

You Should Read the Old Testament

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*For my wife, Deb
who prefers the understated*

Who among the gods
is like you, Lord?
Who is like you—
majestic in holiness,
awesome in glory,
working wonders? (Ex. 51:11 NIV)

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Introduction

I believe that most Christians rarely read the Old Testament. I also believe that it would be much better if they were to do so. However, there are a number of barriers that make it hard for us.

This is the book version of a short course to help people begin to read and understand the Old Testament for themselves. It consists of a series of nine lessons of about twenty minutes each which will help you begin to read this foundational portion of God's Word. It is only reading; there is no written work or assignments. The whole thing will take less than four hours. The course can be found online here: <https://readtheoldtestament.com/>

My goal is that by the end you will feel confident that you can begin to read and comprehend the foundational books of the Bible, and that you will want to read it. These lessons will not make you an expert or even prepare you to master the harder sections, such as the prophets. This is not an overview of the Old Testament, meaning I don't teach you the Old Testament, though I do give you a big picture. It is not an explanation of difficult passages, although some of them should become more clear by the time you are finished. My goal is to overcome the barriers that keep you from reading and understanding the Old Testament (except taking the time out of a busy life – I can't do anything about that).

In this book, any Bible passage I refer to, but don't quote, is a link that you can click. If you do, and are connected to the internet, the passage will open in a new tab. Most of these links are underlined, but some are not and I honestly don't know why.

Before you begin, I need you to take a survey. This is not a test. There are not right or wrong answers. What is important is that you be as honest as possible and give the truest answers, even though these might not be what "Christians are supposed to think." Half-way through the survey you will stop and save it. When you have finished the course (and only if you have fully finished it), I ask that you complete the survey. I really appreciate your time in doing this, since this is part of a doctoral project, it is important to me that I get a good number of people taking the whole survey. The link below will open the survey in a new tab. When you have worked on the survey and saved it, close the tab and come back here to continue. Thank you!

Link to survey: <https://survey.equiphispeople.com/index.php/371324?lang=en>

Why Should you Read the Old Testament?

Since I was a boy I have loved the Old Testament. At first this was because it had the most interesting stories. I thought that stories about armies, battles and kings were more interesting than stories about preaching and healing. I got to know these stories very well, but apart from Proverbs, which my father would sometimes quote to me and show me how its wisdom applied in real-life situations, these stories were all the Old Testament was to me. The Psalms and prophets were incomprehensible, mysterious wastelands to be avoided. This changed when I was a young teenager. I read Psalms and some of them touched my emotions. I read Jeremiah and partially understood it. I then read Ezekiel with more interest than comprehension, both of them fading as I got farther into the book. In the years that followed, the Old Testament became precious to me. Through it I came to understand my God, His motivations, and what He is like in a way I did not get from the New Testament. This shouldn't be surprising, since the writers of the New Testament were very familiar with the Old and assumed their readers would want to be as well. It never crossed their minds that anyone would think that their writings had replaced the Scriptures they had grown up with.

When I was twenty two there was a time I knew that something was not right in how I was relating to God. My conscience was bothering me about very small failures and shortcomings in my life and I was becoming more fearful of God. He felt more disapproving and far away. It was when I picked up Isaiah to read that I realized the problem. For a combination of reasons I had been reading and studying the New Testament exclusively for several months. When I read Isaiah it was like a gentle rain on a dry garden. I devoured it and felt my soul become full. I saw in it the magnificence of God, what He's really like. This took away the false ideas I had developed due to my imbalanced spiritual diet of only reading the New Testament.

I don't want you to suffer from this same imbalanced diet. I want you to read the Bible that Jesus read and taught from, the Bible Paul told Timothy to read publicly, which he said gives the reader the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. When NT

authors refer to Scripture, “Inspired by God and profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, so that God's servants may be well-prepared for every kind of good work” they are talking primarily about the Old Testament. Early Christians didn't call the books they read at every worship service “the Old Testament” until several centuries after Christ. They just called them, “the Scriptures.” I want you to understand the book that the New Testament writers expected followers of Jesus to hear, comprehend, obey, and love.

