicles 2 Chronicles starts with Solomon opening the glorious new stone temple at Jerusalem, and goes on to describe Solomon's glory and the visit of the Queen of Sheba. But after Solomon's death the glory was soon lost amidst civil war, pagan worship, and subjection to foreign powers. By the end of the book the Babylonians had burned Jerusalem, and taken away the principal people and the valuables from the Temple; but then Cyrus the Persian took charge of Babylon and allowed some people to return and rebuild.
- Ezra Ezra was a priest in exile in Babylon, who Cyrus permitted to return to Jerusalem to re-establish the worship. Unfortunately he ordered the returning exiles to banish their foreign wives, which must have caused much suffering, and the book does not claim that God approved of Ezra's actions. This painful episode is part of the story that must be told, but it is said that the books Ruth and Esther are included in the Bible to show that foreign women are fully part of God's world.
- Nehemiah Nehemiah was an exiled Jew working as a courtier and administrator in Persia, who was allowed to return to Jerusalem twice, firstly to survey its state, and having reported back to Babylon, to organize repairs. He was probably the first to return, preceding Ezra by some years.
- Esther The story of Esther is set towards the end of the exile, when Persia was the major power. Esther was a Jewess who through a curious series of events became Queen of Persia. Though it does not mention God, his hand is clearly at work in this very readable story. The Jews celebrate these events in their festival Purim.

Wisdom Literature

- Job** This book is set in ancient times, before the structures of modern society. The main character, a man called Job, asks why there is pain and suffering in God's world. He rejects the answers of his friends, and the book concludes with such a glorious vision of God that the question seems irrelevant.
- Psalms** The Psalms appears to be the hymn-book of the temple in Jerusalem, containing poems from more than one century, for many situations, and from both the northern and southern kingdoms. They offer us words suitable for the deepest despair to the highest praise of God.
- Proverbs** Proverbs were a favourite way of passing on wisdom in ancient times. The book consists mostly of pithy one-liners, traditionally associated with King Solomon, who was famously wise.
- Ecclesiastes** Ecclesiastes is perhaps the most negative book in the Bible! It is the musings of someone who searches after deep wisdom, but concludes that it is better to just get on with life and mind one's own business.
- Song of Songs** The title means "best of songs"; it is basically a love-poem containing frank expressions of physical desire. We would not expect to find such a thing in the Bible, and many readers interpret it as an allegory - but for what? Taken at face value, its inclusion here affirms that love and sex are God-given and can be pure.

The Prophets

These books record what the prophets were saying to the people about the threat of deportment during the time of the kings, then in exile, and when some people from Judah, but not Israel, were allowed to return.

The prophets saw exile from the promised land as the inevitable result of disobeying God, but also emphasized God's mercy, in that if the people started to obey, things would get better.

- Isaiah** Isaiah is the longest of the prophetic books, and manuscripts show that it has been in its present form for over 2,000 years. Isaiah was a prophet in Judah about a century before the exile, and it appears that his prophecies were recorded later, alongside other prophecies during and after the exile. The book has a wonderful grasp of both God's holiness and his mercy, and the need for a better ministry which was fulfilled by Jesus.
- Jeremiah** Jeremiah was a prophet to Judah from 627 BC, about a century after Isaiah, giving the same warnings that disobedience to God and alliance with foreign powers and religions would lead to defeat and exile. He prophesied so to a series of kings, who saw him as a traitor and treated him badly. In the end he saw Jerusalem besieged, its fall, and the exile of the principal people.

