

“Introducing the Bible—Getting a Grip on the Old Testament”

Today we continue in the series we started last week with this deeply profound title, “Introducing the Bible.” In this 4 part series we’re trying to do two things, first, demystify the Bible. That is to take away our fears of it, get a handle on it, begin to understand what it is and what it’s not so that it becomes more approachable. That’s one of our goals in this series, to demystify the Bible. And at the same time, while we demystify this book, I want us to re-mystify it! To see it in its supernatural light, as a powerful way that the living God of the universe wants to speak to human beings. To re-mystify it and approach it as a holy book, a very important way that God chose to share his heart with you and me; a living book that speaks in a living way.

Last week we started that by looking at the Bible in some very broad strokes. We looked at a lot of common questions people have about the Bible: how it came to be, it’s accuracy, how we handle it, how we read it for all it’s worth.

Today we’re going to narrow our focus on this book of books by looking at the Old Testament—that part of the Bible that was recorded before the birth of Jesus. The Old Testament was written down starting about 3,200 years ago. It has about 30 different authors, written down over a period of about 800 years. It is the inspired word of God, but at the same time, it was written by human beings who wrote in a particular context. The Old Testament is made up of different kinds of literature. It has history, law, prophecy, narrative, poetry and much more. It was God’s covenant with the Israelites through Moses. Knowing that is a big part of getting a handle on the Bible. In fact this week’s study guide has a good sample of the different kinds of literature.

But let’s look at **How the Old Testament is put together**. As we do this we remember that what we call the Old Testament, Jews call the Bible. The Old Testament is their Bible. In fact if you have Jewish friends the appropriate way to talk about the Old Testament is to call it the Hebrew Bible.

It’s important for us to remember that the Hebrew Bible is identical to the Protestant Old Testament. The order is different but they are the exact same books of the Bible. The Christian Old Testament is divided this way. **1. The Torah.** The first five books. We associate these first five books with Moses. **2. The historical books.** These have the history of the Israelites. The kings, the battles, the good times and the not so good times of our spiritual ancestors. **3. The Poetic/Wisdom books.** This is where we find the songs, prayers, hymns, wisdom sayings, love poetry of the Israel. **4. The “Major” Prophets.** **5. The “Minor” Prophets.** Major and minor is not about their importance, it’s about their length. These books are arranged roughly chronologically and roughly around broad categories. Knowing that can help as you read.

Catholic Christians add the books of the Apocrypha to the Old Testament. These are books that were not in the Hebrew Bible. They’re valuable resources, but we don’t look at them as being inspired in the same way as the rest of the Bible.

Let’s talk about **How the Old Testament came to be**. Last week we looked at how the Bible didn’t drop down out of heaven. It was written over a long period of time by multiple authors and compiled over time. Some sections of the Old Testament were brought together into the form we have now. Let’s talk about this.

Moses is traditionally thought to be the author of first 5 books—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy—the Torah. For most of the last 2000 years Christians simply attributed the books to Moses, but modern scholarship has said that maybe it’s not that simple. In the 11th century Jewish scholars began looking at these books and saying, “It’s interesting that this part of these writings sound one way in Hebrew and this part sounds different.”

These early Jewish scholars began to notice that vocabulary was different in different parts, and the syntax was different and so they began to figure some things out. One thing they recognized was that Moses could not have written the entire Torah because the last story in the Torah is about Moses’ death, and he clearly didn’t write that story! Somebody else had to have written a least that part of the story.

Then they began to see that a lot of the historical events that are in those first five books happened way, way before Moses was born and they began to think that maybe someone else wrote down that history somewhere along the way and then Moses compiled those histories and accounts. Moses began to be seen

as an editor. So, Moses would have written some portions, other people would have written down other portions, and Moses would have brought them all together.

This is helpful because as you read the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, you see that there are duplicate stories. You read and you go, “Why are they telling me this story again, didn’t I read that a while back?” Yes you did. Sometimes the details are slightly different so you realize you’re getting one set of traditions that are being brought together with another perspective on those events, and that somehow God’s inspiration is a part of all of that.

One example of two traditions coming together is in the very first book of the Bible, Genesis 1 and 2. Genesis chapter one is the creation story. Genesis chapter two is the creation story. Now, these two stories complement each other very well, but you see pretty easily that some of the details are different. The order of how things are created is different. Genesis chapter 1 is a beautiful poem that paints a beautiful picture. Genesis chapter 2 is the same idea but in a story form with different details. For a long time scholars have believed that these two stories seem to come from two different traditions, but they’re both important and complement one another.

