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Introduction to the Bible

The Bible: a library of books

The word Bible comes from the Greek word *biblia*, meaning “books”. The Bible is not one book but a collection of many books of different kinds of writing. It is divided into the Old Testament and the New Testament (testament is a word that means “agreement”). The Old Testament contains books about God’s law, books of history, books of poetry and wisdom and books of the prophets. The New Testament contains books of the life of Jesus Christ, the history of the first Christians, letters and a book of prophetic visions.



Medieval monk at work
During the Middle Ages monks produced many illuminated bibles by hand.

The Bible’s writers

The Bible has a dual authorship. The immediate authors were writers coming from different countries, walks of life and social positions: kings like David and Solomon; prophets, like Isaiah and Ezekiel; Matthew, a tax-collector; Luke, a doctor; and apostles like Paul. But the ultimate author of the Bible is God: it is his message which he wrote through many different people at different times.

The Bible’s original languages

The two main original languages of the Bible were Hebrew and Greek. The Old Testament was mostly written in Hebrew but some was also written in Aramaic. The entire New Testament was written in Greek, the language commonly spoken and written throughout the Roman empire in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD.

The Bible’s message

The Bible has one central message: God’s salvation of his people. The Old Testament tells of God’s chosen people (the people of Israel) and their relationship with God. It describes the problem of human disobedience and God’s preparation of a

solution to this problem through the promise of his Messiah. The New



The caves at Qumran
Many of the Dead Sea Scrolls were found in 1947 in caves in the Qumran area. It is thought these ancient manuscripts were the remains of the library of a Jewish community called the Essenes.

Testament describes the fulfilling of God’s plan of salvation in the coming of his Son, Jesus, who is the Messiah: his life, death, resurrection and ascension, and the growth of the church, God’s redeemed people.

The Bible and archaeology

Archaeology is the scientific study of ancient people and cultures by discovering, studying and interpreting remains from the past. Archaeologists work by locating and dating these remains, like pottery, inscriptions, tools, weapons and coins for example.

Many remains from Palestine and its neighboring countries have been discovered. Important buildings that have been preserved include the theater at Ephesus where the apostle Paul was judged, whilst texts like the 14th century BC Amarna letters or the manuscripts from the Dead Sea Scrolls, all tell us a great deal about the people, the places and the common ideas of Bible times.

Through all these discoveries, we can form a picture of what life was like.

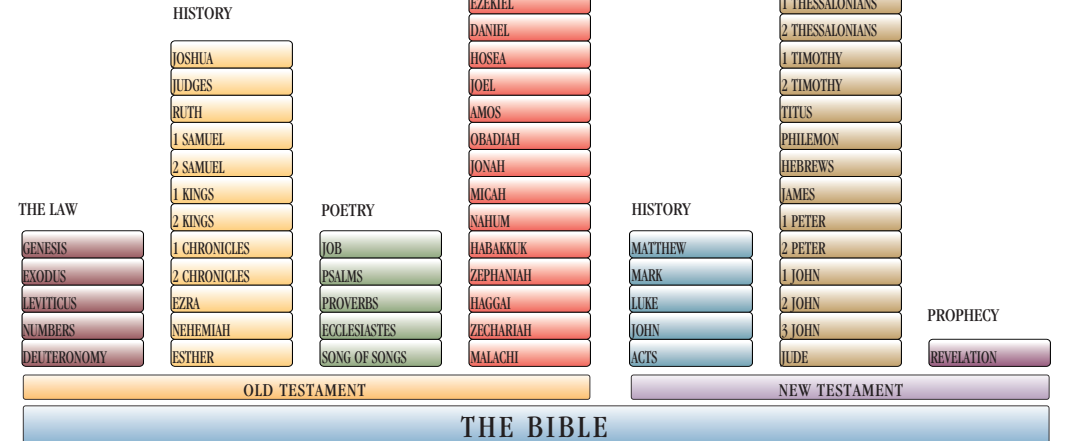


The lands of the Bible

All the events of the Bible take place in the Near East. The Old Testament is focused on Israel and countries to the north and east. The New Testament is focused on Israel and countries in Europe to the northwest.

