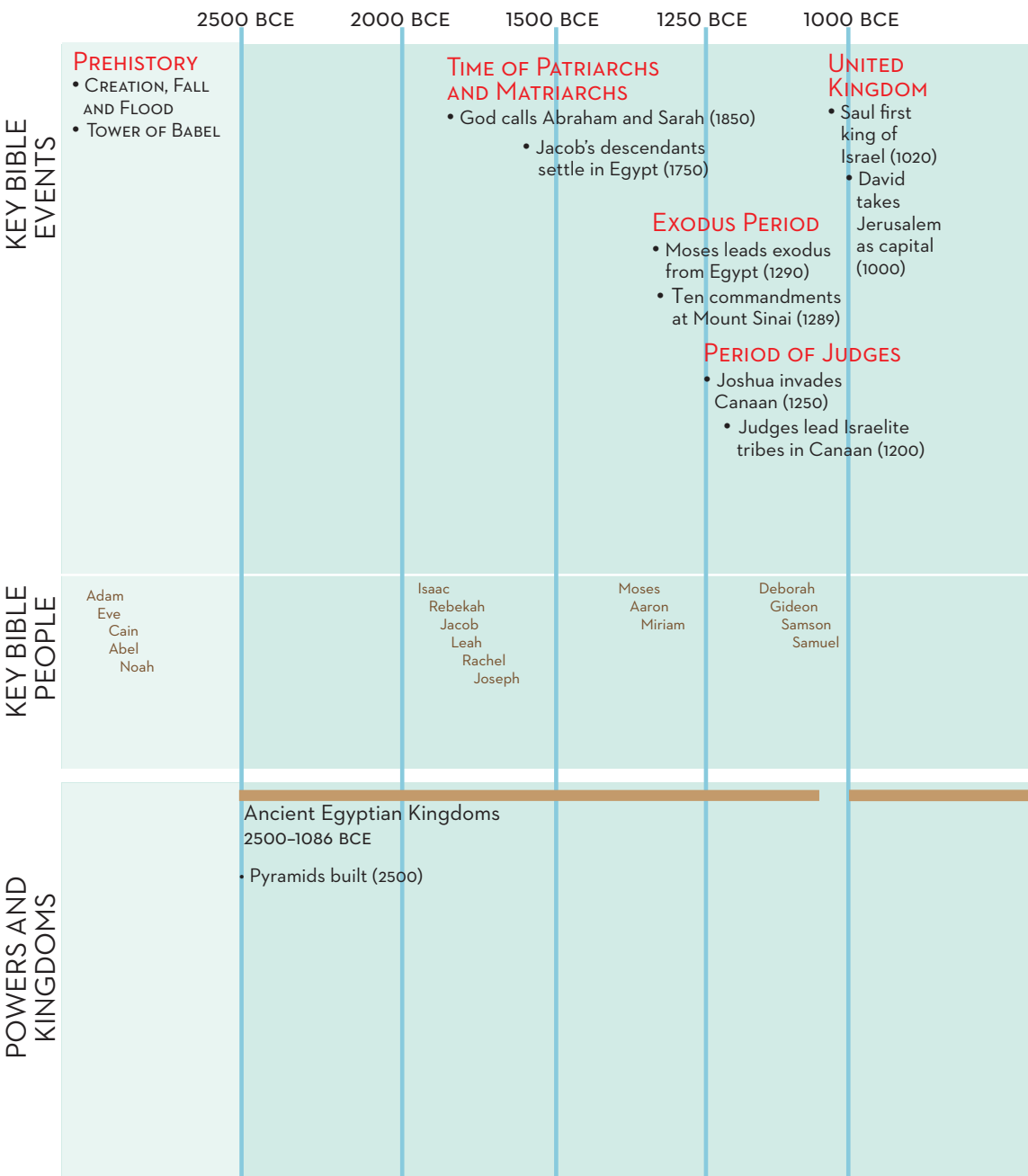


Bible History Timeline

Key Bible events and people are listed along with the ruling powers and kingdoms influential in the world of the Bible. All dates are approximate.





READING AND INTERPRETING THE BIBLE

WHAT SHOULD WE EXPECT

When We Read the Bible?

All of us bring expectations with us when we open the pages of the Bible. The Lutheran understanding of scripture is that we need to find ways for it to break through our expectations and to challenge us. Martin Luther opposed those who let their view of what was in the Bible keep it from speaking anew to them. So, what should we expect when we read and study the Bible? Here are ten things to consider.

1. We should expect to encounter God.

The Bible is like a window. It is not intended to call attention to itself. It is intended to allow us to look through it and see what God is like. The words of scripture are like windows to help us see even more than they can say. Most basically, we should expect to find Christ there—that is, to hear what God has done for us, how God has adopted us, and how God has promised to be with us into the future.

2. We should expect to discover what can be called “the first language of faith.”

The Bible supplies us with a vocabulary to talk *about* God and what it means to be the people of God. It supplies us with a vocabulary for talking *with* God through prayer and worship. Biblical language conveys a different understanding of the world than does nonbiblical language. For example, think about how we describe nature or the natural world we live in. The Bible says that God created it. The Bible helps us view the world as a gift from God, and we are called to take care of that gift, for the benefit of others.