One thing that scholars began to notice is that the word used for “God” in these two stories is different. Look at Genesis 2:4: **“This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created. When the LORD God made the earth and the heavens...” (Genesis 2:4, NIV).** Look at what God is called here, “the LORD God.” And look at the word “LORD” here. Notice how it’s all capitalized. In the Bible, any time you see the word “LORD” in capital letters that’s a clue that the Hebrew word behind it is “Yahweh.” **“LORD” = “Yahweh”.** That’s the personal name of God in the Bible.

Now if you see the word “Lord” printed in the Bible without all caps, it’s the Hebrew word Adonai. **“Lord” = “Adonai”.** That’s the generic meaning of lord—a ruler, a person of royalty. In chapter 1 of Genesis you don’t see the word Lord in all caps anywhere. God is referred to as just God. Always in chapter 2 God is referred to as the LORD God.

Think about this way: some of you when you pray always start your prayers, “Father God...” Some of you always start your prayers, “Creator God” and you’d never do anything different. Some of you start your prayers with “Lord Jesus.” Here you have two creation stories that refer to God in two different ways. Scholars found this pattern throughout the Torah and they began to think that there are different authors of parts of the Old Testament that were brought together by one person. There does seem to be a compilation of materials brought together in the Old Testament, but that doesn’t take anything away from God’s inspiration of the Bible. I believe that Moses wrote parts of the Old Testament, and that Moses drew from other elements and brought that in. And after Moses died others brought information as well.

Let’s look at **The cultural and historical context of the Bible.** It’s important for us to remember that the Bible was written in response to historical events. And it was writing in the context of historical events.

Think of it this way: How much did 9/11 affect America? A lot or a little? A lot. What if we were taken over by a foreign army? What if foreign troops came in to every city and took over, occupying our country. What if they took over our government and we were now powerless as citizens. What if they started destroying the things that we valued most? If that happened, do you think we would see things differently? Would that affect our state of mind, our faith, our lives? Of course! Would an event like that affect literature? Preaching? Yes it would! A lot of what we would write about and talk about would be about that situation. We would write differently. We would pray differently. We would preach differently.

As you read the Bible, remember that every part is written in response to the events the people were going through at that time. And they were going through a lot. Understanding the historical context makes the meaning much clearer.

Let’s take a look at a map so you can see what I’m talking about here. **Map “Modern States and the Ancient Near East”.** This will you get a context of the Old Testament. Israel is right here. This little, tiny speck of land. Here’s Iraq, Iran, other countries. Israel is tiny! It’s got to make you wonder how this little tiny piece of ground was so important in the ancient near east. The reason it was so important was that almost all major trade routes had to pass through it. The surrounding area is all desert. This is area is called the Fertile

Crescent. Any trade from Africa or Babylon, or Persia had to pass through this tiny piece of land where there was fresh water and food—that was Israel. Israel was the Panama Canal of ancient times. Everything had to pass through it. The kings' highways went through it. So whoever controlled Israel controlled trade. This is why Israel was constantly being invaded.

The Assyrians invaded Israel and took control in 722 BC and took many of the Jewish people into captivity. In 567 BC the Babylonians conquered the Assyrians and took even more control of Israel and took more Jews into captivity. About 50 years later the Persians conquered the Babylonians and let many of the Jews go back home. Around 330 BC Alexander the Great, from Greece marched over and conquered the area. Then the Seleucids, then the Egyptians, then the Romans! All of them conquering and becoming occupying forces. Can you imagine the impact all that had? Virtually the entire Bible was shaped by this constant conflict. Much of what you read in the Old Testament is a response to this constant conflict and occupation.

That brings us to a question we just barely touched on last week. **How do we reconcile the violence of the Old Testament with Jesus?** Lots of people read the Old Testament and see this picture of God commanding the Jews to destroy their enemies wholesale—men, women, children, even the animals of their enemies. Lots of people look at that and are turned off by God. Many people are critical of Judaism and Christianity because of that picture of God in the Old Testament. I struggle with the violence in the Old Testament. I struggle partly because one of the key teaching of the Bible is that God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. How can that be when God seems so vengeful in the Old Testament and so gentle and forgiving in the New Testament? Why does God seem to punish so severely in the Old Testament.

For some people this has pushed them away from faith. And it's true, there are about 200 verses in the Old Testament that are very violent and portray God in a wrathful, punishing way. But those verses are a small percentage of the 23,000 verses in the Old Testament. The much bigger picture of God is one of patience, kindness, steadfast love and forgiveness.

If we recognize that God is speaking through human beings living in a specific historical context, a context that was terribly violent, we understand that part of what we're reading is their humanity and part is God's divinity and sometimes those get mixed up together. There are things that God commands people to do in the Old Testament I look at and say, "I just can't go there. I can't believe that that's the nature and character of God." But what I can believe is that people in a very violent culture believed that was what God was like, and they heard God ask them to do certain things and that is how they understood it. I also realize that the ancient Jews did not have a full revelation of God. They only had a partial revelation so they were doing their best to communicate who God was. It wasn't until Jesus arrived, God in human form, that humanity saw the fullness of God. We have to read the Old Testament, particularly those very violent parts with that in mind. I know that's a slippery slope, but it's a challenge we have to face.