A library of books

The Bible is a collection of 66 separate books inside the cover. These are in two main sections, the Old Testament and the New Testament.



The Old Testament

Here we read about God's creation, about the call of Abraham and God's promise to make Abraham's descendants into a great nation, Israel. The Old Testament tells the story of these people, of how God worked through them, revealing more and more of his character and purpose.



*For you are a people holy to the Lord your God.
The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the
peoples on earth to be his people,
his treasured possession.
(Deuteronomy 7:6)*

The Old Testament



The Old Testament contains 39 books: books of the law, history, poetry, wisdom and prophecy. The books were written by different authors over a long period of time. The Old Testament is full of lively stories, of love, hope, family life, jealousy, anger and disobedience. It is made up as follows:

The Books of the Law

The first five books of the Bible are known as the “pentateuch” and describe the origin of the Jewish people and culture. Genesis, the book of beginnings, goes back to the creation and describes the first disobedience towards God and God’s choosing of

Abraham and his descendants. Exodus shows God’s rescue of his people from slavery in Egypt under Moses’ leadership. Leviticus contains laws for the Israelites’ worship, especially about the sacrifices to be made to God. Numbers describes the Israelites’ wanderings in the wilderness for forty years. Deuteronomy records Moses’ speeches to the Israelites when they were about to enter the Promised Land.

The Books of History

This section covers twelve books concerned with the historical accounts of the Israelites. Joshua shows how the Israelites took possession of the Promised Land after Moses’ death. Judges relates how the new nation was disobedient to God and how he chose leaders or “judges”. Ruth, a story of love

and loyalty, is followed by 1 and 2 Samuel, a history of Israel from the last of the judges, through the leader Samuel and to Israel’s first king, Saul, followed by King David, “a man after God’s own heart”. The two books of Kings describe the reign of Solomon, and the later division into the northern kingdom (Israel) and the southern kingdom (Judah). Later Israel fell to the Assyrians and Judah (Jerusalem) to the Babylonians. The two books of Chronicles parallel the events of 2 Samuel and the books of Kings. Ezra tells of the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. Nehemiah describes his leadership in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. Esther was a Jew who became queen of Persia and managed to save her people from a plot to exterminate them.

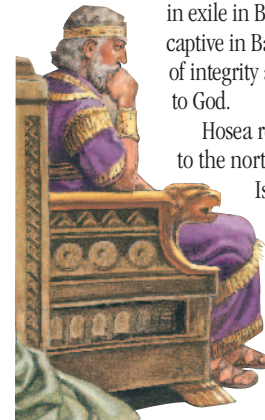
The Books of Poetry and Wisdom

These books deal with important questions of life. Job, a good man, grappled with the difficult question, “Why do the innocent suffer?” The Psalms are prayers, hymns, and poems that cover the full range of human emotions. Proverbs is a collection of wise sayings by different authors on a variety of everyday themes. Ecclesiastes considers the age-old question, “What is life all about?” The Song of Songs is a poem that celebrates the physical love that a couple find in each other.

The Books of the Prophets

The prophets predicted future events, especially about the coming Messiah, but their main task was to call God’s people back to him. Isaiah describes the threat of the Assyrian conquest, God’s promises to exiles in Babylon, and a message of hope to the Jews after they had returned from the exile. The warning messages of Jeremiah came in the closing years of Judah. The book of Lamentations is a song of sorrow about the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. Ezekiel records the visions and prophecies of the prophet in exile in Babylon. Daniel, captive in Babylon, lived a life of integrity and faithfulness to God.