- Lamentations This book is traditionally misnamed “the Lamentations of Jeremiah”. In fact it seems to be the people’s complaint when they were defeated and exiled. There is no hint of repentance, only of “poor me”. They were still ignoring the prophets’ messages.
- Ezekiel Ezekiel’s prophecies focus on priestly things, and speak of visions so weird that commentators discuss mental illness or recreational drugs. He was a contemporary of Jeremiah, who prophesied in exile. His visions include God’s spirit abandoning the temple in Jerusalem, but included signs of hope such as the “Valley of Dry Bones” in chapter 37.
- Daniel This book describes events in the early years of exile when Babylon was the main power. Its opening chapters describe heroes of faith who were miraculously vindicated, when thrown into the burning fiery furnace for example, and Daniel’s prophecies and their fulfillment. It goes on to describe visions of God and the end of the world that are hard to understand; the last book in the Bible, Revelation, takes up some of these themes.
- Hosea The prophet Hosea was roughly contemporary with Isaiah, but living in Israel, the northern kingdom. He felt that God was calling him to marry a prostitute, have children with her, and give them strange names. She continued to work as a prostitute, and his pain was a sign of God’s pain when his people worship other gods.
- Joel Joel was a prophet to the southern kingdom, famous for his prophecy in Chapter 2 that God would “pour out his spirit on all flesh”.
- Amos Amos was contemporary with Isaiah, and said to be the first rural prophet as opposed to a court or temple official. His main message was that those who abuse their power make their sacrifices to God unacceptable.
- Obadiah Obadiah’s brief prophecy says that Jerusalem is holy, so those who despoil it will be punished.
- Jonah The book describes a prophet Jonah in the time of Isaiah, who God called to go and prophecy to Nineveh, the enemy capital city, warning them that they would be destroyed unless they repented. Jonah went in the opposite direction, not wanting them to be saved. A great fish carried him to Nineveh, where his words were acted on and the city was saved. This was one of the first indications that God reigns everywhere, not just in Israel.
- Micah Micah was a contemporary of Isaiah and prophesied to both the northern and the southern kingdoms. His message was that immorality and pagan worship would inevitably lead to disaster, but eventually God would establish his rule for all nations to see. It was Micah who prophesied that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem.

Nahum	Nahum, like Jonah, prophesied against Nineveh; the date is unclear, possibly contemporary with Jeremiah and thus after Jonah.
Habakkuk	The book says nothing about its author, date or purpose, but seems to be a cry to God from the miseries of the exile, answered by a prophecy of Babylon's fate.
Zephaniah	The first verse says that these words date from the time of King Josiah, who was a king of Judah noted for trying to bring the people back to God. He condemns the society as corrupt and prophesies the destruction of Jerusalem, suggesting that he spoke before Josiah's reforms began in 621 BC. This prophecy may therefore be slightly earlier than Jeremiah's.
Haggai	The background to this prophecy is that the Persians have allowed some Jews to return and rebuild Jerusalem, while remaining their vassals. Haggai urges them to finish the job by rebuilding the temple.
Zechariah	This prophecy is contemporary with that of Haggai, and the book Ezra says that both of them preached to those who had returned from exile. This book mostly speaks in mysterious language that is taken up in Revelation, the last book of the Bible, and applied to the end of the world. The later parts of this book are very hard to understand. Nevertheless it is often quoted in the New Testament, and applied there to Jesus.
Malachi	This book picks up many of the earlier prophets' themes about dishonouring God and urges the priests to do something about it. It foretells a day when God will come and judge his people for such sins. This, the last book of the Old Testament, thus paves the way for John the Baptist to preach repentance before the coming of the Messiah.

The New Testament

The Gospels

which seem to have been written between about 60 AD and 100 AD, tell us about Jesus's life and ministry; but where does it start and end? What should be included, and what left out? The four accounts that are regarded as authentic each present a different point of view, so by reading them all we can build up a composite picture that is reasonably complete.

Matthew, Mark and Luke (the "Synoptic" Gospels) largely tell the same stories, often using almost identical words, while John has a lot of material not found in the Synoptics.

There are strange differences between the Synoptics and John regarding the timing of events; apparently the temple in Jerusalem used a different calendar from other Jews. Overall, the synoptics emphasize Jesus's humanity, while John emphasizes his glory.

Matthew	The anonymous author (not necessarily the Apostle Matthew) starts by tracing Jesus's genealogy back to the Jewish patriarchs; that sounds
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like a Jewish approach, until you notice that he includes four women in the genealogy. Then he describes the events surrounding Jesus's birth, mingled with prophecies which it seems to fulfil. His aim throughout the account that follows seems to be to show Jesus as the fulfilment of prophecy (though he often expects the reader to notice allusions, without them being pointed out) and of all that Israel was called to be.

Matthew's Gospel is divided into three sections by the two identical phrases "From that time on Jesus began to ..." in Matthew 4:17 and Matthew 16:21. The themes of the three sections appear to be Jesus's birth and upbringing in private; Jesus's public ministry preaching about the Kingdom of Heaven; and Jesus's sacrifice for sins. In the first Jesus appeared to be an ordinary person; in the second he lived as a prophet; and in the third he revealed himself as the Messiah.