I am saddened that most Christians today have very little knowledge of the Old Testament, even though it is more than $\frac{3}{4}$ of the Bible and is a major part of God's plan to renew us, repair us and make us perfect, like He is. He wants all His children, step-by-step, to become whole and complete like Himself. But you need to know that the Bible, including the Old Testament, is a powerful thing. It can transform your life, as it has that of countless millions, by bringing you in contact with the life of your Creator. It has also ruined the lives of countless millions who don't use it to come to know God. They use it as a rulebook that tells them the bad things they must not do and good things they must do so that they can be one of the good people that God accepts. These are the religious people. They may do things which are outwardly good, but they think they're better than others and inside they are shriveling up because they have no connection to the life of God, which is what the Bible is really given to us for.

What God is Doing

Our Creator promises that everyone who trusts in Jesus is his child. If you trust in Jesus, you are a child of God and God will treat you like His child. He will provide for you, teach you and also discipline you. He wants you to learn from Him and know Him because He knows you perfectly, inside and out. He sees the cracks in your soul, the pain you've suffered, the desires you feel. He knows the deepest parts of you, even those parts you don't understand yourself, and He wants to heal you. His goal is for you one day to be perfect, though He doesn't expect this now. He isn't disappointed by your imperfection.

To understand God's work in your life imagine that your father makes furniture and you are a small child, sitting on a stool, watching him. Some things he does will make sense right away but for a long time, what he is doing seems random and impossible to understand. Sometimes

it seems contradictory. Why did he rub this piece of wood with that scratchy paper, but didn't rub that other piece? Why did he use three different colors of scratchy paper on the one before that? A lot of the time he cuts wood up into smaller pieces, but other times he sticks them together which makes a bigger piece with a funny shape. Sometimes he sticks wood together with little pieces of metal that he hits really hard with a heavy tool and sometimes he uses a spinning tool to make tiny, careful holes and then presses little pieces of wood into them. Some of the tools he uses are noisy and scare you. As I said, at first this makes no sense, but over time you will come to understand much of what he is doing. You are especially helped because he actually explains a lot of it, if you care to listen.

Just like the carpenter father, what God wants is for you not only to understand Him and what He is doing, but to become a coworker with Him in this world which is His shop. To do this He doesn't just have to give you knowledge, but also to make you the kind of person who can do the job by healing your thoughts, emotions, desires and everything about you.

To put this in more literal terms, God wants you to live more realistically and truly than you do now. He wants you to really understand yourself and the nature of the world around you and to live in it well. He wants you to live the way that is best for you and those around you, like He does. Since God is love and perfectly understands the way the world really is, He is doing what is best for you and the world. He invites you to do the same. In order to live realistically in the world you must come to God as a willing student so that He can both teach you and heal you. How do we do this?

How Do we Know God?

The main way that you can come to know God is by reading the Bible. After all, this is why we have the Bible. It isn't a secret source of material for theologians to argue about. It's the most concrete way you can come to know your Creator. It contains what He wants you to understand so that you can become more and more the person you are made to be. Many people who want to love God and be His followers are missing the knowledge of God that comes through His Word, and many aren't aware of what they're missing. Lots of people go to church and enjoy the emotions they get during the singing. For many, that's why they go. But

if this describes you, you will have to admit that on Monday you feel and think the same way you did on the Saturday before. This is because you are not being changed by the music. Music has a purpose, but it isn't transformation. To be transformed you must fill your mind and allow it to be renewed by God's revelation, which is the Bible, most of which is the Old Testament.

When Jesus was growing up, He came to know His Heavenly Father through reading the Bible. When He preached about the Kingdom of God, He validated that what He said about God was true by referring to the Bible. When His followers went out and proclaimed the message of Jesus, people recognized that it was true because it agreed with the message of the Bible ([Acts 17:10-11](#)). People recognized the mark of what was and was not from God by meeting Him in the Bible. So the first and most obvious way to know God more is by studying the Bible. We should never forget that the Bible Jesus used and the apostles preached from and that validated Jesus' message is what we call the Old Testament.