Hosea records prophecies to the northern kingdom of Israel: even though the people were faithless, God



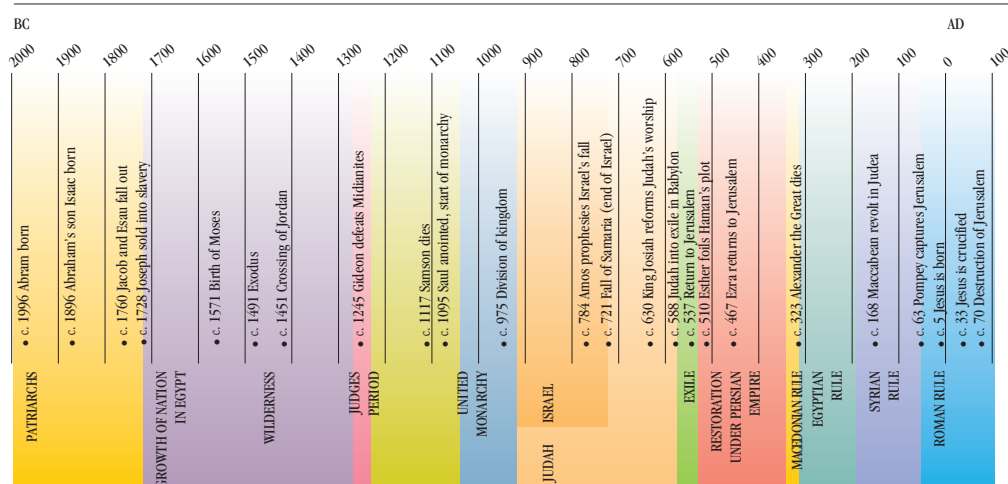
King Solomon was famous for his wisdom.



was still faithful. Joel describes a devastating plague of locusts, seen as a sign of the coming final “day of the Lord”. Amos preached a message of social justice to the affluent society of Israel. Obadiah is a prophecy against Edom, a country bordering Judah. Jonah describes his reluctance to go and preach in Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, Israel’s enemy. Micah records prophecies against injustices in society yet also contains a message of

forgiveness and restoration. Nahum foretells the destruction of Nineveh. The prophet Habakkuk questions God about how he could use the wicked Babylon to punish people who were better than them. Zephaniah prophesied against Judah; Haggai and Zechariah urged the people on to rebuild the temple; and Malachi questioned the people’s religious apathy and challenged them to wholehearted obedience to God.

Biblical Timeline*



*These dates are from *The Annals of the World* by James Ussher



CREATION STORIES

Since time began many cultures have invented stories that explain the origin and order of the universe. One of the most famous is the Babylonian epic of creation, "Enuma Elish". The Babylonian version features the god Marduk. According to Archbishop James Ussher, who researched chronologies from the Old Testament, God created the world in 4004 BC.



FRUIT

The law of Moses declared that for the first three years after a tree was planted, its fruit was forbidden. In the fourth year, the fruit belonged to God, and it was only after five years that people could eat the tree's fruit. Fruit trees were so valuable that even during war, special efforts were made to protect them. Figs, grapes, dates and olives are all important crops, but citrus fruits did not come in until New Testament times.

God makes the world

GENESIS 1-2

At the beginning of time, God created heaven and earth. The earth was completely dark, without any shape, and empty. Complete darkness hung over the ocean waters.

God then made everything simply by the power of speaking out his commands.

"Let the light shine!" God said on the first day, and light came. He saw that the light was good. He separated the light and the darkness. He called the light "day", and the darkness "night". Then came evening and morning.

On the second day, he said, "Let the oceans divide," and a great space appeared between the waters. God called this space "sky".

On the third day, God said, "Let there be dry ground," and he called the dry ground "land". Then the land produced many different kinds of trees and flowers. Fruit and crops started to grow.

On the fourth day, God commanded, "Let the sky be filled with lights," and he made the sun, the moon, and set brilliant stars and galaxies around them.

