

## Chapter 26

# Ten+ People You Should Know from the Bible

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Getting a look at Adam and Eve
  - ▶ Sailing away with Noah
  - ▶ Going on the journey of a lifetime with Abraham
  - ▶ Wandering about with Moses
  - ▶ Taking one on the rocks with David
  - ▶ Confronting the town “bull-y” with Elijah
  - ▶ Looking ahead with the prophet Isaiah
  - ▶ Following the lead of Judah “the Hammer” Maccabee
  - ▶ Getting the message from Jesus
  - ▶ Spreading the word with Peter, Paul, and Mary
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**I**n this chapter, you meet (in order of appearance) ten (or so) of the Bible’s most important people. Of course, limiting the Bible’s cast of thousands to ten is nearly impossible, so we fudge a little. In addition, the most important character in the Bible is God, but because God isn’t a “people,” and because we discuss God’s nature and role throughout this book, He didn’t make the list. However, with this list you’ll be sure to impress your friends at dinner parties and improve your score on the TV quiz show, *Jeopardy!*

## *Adam and Eve*

Look, we know that Adam and Eve are two people, and we shouldn’t cheat — especially in a book about the Bible. But Adam and Eve really are inseparable. And after all, even the Bible refers to them as “one flesh” in recognition of their coming from the same flesh (Adam’s) and being joined together again in marital/sexual union.

Adam and Eve are important because, according to the Bible, they're the first two people in the world, and from them comes everyone who has ever lived — whether Shaquille O'Neal or the Munchkin actors in the *Wizard of Oz*.

The human drama begins when God forms Adam from the ground and breathes life into him. God then performs the first surgery, creating Eve from Adam's side (a more literal translation than "rib"). Adam and Eve live together in Paradise (or what the Bible calls the Garden of Eden) until they disobey God by eating fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. This act of defiance, called "The Fall" by many theologians, is a real bummer because from it comes painful childbirth, weeds in your garden, and, ultimately, death. Moreover, Adam and Eve's disobedience introduce fear and alienation into humankind's formerly perfect relationships with God and one another. As evidence of this alienation, Adam and Eve's son, Cain, murders his brother, Abel. To read more about Adam and Eve and their family, turn to Chapters 4 and 5 of this book, and open a Bible to Genesis 2–5.

## Noah

Noah is most famous for building an ark — a giant three-decked wooden box in which he, his family, and a whole bunch of animals ride out a massive flood that God sends to destroy humankind for its disobedience. God chooses Noah and his family to survive the deluge because Noah is "the most righteous in his generation." Noah is important not only because his ark decorates most nurseries in North America but also because, according to the Bible, if Noah hadn't been righteous, you and I wouldn't be here right now. To find out more about Noah, see Chapter 4 in this book and read Genesis 6–9.

## Abraham

The Bible is filled with stories about people disobeying God. One notable exception is Abraham, a man who, though not perfect, obeys God's command to leave his homeland in Mesopotamia and venture to an unknown Promised Land (ancient Canaan; later Israel). God promises Abraham that his descendants will become a great nation, through which all the people of the earth will be blessed.

The tales of Abraham and his wife Sarah are a roller coaster of dramatic events that repeatedly jeopardize God's promise. Ironically, the biggest threat to God's promise is when God Himself commands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac (see Chapter 5). Abraham sets out to do just as God orders, but right before Abraham delivers the fatal blow to his own child, God stops the sacrifice. As a reward for Abraham's faith, God fulfills His promise to make Abraham's descendants a great nation, as Isaac's son Jacob eventually has 12 sons, whose descendants become the nation of Israel.

Today, three of the world's major religions — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam — trace their roots to Abraham. To discover more about these three Abrahamic faiths, see Chapter 24.

## Moses

The Hebrew Bible describes Moses as the greatest prophet who ever lived, and for good reason. Moses is born during hard times for ancient Israel. They're enslaved in Egypt, and their growing population so alarms the Egyptians that the Egyptian king orders all newborn Israelite males drowned in the Nile River. Moses' mother saves her son's life by placing him in the Nile in a reed basket, where he is soon discovered by Pharaoh's daughter, who ironically raises Moses in the royal palace. After he's grown, Moses must flee Egypt for killing an Egyptian who was beating an Israelite slave. Eventually, God appears to Moses in a burning bush and tells him that he must return to Egypt to deliver the Israelites from their slavery. With God's help, Moses succeeds in his mission, bringing the Israelites to Mount Sinai, where God first appeared to Moses. At Mount Sinai, God gives Moses the Law, including the Ten Commandments. Moses eventually leads the Israelites to the edge of their Promised Land (ancient Canaan; later Israel), where he dies at the ripe old age of 120. To read more about Moses, see Chapter 7.