The Old Testament: A Nice Day Spa

Even though three quarters of the Bible is the Old Testament and the New Testament stands on the shoulders of the Old, most people have very little idea what it says, and even fewer ever read it. Some Christians read the Psalms and a maybe a few other places, but this is like someone using a five-thousand room mansion as a day spa. They use a side entrance which leads to this wonderful spa which they visit when they're aching. They get a nice massage and take a refreshing dip in the pool. They haven't even looked at the rest of the house and assume that most of it is filled with dust and cobwebs and probably lacks central heating and running water. They don't think they need this huge old house because they live most of the time in a nice modern house called the New Testament, or What I Hear in Church. It's very comfortable. This is where almost all their knowledge of the faith comes from.

This is not a good situation. After Jesus rose from the dead, the only time he said anything negative to his followers was when he criticized some of them for not understanding the Old Testament. "He said to them, 'How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in

all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:25-27 NIV)” “Moses and the Prophets” means the Old Testament. Not understanding the Old Testament meant His followers didn't fully understand Jesus. This isn't surprising, since most of what we know about God is contained in the 77% of the Bible that is the Old Testament.

New Testament Incomplete without the Old

Reading the New Testament without knowing the Old is like walking into a movie at the climax and expecting to understand it. Let's say the movie was long and had a great plot. It was filled with ups and downs, the characters were really great and the conclusion was brilliant. It was the best movie you've ever seen. You were really excited to see that the ending leaves room for a sequel and you can't wait for the next one to come out. What would you think of your friend who only saw the last twenty minutes of the movie, agreed that it was great and wanted to see the next one, but refused to watch the film from the beginning, because he knows how it ends up? Wouldn't you think he was fooling himself that he really understands the movie?

Since the New Testament was never meant to be read without the Old, there are many subjects that the New Testament barely touches because it doesn't need to. It's sad when Christians scramble around the New Testament for guidance on some subject, trying to draw a conclusion from the few hints they find here and there when the Old Testament has a lot to say about it.

The Old Testament contains most of what God has to say about daily life, the enjoyment of everyday things, romance, sex, money, society, poverty, international relations, the environment, war, slavery, and the emotions of life. It is where God teaches us how to pray and how to worship. It contains a songbook and has most of what God says about music. It has room for arguing with God, expressing our negative thoughts and feelings to Him. It also has more room for uncertainty than most Christians are comfortable with. A Christian who studies the Old Testament should be less likely to give simplistic answers to difficult questions than one who does not, though the Old Testament is not a cure for this unfortunate human tendency. The Old Testament makes some Christians uncomfortable because it challenges the simplistic half-truths they hold with a more complex picture. Some people are happy with a

simple half-truth and don't want to lose it.

However, the Old Testament is not all complex. If you read it there are some things that will come through to you with great force, such as the absolute, rock-steady faithfulness of God. In fact, the biggest reason I read the Old Testament, the thing that drives me to read it more than all the other reasons combined, is that in it I see the beauty of God.

Promise

You might be surprised by one way the Old and New Testaments are different. When you're suffering, whether emotionally or physically, you will tend to find more comfort in the Old Testament than the New. As you get to know the Old Testament better you will see why I made this bold statement, but part of the reason has to do with the way each Testament uses the idea of promise. Both Old and New are about God's promises, but from different angles. Promise in the New Testament tends to be oriented on the future. Jesus died, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. So we His followers are waiting for His promised return, the final fulfillment of all things. Because of this, Christians tend to think of God's promises as something like contracts awaiting future fulfillment, even if they are partially fulfilled now (we have the Holy Spirit as a downpayment, for example [Eph. 1:14](#)). The Old Testament idea of promise is much more like a wedding vow. God promises to be near His people, to care for us, to be present with us. Of course there is a future element to this, because it means that whatever happens tomorrow, God will be present there, too, but overall promise in the Old Testament tends to be about the now. When you are hurting, the assurance of God's presence now is usually more comforting than the assurance that one day the suffering will be over. The New Testament's emphasis on a future resurrection is added to the promise of God's faithful presence now which we already have in the Old Testament.