On the fifth day, God filled the oceans with fish and the sky with birds. He blessed them all and told them to roam free and to increase in number and to fill the earth and skies and oceans.

Finally, on the sixth day, God made animals of all shapes and sizes, both tame and wild, to live on the land. And he made man and woman, and told them, "Go and have many children so you can take care of the earth and all the fish, birds and animals and all living creatures."

At the end of the sixth day, the heavens and the earth were completed in all their glory. God looked back at everything he had made and was extremely pleased with what he saw.

By the seventh day, God had finished making the universe. So he rested from all his work and made this day a special day. It was a holy day, a day for rest and for stopping to give thanks for all the wonders of his magnificent creation.



THE FIFTH DAY OF CREATION

The opening words of the Bible declare that God made heaven and earth. Everything around us did not come about by mere chance but is the result of God's purpose and design.



Sin spoils the creation

GENESIS 2-3

God made a beautiful garden called Eden, a paradise full of animals and fruit trees. At the center of the garden stood a tree with the special power to give the knowledge of good and evil to anyone who ate its fruit. God told Adam, the first man, to look after the plants, but warned him, “You may eat fruit from any tree you like, but not from the tree of knowledge. If you do, you will die.”

When God realized that Adam was lonely by himself, he made him fall into a deep sleep. He took out one of Adam’s ribs and from it he made a woman called Eve, to be Adam’s wife. Although they were both naked, they were not in the least embarrassed, and they were very happy living in the garden.

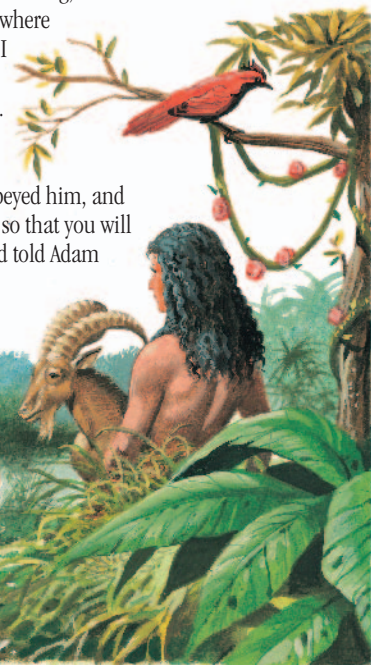
Now in the garden was a serpent, who was the most cunning of all the animals. He used his powers of persuasion to get Eve into trouble. “You won’t really die if you eat fruit from the tree of knowledge,” he said. “Instead you will be just like God, knowing what is good and what is evil.”

Eve was so tempted by the tasty fruit that would make her clever that she picked some and ate it. She offered some to Adam, who ate it too. Immediately, they realized that they were naked and were ashamed. They sewed fig leaves together as clothes to cover themselves.

When God came walking in the garden that evening, Adam and Eve hid themselves behind the trees in fear. “Adam, where are you?” God called. “Have you eaten the fruit I told you not to eat?”

Reluctantly, Adam had to admit that he had. “The snake tricked me into giving it to him,” Eve explained, sadly.

God was angry that Adam and Eve had disobeyed him, and told Adam, “I will curse the ground with weeds, so that you will have to work hard to grow your food.” Then God told Adam and Eve to leave the Garden of Eden for ever.



THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

According to tradition, the fruit that Adam and Eve ate from the tree of knowledge was an apple. But the Bible does not tell us what kind of tree or fruit it was. Some experts now think the fruit may even have been a pomegranate.



Cain murders Abel

GENESIS 4

Adam and Eve started a new life outside the Garden of Eden. They had two sons: Abel, who grew up to be a shepherd, and Cain, who worked in the fields as a farmer.

When the time came to make an offering to God, Cain brought a few of his harvest crops, but he did so with a careless attitude. Abel, on the other hand, brought only the very best pieces of meat from his sheep, showing his deep, heartfelt trust in God. So God was pleased with Abel’s offering but not with Cain’s. This filled Cain with anger.