Matthew records the Sermon on the Mount, re-interpreting the Old Testament law, which is some of Jesus's most difficult teaching to apply. The Law called for holy actions; Jesus calls for holy thoughts and desires.

Mark

Mark skips Jesus's genealogy, birth and upbringing, and starts at Jesus's baptism by John, leading to Jesus's teaching and healing ministry. Consequently this is the shortest of the four Gospels.

Mark is brief yet tells us many tiny details, showing that it is based on eye-witness testimony. Mark also emphasizes that even for Jesus healing is not a magic wand being waved and all being well, but a process involving struggle; and Jesus also struggles with the slowness of the disciples to understand.

This Gospel is in two parts; in the first eight chapters Jesus is portrayed as a dynamic leader who teaches the general public and performs miracles, but later he seems more passive and things are done to him.

Luke

Luke is probably the only Gentile author of any part of the Bible. His use of scripture is less subtle than Matthew's; he makes one point at a time by putting it in the mouth of one of the actors, as if he were writing an opera.

Luke was a doctor, and he is precise about details of the Roman administration and about medicine; he uses correct technical terms throughout. He focuses on physical wholeness, especially the sick being healed, as well as prayer, penitence, and Jesus's ministry to marginalized people such as children, women, and the disabled. He seems vague about the geography of Palestine, but unlike the other Gospel-writers he always correctly calls the "Sea of Galilee" a Lake.

There is a tradition that Luke interviewed Mary and learned details about Jesus's birth and upbringing not found in the other Gospels. He includes a version of the Sermon on the Mount which we call "the Sermon on the Plain" because he describes the place as flat rather than high.

Luke continues this account by telling us what happened afterwards, in the book Acts.

John John presents Jesus very differently from the Synoptic Gospels. He starts not with a genealogy but with the creation of the universe, making the point that Jesus is the creator God. John describes Jesus not as a man struggling with his painful duty, but as a king who is always calmly in control. He urges his readers to attain salvation through belief. John, the only disciple to witness the crucifixion, presents it not as martyrdom but revelation, giving a different emphasis to his entire Gospel.

Seven times in John's Gospel Jesus says "I am..." echoing the name of God in Exodus 3:14: I am the bread of life; I am the light of the world; I am the gate for the sheep; I am the good shepherd; I am the resurrection and the life; I am the way, the truth and the life; and I am the true vine. These are ways Jesus reveals God's love. We should respond by "washing each other's feet". By accepting Jesus and his message people are reborn to spiritual life, destined for eternal life in heaven.

The Epistles

which means "the letters", but a few don't fit that description well. The first book in this group, Acts, describes St Paul's ministry in the early church; the last of the group, Revelation, describes a vision seen by St John the Divine. But the remaining books are mostly first-century letters written by (or on behalf of) the Apostles. Most were intended for to be read publicly in churches, but a few are private letters.

Acts This is the second part of Luke's account, the first being his Gospel. In this book he describes how Christians progressed from meeting Jesus risen from the dead to the establishment of the first churches, with particular emphasis on the ministry of St Paul. Luke accompanied Paul in much of that ministry, so much of the book describes what "we" did, rather than "they".

The book mentions early tensions within the church concerning questions such as circumcision and eating food that had been sacrificed to idols, which were resolved through face-to-face meetings in Jerusalem, and the need for rich congregations to support poor ones.

Romans St Paul's letter to the church in Rome is special in that he had never met them. He had little idea of what they already knew (perhaps no more than the account of Jesus's death and resurrection) and what they needed to be taught, so this letter contains a careful explanation of Christianity, which though it is rather long, is useful.

The letter comprises: (a) how Christians know God (chapters 1–8); (b) Israel and salvation (chapters 9–11); (c) how Christians should behave (chapters 12–15), especially "love is the fulfilling of the Law" (Romans 13:10).