3. We should expect a language rich in metaphor.

In the Bible we find many metaphors, such as the “lamb of God,” the “rock of our salvation,” the “bread of life,” and the “way.” We should not expect to read the Bible simply as a textbook. The Bible uses language and stories rich in metaphors that point to God. That lively language enlivens our sense of ourselves in relation to our neighbors and the world.

4. We should expect to be challenged.

The Bible provides a picture of what it means to live as a child of God and as a follower of Jesus. For example, one in ten verses in the gospels are about wealth and our use of it. We hear, “Blessed are you who are poor” (Lk 6:20). To the rich young man Jesus says, “Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor” (Mk 10:21). It is important that we not too quickly say, “Oh, all this just deals with one’s *attitude* toward riches.” That insulates us from the challenge of these texts, from the challenge of doing justice. We need to let the challenge confront us.

BIBLE READING PLAN

Martin Luther once said, “For some years now . . . I have read through the Bible twice every year. If you picture the Bible to be a mighty tree and every word a little branch, I have shaken every one of these branches because I wanted to know what it was and what it meant” (LW 54:165).

Few of us will ever approach the time and energy Luther devoted to reading the Bible. Yet, as Luther’s heirs, we carry his love for scripture and affirm with him that God’s word alone holds the key to life and salvation. With Luther, we want to “shake each branch” to discover its meaning for our lives.

When Martin Luther lived in exile at the Wartburg Castle, with his own life as well as his reforming cause in jeopardy, he used his time for intensive Bible study. In addition, he began a monumental undertaking to translate the Bible into the common language of his country’s people. If every believer was a priest before God, as Luther proclaimed, then he or she should be invited to read and study God’s truth found in scripture.

Using This Plan

This Bible reading companion provides a yearlong interaction with scripture. Each day offers three different “paths” through the Bible. This allows adults, youth, and children to choose the path most appropriate for their interests, their abilities, and the amount of daily time they are willing to dedicate to daily Bible reading.

The Challenge Path. Dig deeply into the Bible’s riches. This path offers large sections of scripture for thoughtful meditation. For six days of each week, read through about two to four chapters of a book of the Bible. These readings alternate between the New and Old Testaments. Sundays offer a different approach. Since three appointed scripture readings are typically read at Sunday worship, those following the Challenge Path generally will study selections that day from a variety of biblical resources such as Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. In other instances, Sunday reading will focus on short books such as Ruth, Jonah, and Esther.

The Survey Path. Shorter scriptural references characterize the Survey Path. There is usually a close connection with the readings listed for the Challenge Path. However, from time to time, related passages from both the Old and New Testaments are brought together to explore connections of key biblical ideas. Each week features a theme for your reading.

The Sampler Path. This path distills the Bible’s message in a weekly series of memorable and quotable references. These passages are special treasures of Christian faith and can be used for memorization. For the most part, the Sampler Path uses shorter portions of the Challenge Path selections. Hopefully, this will encourage discussion and interaction between members of the same household who are reading different “paths.”

MARTIN LUTHER

on the Bible



Portrait of Martin Luther by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553), 1529.

Martin Luther's deep engagement with scripture caused the Lutheran Reformation. Writing in 1545, a year before his death, Luther recalled how his meditation on Romans 1:17 had affected him. The words of the apostle Paul, "He who through faith is righteous shall live," had led Luther to a new understanding of the righteousness, or justice, of God. Luther remembered, "A totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me." He no longer saw God's righteousness as the righteousness by which God judges us but rather as the way God justifies us—that is, puts us in right relationship with God. Luther then "ran through the Scriptures from memory," he said, and found similar passages about "the work of God, that is, what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God, with which he makes us wise."¹ He came to recognize that God acted in the gospel to *give* us righteousness. That was profoundly different from God acting in the law to *demand* righteousness from us. Luther's insight had tremendous implications for how we read the Bible, how we engage with the Bible's message, and how we live as Christians in the world.

How Luther Read the Bible

For Luther, God's two ways of dealing with humans—law and gospel—gave both content and shape to the biblical message and provided the proper lens for reading the Bible. He recognized that truly understanding the biblical text always rested on fundamental principles of Christian teaching or doctrine. But he also understood these principles to arise from the Bible itself rather than from the mind of the reader. Today we may struggle with the idea that certain core Christian beliefs shape the way we read the biblical text. But Luther and other theologians through the centuries recognized that this is true. Luther always tried to make his presuppositions clear, to show his readers that they originated in the Bible itself, and to show that they truly helped the hearer and reader to understand the biblical message.

Law and gospel in the Bible

Luther recognized both law and gospel as God's good ways of working in the lives of humans. Sometimes he equated the Old Testament with law and the New Testament with gospel, but more often he

recognized that law and gospel were found in both parts of the Bible. God gives us the law to teach us to fear (revere), love, and trust in God above all. The law also helps us to order society, to curb evil, and to provide a standard of righteousness that guides human life. God gives the law so that we may know what good works please God. Luther recognized that some laws in the Bible were outdated or did not apply in his time and place. But he never dismissed biblical laws lightly and never merely because they were inconvenient or difficult. He taught that the biblical laws were one valid expression of the natural law governing humanity, law that could vary according to time and place. Most importantly for Luther, our failure to live up to God's law also reveals our sin and puts to shame all our assumptions about our own human ability.² This function (or “use”) of the law drove humans to the promise of the gospel.