“Why are you so angry?” God asked Cain. “If you make the right offering I will accept it, but be careful, because if you do not, sin is waiting to pounce on you and rule you.”

But Cain would not listen. Burning with rage and jealousy, he lured his brother Abel into a field and killed him.

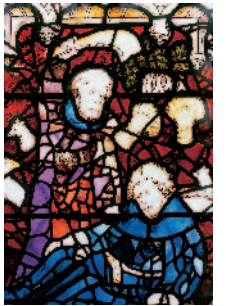
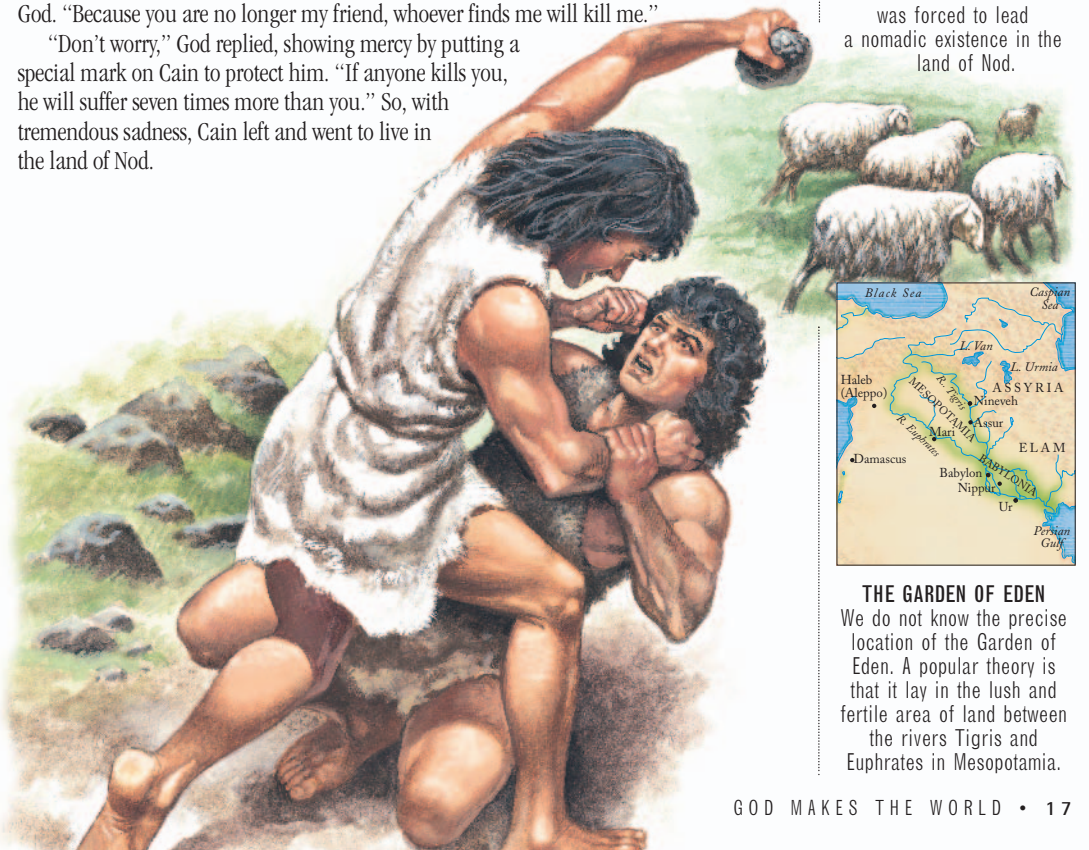
“Where is your brother?” God asked him, but Cain pretended not to know.

“Don’t ask me,” he replied. “Am I supposed to look after him?”