Someone might object that the New Testament also assures us that God is present with us. This is certainly true, but on the whole, the Old Testament is more oriented on the present life than the future. In fact, one of the most often-quoted verses of assurance in the New Testament, Hebrews 13:5b "I will never leave you, nor forsake you," is itself a quotation from the Old ([Deut. 31:5](#)).

Some of you may not want to read the Old because you are content with what you know of God from the New. The “mean” God you think you see in the Old is scary and you'd rather not know him. Are you afraid to meet the God of the Old Testament? He is the same God as the God of the New. How could He not be? Is it possible that this refusal means that the God you love is really an idol you've created? You have to ask yourself if you really believe that God is good. Are you willing to learn more about what His goodness looks like? Or do you already know exactly what goodness looks like and demand that God fit your idea? As you learn from the Old Testament you will see that it is not bad news you have to brace yourself for, but good news you hadn't heard, even if at first glance it might not seem that way.

If you do object to the picture of God the Old Testament presents, I don't want you to think I'm saying that you have no reason to question some of God's actions or inaction in the Old Testament. There are things that happened that should bother you. Some things are much harder to understand than others. What I'm asking you to do is to give God the same respect you would give a friend who knocked down a little boy. When you see the boy, bruised, hurting and scared, you could get mad at your friend and refuse to speak to her, or you could ask why she did it and find out that she had knocked the boy out of the path of a car, and been hurt herself as a result. I'm asking you to remember that what God is doing is ridding the world of evil with its suffering and restoring the human race to paradise. This is more important than any human improvement project, rescue effort, or life-saving procedure. Maybe the Surgeon is cutting more than you think He should and in many more places than you expect, because the cancer He's fighting is far more pervasive than you know. You need to see the whole picture and see that it is good news you have not heard. You can't know God as He wants you to know Him without interacting with the Old Testament.

A Christian who has not interacted with the Old Testament is like someone with a vitamin deficiency. People live with vitamin deficiencies, but their health isn't the best. If you don't read the Old Testament, your spiritual health is negatively impacted in ways you don't know. I'm not saying that you are a lower-tier Christian, or that God is angry or disappointed with you. I am saying that you are missing out on something wonderful He is offering you, and something which is a normal part of Christian development.

If some of what you have just read doesn't make much sense to you because you don't read the Bible at all, or not much, or you have just started, it's still true that if you absorb what the Old

Testament says, your life will improve. You will understand the world and the people around you better than you ever could otherwise. You are not in a bad place to learn to understand and appreciate the Old Testament. One of the major barriers to understanding is that people have to break habits of thinking they have gotten from misguided teaching at church and from reading the New Testament alone. Usually, what they know from church isn't wrong, but oversimplified. This leads to reading the Bible with questions about a narrow range of topics, like thinking that Christianity is only or mostly about being forgiven for our sin. This causes us to miss most of the point. These habits can be hard to break, so if you are starting fresh you have that advantage.

Let me say now that you are able to read and understand the Old Testament. It may seem impossible or at least very difficult, but if you can understand what I'm saying now, you can certainly understand the Old Testament. You need just a small amount of teaching and you can make a good beginning. With some practice and a little more information, you can be a competent reader of the Old Testament. The major barrier is just taking the time.

Fortunately, the Old Testament is very diverse. It contains stories, songs, prophecies, proverbs, laws and other types of material. Instead of looking at the whole thing and thinking you could never understand all of it, you should realize you don't have to know everything in order to begin. You never have to learn a subject all at once. You start out as a beginner and slowly add to your understanding. This is how you have learned everything in your life. The Old Testament is no different.