- 1 Corinthians Corinth was a cosmopolitan Greek seaport. Christians there were torn between making compromises and becoming outcasts; for example, it was difficult to get meat that had not been sacrificed to pagan idols.
- 1 and 2 Corinthians record just part of one side of a dialogue, which can be hard to follow at times. It seems that the Corinthian church had asked some questions, and Paul had heard some rumours, prompting him to write these letters.
- The letters provide useful practical advice and (in 1 Corinthians 11) what is thought to be the earliest account of Jesus instituting Holy Communion, predating the earliest of the Gospels by at least 5 years.
- Corinth was famous for prostitutes who offered opportunities of all kinds. The letters to the Corinthians are the only ones where Paul makes rules for holy living, such as dressing modestly; elsewhere the Holy Spirit could lead Christians to use their freedom to grow into living that pleased God.
- 2 Corinthians This book is another part of St Paul’s dialogue with the Corinthian church; it mentions another letter which has not survived. Again it offers some useful ideas and practical advice, but we do not know exactly what questions Paul was answering.
- Galatians This letter to the churches in an area called Galatia proved capable of being misunderstood. The same thoughts are more carefully re-stated in Romans.
- This “eGALitarian” book teaches that we are all equal under God. Chapter 5 lists “fruits of the Spirit”, that is, results of the Holy Spirit’s presence that should appear in the life of *every* Christian, though only their friends may see the change. A quite separate list of “gifts of the Spirit” appears elsewhere, indicating some of the special qualities that God gives to *some* individuals so that they can fulfil their personal calling.
- Ephesians This letter, especially the first 10 verses of chapter 2, explains Christianity with a clarity that has made this book hugely influential, though its source and content are now questioned.
- It emphasizes certain points in order to guide Christians away from heresies. For example, it discusses circumcision, saying that the old law has now been done away with, so Christians need not follow it. It says that what was hidden is now revealed, so Christians should not join secret societies that claim to have hidden knowledge.
- Chapter 4 lists some “gifts of the Spirit” — see Galatians above — and chapter 6 lists the “armour” which God provides and we are expected to use to protect us from evil attacks.
- Chapters 5 and 6 mix inspiring phrases with teaching about submission that is more conservative than other letters attributed to Paul, especially Galatians, and is widely disregarded today.

- Philippians** The letter to Christians in Philippi, like that to Ephesus, appears to have been written while Paul was under house arrest in Rome, expecting to be martyred, so he tried to supervise the churches he had founded through these letters and by sending representatives.
- It seems that the Philippians were the first to make a collection for poor Christians elsewhere, but in other respects were finding Christian life a struggle. He reassures them that he is praying for them, and ultimately it is God's strength, not theirs or his, that counts.
- Colossians** The letter implies that various preachers were at Colossae, pulling the church in different directions on issues such as baptism. Paul explains how he understands baptism, and encourages the church to listen to Epaphras, who had been taught properly.
- Chapters 3 and 4 describe how he expects Christians to behave.
- 1 Thessalonians** This letter is believed to be the earliest Christian text, dating from 50 or 51 AD. Acts chapter 17 describes the background; there was much opposition to Christianity in Thessalonica, including personal attacks on the missionaries. It encourages the believers to stand firm, confident in the truth of the Gospel.
- 2 Thessalonians** This letter is a puzzle; it repeats much of 1 Thessalonians, sometimes using the same words. Its source and purpose are unclear; perhaps it was addressed to another church that needed to hear the same message.
- 1 Timothy**
2 Timothy
Titus Timothy worked alongside St Paul at Philippi, Colossae and Thessalonica, and Titus was sent by Paul to Corinth. These three letters contain encouragement and instructions for the work. However, they speak of Bishops, sometimes translated Presbyters, and Deacons (which were probably not invented in Paul's lifetime) and women being subject to men (which Paul didn't teach) so their date and source is in doubt.
- Philemon** This is a private letter from Paul to someone called Philemon, who owned a slave called Onesimus who ran away and met Paul. The legal consequences for a slave running away were severe. It appears that both Philemon and Onesimus were Christians, so Paul strongly urged Onesimus to go back, and Philemon to accept him without a fuss. The letter makes puns on Onesimus's name, which means "useful".