“Look what you’ve done!” said God, angrily. “I can plainly see Abel’s blood on the ground, so now I must punish you. From now on your crops will no longer grow and you will have to wander through the world without a home.”

Cain trembled with fear. “My punishment is too much for me to bear,” he pleaded with God. “Because you are no longer my friend, whoever finds me will kill me.”

“Don’t worry,” God replied, showing mercy by putting a special mark on Cain to protect him. “If anyone kills you, he will suffer seven times more than you.” So, with tremendous sadness, Cain left and went to live in the land of Nod.



CAIN KILLS ABEL

After Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden, sin entered the world for the first time. This is shown when Cain became jealous of Abel and committed the first murder. Cain’s punishment for killing his brother was to become a wanderer with no home. He was forced to lead a nomadic existence in the land of Nod.



THE GARDEN OF EDEN

We do not know the precise location of the Garden of Eden. A popular theory is that it lay in the lush and fertile area of land between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates in Mesopotamia.





CARPENTERS' TOOLS

More than three thousand years ago, the Egyptians used tools like this adze and chisel. Noah may have used an adze to hack and plane the wood, and a chisel to carve and shape it.



BOAT BUILDING

In many parts of the world, boats are still built by hand using methods and tools that have hardly changed over thousands of years. The ark that Noah built was enormous. It is estimated that it was as long as one and a half football fields and as tall as a 4-story building. The framework was sealed with tar to make it watertight.

Noah builds the great ark

GENESIS 6-8

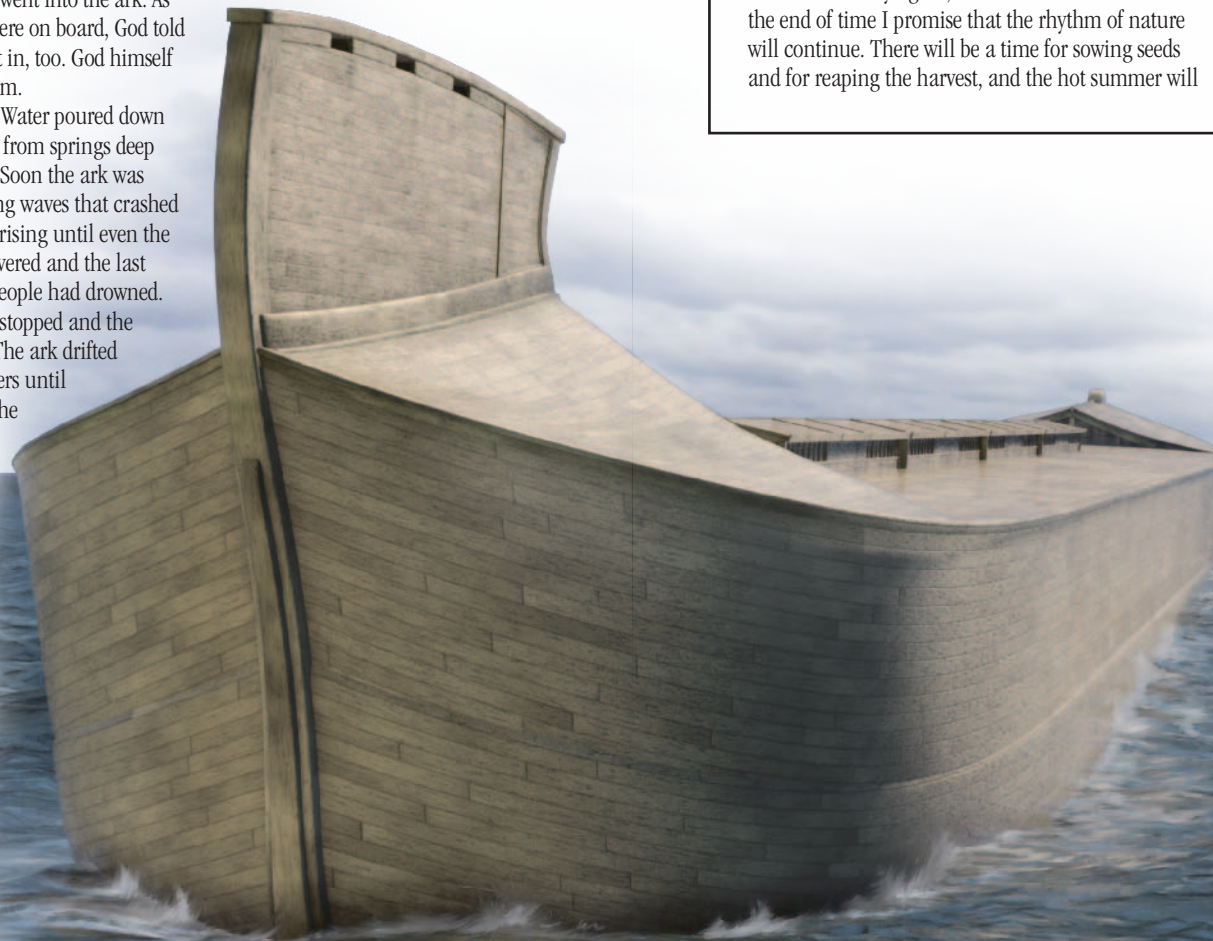
God saw that people were becoming more and more wicked and he began to regret making them.