The gospel is the gracious promise of God in Christ. It grants forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation to the fallen and unworthy sinner. To read the Bible with the gospel as its heart is to “urge Christ” in each biblical text. “The Scriptures,” Luther stated, “must be understood in favor of Christ, not against him. For that reason they must either refer to him or must not be held to be true Scriptures.” And again: “If one of them had to be parted with, Christ or the law, the law would have to be let go, not Christ.”³ Like Christian interpreters since the earliest era of the church, Luther understood Jesus Christ to be the center of scripture: Christ was found throughout scripture, not just in the New Testament. For many prior interpreters Christ was primarily an example to be imitated. But Luther saw Christ first and foremost as gift (gospel) and only secondarily as example (law). For him, this carried very personal implications:

The chief article and foundation of the gospel is that before you take Christ as an example, you . . . recognize him as a gift, as a present that God has given you and that is your own. This means that when you see or hear of Christ doing or suffering something, you do not doubt that Christ himself, with his deeds and suffering, belongs to you. . . . This is the great fire of the love of God for us, whereby the heart and conscience become happy, secure, and content. . . . Now when you have Christ as the foundation and chief blessing of your salvation, then the other part follows: that you take him as your example, giving yourself in service to your neighbor just as you see that Christ has given himself for you. . . . Therefore make note of this, that Christ as a gift nourishes your faith and makes you a Christian. But Christ as an example exercises your works. These do not make you a Christian. Actually they come forth from you because you have already been made a Christian.⁴

Is the Bible the word of God?

Repeatedly, Luther warned against confusing law and gospel, demand and promise, example and gift, when interpreting scripture: “It is not yet knowledge of the gospel when you know these doctrines and commandments, but only when the voice comes that says, ‘Christ is your own, with his life, teaching, works, death, resurrection, and all that he is, has, does, and can do.’”⁵



Facsimile of a page of the New Testament printed in 1523.



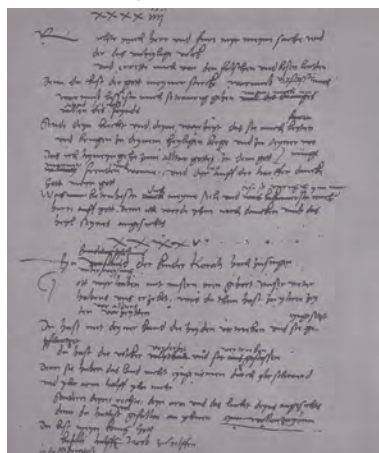
"Genesis," frontispiece depicting the creation, Luther Bible, first edition, 1534.

So Luther never simply equated the word of God (both law and gospel) with the written scriptures. On the contrary, he taught that the word of God is essentially oral in character; it is a "living voice." In a famous passage from the *Church Postil* of 1522, Luther contrasts Moses as a writer of "doctrine" with Christ, who commanded that his teaching "should be orally continued giving no command that it should be written." That the New Testament finally took written form is, for Luther, evidence of "a serious decline and a lack of the Spirit which necessity forced upon us."⁶

Where is the word then? Luther believed that all humanity, all institutions, including the church, are affected by the hurly-burly of events and infected with sin. God's word is mingled with and hidden under the forces that oppress the church at all times and places. God's word is realized in the community of faith only because the word itself acts in us. It forms in us confession of faith, a loving response to divine grace. Although that has been true from creation to the present day, knowledge and proper understanding of God's word are not a continuous, unbroken achievement of the church. Rather, our knowledge

of God is best understood as God's gift, which draws the spontaneous response of the Christian community to the gospel. It is a response created within the hearts of believers by the Holy Spirit's work in the word. God—not doctrinal propositions, a pope, or a succession of bishops—provides faithfulness in the church. Therefore, under the guidance of the Spirit, responsible faith requires critical discernment of the text of scripture, not just listening to the traditions of the church.⁷

Discerning the scriptures



Luther's manuscript for Psalm 43 from his translation of the Bible.

Luther sought to discern or understand the meaning of biblical texts within his overall theological framework. At the same time, he paid close attention to a number of factors, including historical context and literary style: "For before one learns the reason and the motive for what a man says, it is only letters, the shouts of choristers or the songs of nuns. . . . There are many passages in Holy Scripture that are contradictory according to the letters; but when that which motivates them is pointed out, everything is all right."⁸ This sense of context even extends to individual authors of scripture and their differences. In speaking of understanding Paul, for example, Luther declares:

The histories in the Scriptures are often concise and confused so that they cannot be easily harmonized, as, for example, the denials of Peter and the history of Christ's Passion, etc. Thus Paul is not reciting the entire history here. Therefore I do not expend any labor or concern on harmonizing these things, but here pay attention to Paul's purpose and intention.⁹



MAP 1



MAP 2