You could summarize the whole Old Testament and the entire human story, and our individual stories like this. **ORIENTATION**, everything is good. For the Jews this was the time they entered the Promised Land. They were loving life and loving God and it was good! You've been there yourself. Your job's going well, life is going well, worship is great, you're thankful.

There's only one problem with a time of orientation, it often leads to **COMPLACENCY**. After a while in the Promised Land the Jews started to get complacent. They didn't take their faith as seriously. They got away from God's law and direction. They started to get lax in their worship and community. For us when things are going well, maybe you stop praying as much, maybe you get out the habit of going to church, you don't get into the Bible like you used to. That's complacency. The complacency leads to **SIN AND INFIDELITY**. In the Old Testament the Jews started to do the things they knew not to do, and to not do the things God had asked them to do. They started to make covenants with their enemies, intermarry with them, and bow down to their gods. For us this is when we start to give in to greed, materialism, lust. Blatantly doing things we know are wrong, and not doing the things we know please God.

That leads to the next part of this cycle, **WARNINGS**. For the Jews, God would send prophets to say, "If you don't turn from this wickedness then you're going to experience the consequences. God won't protect us as a nation and things will happen." The message of the prophets was often, "Stop bowing down to these

false gods, stop ignoring orphans and widows and mistreating others or it will just get worse.” God sends us warnings too. Those gut feelings we have, or maybe it’s a friend who calls us on the carpet, or a pastor or small group leader who tells us what they see us doing.

If we don’t change directions then **TROUBLE** comes. For the Jews, terrible things happened. Plagues, invasions, slavery, you name it. For us we may lose jobs, respect, families, our dignity, our health, our life savings.

That leads to **REPENTANCE**. That’s the turn-around, the awakening to God’s way. The realization that God’s way works. That’s the way it happened for the Jews, that’s the way it happens for us. Sometimes it’s when we hit rock bottom. Sometimes we repent before we get there. Either way, it’s the time when we get honest with God, realize how we’ve wandered away and do something about it.

That’s when the Jews would experience **RE-ORIENTATION**. They would right the wrongs, make the course corrections. The same is true of us. Some of us have been there and done that. Almost all of us have been there and done that. And we do we feel that closeness to God, we reconnect to his love, a love that he never pulled back, we just pulled away from, and we’re filled with **GRATITUDE**. And then that leads to **ORIENTATION** again.

Unfortunately the Israelites repeated that cycle over and over again, and unfortunately some of us do too. That’s the story of our spiritual ancestors, the Israelites, and that’s our story too. It’s the challenge of breaking that cycle individually, and as a society, as a community of faith. We don’t have to repeat the cycle!

That brings us to the last book of the Old Testament. It’s the book of the prophet Malachi. In this book of the Bible, about 100 years have gone by since the last cycle of orientation/disorientation has taken place. They’ve returned to their homeland after being in captivity, they’ve rebuilt the Temple that had been destroyed, life was good but they were heading once again into complacency. The people start bring their lame sheep as offerings to God, they bring their leftover to the Lord as sacrifices, they start doing things that are clearly not pleasing to God. And Malachi the prophet says, “God is bringing a change. God is about to break this cycle.” And that is the bridge to Jesus. God breaking in to human history to stop the cycle. And that’s where we’ll pick up next week.

For now I want to encourage you to read the Old Testament. And as you read the Old Testament you’re going to get hung up on some things—just know that that’s going to happen. You’ll read things and say, “This just can’t be what God is like.” Some things should trouble you as you read the Old Testament. But here’s what you do: Always look at the Old Testament in light of Jesus. Jesus said, “Moses said this, but I say to you this...” In other words, “Now you can understand some things that you couldn’t understand in Moses time.” And Jesus becomes the definitive word. We measure everything in the Bible against Jesus. Jesus was God in flesh. When we look at Jesus we see the very heart of God. I measure everything else against who Jesus was and what he shows us about the character of God.

Don’t be afraid to read the Old Testament and as you do ask three questions: **1. What does this teach me about God? 2. What does this teach me about human beings. 3. What does this passage teach me about me?**

I want to wrap up by encouraging you to dig deeper in scripture. You’ll never experience the presence of God in your life like you could without opening up your Bible and reading it. Listen, you’ll never become the Christian that God wants you to be without opening up the Bible. It’s important that you do that on your own. But the best way to do that is with others. Get in a study, a course, a class and dig deep. Dig deep. And for today, that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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