But there was one good man, called Noah, who loved and obeyed God. "I have decided to destroy the men and women that I have created," God told him. "Every living animal will die too. I want you to make a wooden boat, because I am going to send a flood to cover the whole world. Only you and your family, and the animals that are inside the boat, will be kept safe."

With the help of his three sons, Noah obeyed God and began to build an enormous boat, called an ark. He followed the plans that God had given him for its construction precisely. When the ark was finished, God sent two of every kind of animal and bird — one male and one female — and they all went into the ark. As soon as the last animals were on board, God told Noah and his family to get in, too. God himself closed the door behind them.

Then it began to rain. Water poured down from the sky and burst up from springs deep under the earth's surface. Soon the ark was floating free on the swirling waves that crashed against it. The water kept rising until even the tallest mountains were covered and the last remaining animals and people had drowned.

After 40 days, the rain stopped and the water began to go down. The ark drifted silently over the calm waters until finally it came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. Noah sent out birds to see how much of the earth was free of flooding. When a dove returned with a fresh olive leaf in its beak, Noah knew that the trees were growing again. Their voyage was over. Soon they could all leave the ark and explore the earth.



A rainbow of promises

GENESIS 8-9

You must leave the ark now," God said to Noah and his family. "Bring the animals, too, as they must find new homes and raise their young." So Noah climbed down the gangway and stepped onto the earth. He was so glad that God had saved him from the flood that he built an altar and made an offering to God.

"Even though people will never change, and will continue to behave wickedly, I will not destroy the world in this way again," God said. "From now until the end of time I promise that the rhythm of nature will continue. There will be a time for sowing seeds and for reaping the harvest, and the hot summer will

follow the cold winter as surely as the day follows the night."

Then God told Noah and his family, "Make a fresh start. The whole world belongs to you and your children. Use it wisely and enjoy its resources."

Then God made a covenant with Noah, his children, and all the animals. "I will never again send a flood to destroy the world. If ever it rains for a long time and you begin to worry that I have forgotten this promise, all you need to do is look upwards. I will put a sign in the sky to remind you of what I have said. Whenever you see the colorful rainbow shining out in the middle of dark rain clouds, remember my promise."



THE RAINBOW

There are lots of covenants in the Bible, but God's covenant with Noah is the first one. A covenant is an agreement in which people promise to do certain things. The rainbow was the sign of God's covenant promise never again to destroy the earth with a flood. The word that the Bible uses for rainbow also means a "war-bow". This symbolizes God lowering his bow to declare peace.