- Hebrews This book is placed between the letters attributed to St Paul and those attributed to others, because it is anonymous and its source is disputed. Nevertheless it is a valuable part of the Bible because it makes some important points.
- The Jews wanted God to send an angel or a prophet to help them. The writer is trying to show that God has gone one better! He discusses Christ's priesthood, arguing that it is incomparably better than that of the Old Testament because (1) the old priests were themselves sinners in need of forgiveness, so they were not able to provide forgiveness for others, (2) being sinners, they had no right of access to God, and (3) the priests died and were unable to save permanently. Hebrews 8:1 celebrates the fact that Christ is free of these defects.
- The writer seems keen to show that Christianity is rooted in the Old Testament but without the defects of Judaism, so he looks back to time before Moses, focussing on Abel, Melchizedek and Abraham.
- James The introductory verses assume that readers will have heard of James and respect his authority. Modern scholars think it means James the brother (half-brother?) of Jesus mentioned in Matthew 13:55. He became elder of the church at Jerusalem. Eusebius says "James the Just", the first bishop of Jerusalem, spent so long praying that his knees became calloused. He was stoned to death by the Jews in 61 AD.
- The sentences are short and blunt, like a sermon composed of loosely connected "sound bytes", or like a Christian version of "Proverbs". It says that faith leading to salvation can always be seen in the actions that arise from it, and gives examples that seem to be based on the Sermon on the Mount. This counterbalances St Paul's teaching that we are saved by faith, not by keeping laws.
- 1 Peter St Peter characteristically used the word "tree" to mean the cross on which Jesus died, both in Acts (5:30 etc.) and in these two letters.
- The epistle starts by discussing what a Christian is, then goes on to how one should behave, and finally focuses on relationships. There is much talk of suffering, but there is no evidence that the context involved particular persecution, so perhaps he has in mind the tension of being counter-cultural ("in the world but not of the world").
- Peter at first rejected Jesus's offer to wash his feet (John 13:8), but learned the lesson that "unless I wash your feet, you have no part in me". Being a Christian involves letting Jesus serve us. Peter often returns to that lesson in this epistle.
- 2 Peter Anselm Grün OSB says in his book *The Seven Sacraments*¹ "The Second Letter of Peter applied Jesus's message to the conditions of the Hellenistic spiritual world, and explained that Jesus's appeal was based on his gift to us of everything positive we need for ourselves and for our life".

¹ Grün, Anselm OSB *The Seven Sacraments* (London: Continuum, 2003) page 5

- 1 John This letter counters the teaching of those who offered hidden knowledge, saying “you have no need to be taught”. John states over and over again that his readers know the Gospel, and having accepted Jesus they have come to know the Father, and no other knowledge is necessary.
- John’s style is to paint everything in black and white. Throughout this book, the twin themes of salvation by works and salvation by faith (often thought of as being in conflict) are inextricably interwoven. 1 John 5:1 is the key: the carefully chosen words “keeps sinning”² imply that though we continue to commit sins, a process is going on that is saving us from our sinfulness. Non-Christians may think that they could stop sinning if they wanted to. Those of us who have tried, know that avoiding sin is not that easy, so we confess that we are sinners; that we would rather not be; and that we rely on God to save us.
- 2 John This appears to be a private letter to a “lady”, perhaps Mary the mother of Jesus. This book is briefer than 1 John, but John’s favourite themes of eternity and truth can be seen in it. It urges the lady to love fellow Christians but be careful of strangers spreading false doctrine.
- 3 John This again appears to be a private letter, mentioning various people about whom we know nothing. Again it warns of strangers spreading false doctrine.
- Jude Jude is almost entirely composed of material from 2 Peter, presented in the same style. Apparently they are different versions of one document.
- Revelation Someone called John (not necessarily John the beloved disciple) records in chapter 1 a vision of Jesus in glory, then two chapters of short messages from Jesus to churches in the middle east. From Chapter 4 onwards, Revelation uses symbolism heavily; to understand it, keep the first few chapters of Zechariah handy. Zechariah saw similar visions, asked what each element signified, and recorded it for our benefit. Ezekiel’s and Daniel’s prophecies use similar symbolism; the style is called Apocalyptic writing, that is, writing about the end of the world.
- We should not be surprised that we cannot understand everything in Revelation. In war the opposing sides take great care to keep their plans secret; otherwise the enemy would easily thwart them. What is mysterious to us is probably also mysterious to Satan and his demons, and must remain so until the events come to pass. Then the meaning that has been staring us in the face down the millennia will suddenly become so obvious that we will wonder why we never saw it before.
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² “Good News Bible” translation