## David

David is Israel's second and arguably greatest king. As a boy, David courageously defeats a mighty enemy warrior named Goliath with only a sling and a stone. As a man, David conquers all Israel's enemies and begins a dynasty that would rule Jerusalem for nearly 400 years. But not all the news surrounding David is good. David perpetrates one of the Bible's most heinous crimes: He commits adultery with a woman named Bathsheba, who's the wife of one of David's most loyal soldiers, Uriah. Then, to cover up the crime, David has Uriah killed. In David's favor, when the prophet Nathan confronts David with his sin, David repents. Moreover, in God's favor, God forgives David for his sin, but not without punishing David for his crime.

Beyond David's royal exploits (and indiscretions), he's credited with writing many of ancient Israel's worship songs, which you can read in the Book of Psalms. To find out more about David's incredible life, see Chapters 10 and 11 of this book along with 1 Samuel 16–1 Kings 2 and 1 Chronicles 10–29 of the Bible.

## Elijah

Elijah is one of Israel's greatest prophets, as well as God's heavyweight champ in an epic bout against a deity named Baal (the Canaanite storm god).

In order to prove to the Israelites that God is the only true God, Elijah gathers the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel, where for the main event each deity is given a pile of wood with a bull on it. The god who can produce fire and consume the sacrifice wins. Baal goes first, and for half the day his prophets dance, shout, sing, and even cut themselves in order to convince their god to answer Elijah's challenge. When their efforts fail, Elijah prays to God, who immediately sends fire down from the sky and consumes the sacrifice. The Israelites rededicate themselves to God, and they kill the prophets who deceived them into worshipping Baal.

Later, near the Jordan River, a fiery horse-drawn chariot descends from the sky and takes Elijah to heaven, but not before he appoints a successor named Elisha. Elijah's atypical departure influenced later biblical prophets, who predicted that Elijah would return as a precursor to the coming of the Messiah. Because of these prophecies, Jews invite Elijah every Passover to usher in the age of the Messiah (see Chapter 27), and the New Testament writers associate John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus' ministry, with Elijah (see Chapter 18). To find out more about Elijah, see Chapter 10 in this book, and read about him in the Bible in 1 Kings 17–21 and 2 Kings 1–2.

## Isaiah

Isaiah is one of the most influential prophets in the Hebrew Bible. During his career, Isaiah advises several kings of Judah, helping them to avoid being destroyed by the mighty Assyrian Empire (around 700 B.C.E.).

Beyond Isaiah's political influence, he is a masterful poet, with many of his prophecies inspiring hope for eventual peace and righteousness on earth. Several of these prophecies were later understood by Christians to be predictions of Jesus, including the birth of Immanuel (Isaiah 7); the coming of the Prince of Peace, as quoted in Handel's *Messiah* (Isaiah 9); and the suffering of God's "Servant" for the sins of His people (Isaiah 53). You can read more about Isaiah in Chapter 13 of this book and in the Bible in 2 Kings 19–20, 2 Chronicles 26, 32, and the book that bears his name.

## Judah Maccabee

"It's all Greek to me" certainly wasn't a personal motto for Judah Maccabee. Judah spearheads a revolt against the Greek king, Antiochus Epiphanes, who prohibits the Jews from following the Law of Moses, and who offered sacrifices to foreign gods in Jerusalem's Temple.

Judah (nicknamed Maccabee, meaning "hammer") eventually regains control of Jerusalem and cleanses the Temple (165/164 B.C.E.) — an event commemorated by the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah (see Chapters 17 and 28). Although

Judah would eventually die in battle in 160 B.C.E., his efforts ultimately lead to the political and religious autonomy of the Jews, initiating a dynasty known as the Hasmoneans (or the Maccabees, after Judah's nickname). The Hasmoneans would rule the Jews until the Romans overthrew them almost a century later.

