Introduction
Overview of the Bible and its Important Dates

Reading the Bible with clear understanding is difficult for Christians today, and the sole purpose of this book is to assist the thoughtful reader in doing so. While some passages of Scripture, like the 23rd Psalm and Jesus’ parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Son, lend themselves to immediate understanding, the Bible as a whole is an extremely complex book, and its complexity staggers even the most serious scholar who turns to it. Consider these facts about the Bible which contribute to the difficulty of reading it.

- The Bible is not one book but at least sixty-six books.
- Some of the earliest books were written around the year 1000 BC and the latest were written in 100 AD, a span of at least 1100 years.
- Even those written earliest were recording events that took place 750 years before the actual writing occurred.
- The multitude of forms of writing are included in this book: poems, hymns, law codes, creeds, parables, folk tales about great people, histories, genealogies, diaries, liturgies for use in worship, letters written to church groups for study and instruction, personal letters dispatched to friends.
- Scripture was written by and about people who lived in a vast variety of cultural situations. Some lived in Egypt from about 1700 to 1300 BC; others lived as outcasts for two centuries in the mountains of Judah; others were inhabitants of the most powerful empire of its contemporary world in the time of King David; others were exiled for some generations into the far-off land of Babylon; still others were residents of great cities of the Hellenistic world like Alexandria, Antioch, Ephesus, Philippi, Corinth, and Rome itself. These people were ruled by one great empire after another; the Egyptian, the Syrian, the Assyrian, the Babylonian, the Persian, the Greek, and the Roman. No other known collection of writing was produced in so many different cultural settings.
- Scripture was written in two basic languages, Hebrew and Greek, both of which are used today chiefly by scholars and which are unfamiliar to the rest of us.
- The texts of the compositions used for reading and translating the Bible are admittedly not the original ones. Our earliest New Testament text dates from the middle of the second century AD and the texts used for the Old Testament come largely from the ninth century BC. There are endless variations given for the spelling of words and for the form of the various verb-endings, and alternate texts are offered for some passages in the original text of the author.
- The various translations made into English also compound the confusion. The King James Version is probably the most literal of our translations, but it is based on an out-of-date text and employs a form of the English language more suited to the seventeenth century than to the twenty-first. The Revised Standard Version tried to update the King James Version and succeeded at some points but failed at others. The New Revised Standard Version updated the Revised Standard Version with inclusive language but sacrificed some of the meaning and majesty of the earlier version. The Good News Bible, the New English Bible, the translations of J. B. Phillips, and the Message attempt to catch the spirit of the Scripture rather than the literal meaning, while the translators of the Living Bible and the New International Version chose the theologically most conservative position at every point. The difficulties of translation and the variety of translations are also confusing to the person who wants to read the Scripture meaningfully.
Yet it is important for Christians to work out a way of approach to the Scriptures, a scholarly way that takes into account the language, thought-forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written. What follows is my attempt to hear God speak in the human situations in which we find ourselves and I commend it to you for your study and your critique.

In searching through the Scriptures, I find it important to isolate five major components that went into the composition of the Scriptures. The first two are in this introduction, the others will come later in this study.

The first stage of understanding the Scriptures is to look carefully at those persons whose lives made the most impact on shaping the Scriptures. Four such persons are presented. Moses acted as agent for God’s covenant with God’s people and is fully recognized as the most important person in the Old Testament; he is to the Old Testament what Jesus is to the New. David, considered a just and God-fearing king, set the model for Kingship and governance to which all succeeding generations looked. Elijah was the quintessential prophet, and his confrontations with King Ahab and Queen Jezebel inspired the work of the prophets from his own day to that of John the Baptist. And Jesus was the Christ, the culmination of the Old Testament and the center of the New. These four are designated “Pioneering Persons,” because they pioneered new trails over which others could later follow.

A second component for reading the Bible meaningfully consists of detailing the history that provided the skeletal structure for the writing of Scripture: If a dozen dates, more or less, are fixed in memory, the pattern of Scripture is more perfectly discerned. The following dates are suggested:

- c. 1325 BC: The Exodus from Egypt under Moses.
- c. 1000: The beginning of David’s kingdom.
- 925: The division of David’s kingdom into a Northern kingdom called Israel and the southern kingdom called Judah.
- 722: The destruction by Assyria of the northern kingdom.
- 586: The destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian armies and the exile of Judah into Babylon.
- 539: The beginning of the return to the land of Judah from the Babylonian exile.
- 333: The Greek conquest of the Persian empire and the beginning of the Hellenization of the world.
- 167: The Maccabean revolt against Syria.
- 63: Rome takes over the Holy Land.
- 29 AD: The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- 70: The destruction of Jerusalem by Roman armies under Titus.
- 135: The final revolt of Bar Kochba, whose defeat ended Jewish hopes for a return to power in the area that Rome now called Palestine.

With these dates in mind, the Bible reader can begin to fit other events into their historical settings.

Tomorrow and the rest of the week we look at Moses, the first of our Pioneering Persons. And so we begin.