So the next time your hammer misses its target and you smash your thumb, try screaming "Judah Maccabee!" You'll feel better knowing your expletive is historically correct. To discover more about Judah and the Maccabees, read Chapter 16 of this book, and 1 and 2 Maccabees of the Apocrypha.

## Mary

Being Jesus' mom, as you might imagine, is bound to put you in the theological limelight, and Mary holds this office with dignity and grace.

Betrothed to a man named Joseph at a young age, Mary becomes pregnant under mysterious circumstances. Two of the four gospels say that God is the father, but because of the relative silence of the other two gospels, as well as the lack of this being explicitly mentioned by Peter and Paul, it seems the doctrine of Jesus' virgin birth wasn't emphasized in the early Church — though it certainly did dominate later. The picture of Mary in the gospels is one of a concerned and loving mother, who doesn't fully understand her son at times, but supports him to the end, even painfully witnessing his execution at the foot of the cross.

Much of what Christians believe about Mary arose after her lifetime and highlights theological differences between Catholics and Protestants. For Catholics, Mary maintained her virginity throughout her life. Thus, Jesus' "brothers" and "sisters" were either children fathered by Joseph from previous marriages, or cousins. But for most Protestant groups, Jesus' siblings are just that: his brothers and sisters (though technically they are his half-siblings, since God is Jesus' father). Also in death, Catholics believe that Mary's assumption to heaven involved not only her soul, but her body as well. For all Christians, Mary becomes venerated more than any other woman in the Bible.

## Jesus

The New Testament's story of Jesus is as fascinating as it is inspiring. Born and raised in the "backwaters" of the Roman Empire, Jesus begins a religious movement that eventually overtakes the Empire. According to the New Testament, Jesus is the Messiah ("anointed one," Greek "Christos"), the promised deliverer of Israel, whose death on the cross brings deliverance from sin, and whose eventual return to earth will bring deliverance from oppression by ushering in God's kingdom. Jesus' message of caring for the

downtrodden, extending kindness to strangers, and loving one's enemies is still unrivaled for its profound insight and penetrating simplicity.

To find out more about Jesus, read Chapters 19 and 20 of this book, and the New Testament gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

## Peter

Jesus affectionately gives his closest friend, Simon, the nickname "Rock," though the Greek form of the name is "Peter." Peter is a fisherman until Jesus calls him to be a disciple or "a fisher of men." Peter soon becomes the "rock" on which Jesus builds his church, even giving him the keys to the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 16:18–19) — an action that suggests Peter's privileged position among the disciples. Therefore, according to Catholic doctrine, Peter is the first Pope, the *vicar* (or substitute) of Christ on earth. But even Jesus' closest confidant betrays him, as on the eve of the crucifixion, Peter denies knowing Jesus three times. Following Jesus' death, Peter is restored and helps spread Christianity abroad, even inducting the first gentile or non-Jewish members into this movement. Tradition holds that around 64 C.E., the Roman Emperor Nero executed Peter by crucifying him upside-down — a method Peter requested because he didn't feel worthy to die in the same manner as Jesus. His tomb is now encased within *St. Peter's Basilica* in Rome.

To find out more about Peter, read Chapter 19 in this book, as well as the gospels and the letters ascribed to Peter in 1 and 2 Peter of the Bible.

## Paul

Paul (or Saul, as he is first called) is arguably the person most responsible for spreading Christianity throughout the Mediterranean region, on its way to becoming the religion of the Roman Empire. Paul's efforts to convert people to Christianity are all the more remarkable since, when we first meet Paul, he is vigorously attempting to stamp out this movement because he believes that its message contradicts the teachings of the Hebrew Bible. Then, one day, while Paul is traveling to Damascus to arrest Christians, Jesus appears to him in a blinding flash of light and tells Paul his efforts against Christianity are what contradict the teachings of the Hebrew Bible, because Jesus is God's promised Messiah.

Paul spends the rest of his life spreading the "good news" about Jesus' life and teachings throughout the Roman world, suffering intensely for a movement he was once bent on destroying. To find out more about Paul, check out Chapter 20 of this book, the biblical Book of Acts, and Paul's many letters in the New Testament.