Because it's so diverse, some sections are much easier than others. If you begin with the beginner books, they will build your knowledge base, enabling you to understand the harder ones. You shouldn't try to tackle prophetic books until you are familiar with the historical books. Even within a category of book, such as prophecy, some are easier than others. Jeremiah, for example, is much easier to understand than Ezekiel and I recommend you read it first. If you do, you will find Ezekiel easier to follow.

Perhaps you have already read the Old Testament and, when you do, you get something out of it, but would like to learn more. I hope what you find here will also be helpful for you, although much of what you read you will already know, since we begin at a basic level. It is short enough that you won't spend too much time reading things you already know and it will

almost certainly sharpen your insight by putting more tools in your interpreter's toolbox – the set of skills that we unconsciously use when we read anything.

This is the first in a series of lessons to help people begin to read and understand the Old Testament for themselves. My goal is that by the end you will feel confident that you can begin to read and comprehend the foundational books of the Bible, and that you will want to read it. It will not make you an expert or even prepare you to master the harder sections, such as the prophets. However, soon, I will add another series of lessons to help you move from being beginning readers to solid, intermediate readers. When you become an intermediate reader you can read almost any passage in the Old Testament and generally understand it, and what you don't understand you will recognize why you don't understand it yet. But for now, this is a series of nine lessons of about twenty minutes each which will help you begin to read this foundational portion of God's Word.

Is the God the the Old Testament Harsher than the God of the New?

The most common complaint I hear about the Old Testament is that the God of the Old Testament doesn't seem very much like the God of the New Testament. The God revealed in the Old Testament is hard-to-please, mean and vengeful. This complaint doesn't come out of nowhere. Many times in the Old Testament he says that he is a jealous God, and we know that jealous spouses are controlling and unfairly suspicious. He sometimes seems unconcerned about human life. He drowned the whole world, destroyed cities with fire from the sky, and crushed Egypt with plagues, including taking the life of every firstborn. All of this is true, but this is still not an accurate picture. I will explain why in a roundabout way.

I have met several men whose job it is to hurt people, the kind who collect money for criminals, the kind who have callouses on their fists. I've met these people, but they are not my friends. I do, however, have an actual friend who hurts people for money. He hurts them until they bleed. This is true; I've seen the scars he's left. You may wonder why I am happy to go have dinner with a guy like that. I respond, why would there be a problem with having a friend who is a surgeon? How about my friend who tries to help criminals avoid punishment? I'm talking about my friend the public defender, who acts as a lawyer for people accused of crimes but can't afford their own. Do you know a policeman? Then you know someone who grabs people off the street and locks them into a small room, sometimes for years. These examples show that a lot of confusion can be created by an incomplete description of someone's behavior. This is especially true of descriptions that leave out the person's motives and the goal they are trying to achieve. The fact that the surgeon is working to save the life of the patient makes the statement, "he hurts people for money" almost untrue. In the same way, the picture of God as harsh comes from an incomplete reading of the Old Testament.

Imagine a grandmother who has prepared a fabulous meal for her family. It brings her joy to see her children and grandchildren enjoying all the good things she has prepared for them. What if you heard that earlier she punished one of her grandsons who kept trying to sneak in and eat the sugar she had in the kitchen? Would you say that she was an evil old lady who gets

angry with children? No, the boy was trying to eat the sugar, which would keep her from making a dessert that everyone, including the boy, would enjoy. What he was trying to do would mess up the blessing to come for the whole family. When you hear about the punishment you give grandma the benefit of the doubt. Unless you had some negative experiences with a grandmother that have warped the way you think of them, you interpret her actions in the light of the great meal she was planning.

As you read the Old Testament you will see that God has good ultimate goals and knows the best way to get there. You will see that God values many things just as we do: human life, the natural environment, peace, prosperity and so forth. Each of us values many different things: family, friends, home, nature, our community, our nation, peace, joy, etc. Even in an ideal world, we would sometimes have to choose between these loves, so also in the real, broken world we inhabit they often come into conflict. A man will cut down a tree he loves if its heat will keep his family alive through a cold winter. Many people have given a kidney to someone they love more than their own health. We recognize that there are gradations in these values. A woman who runs into a burning house to save her pearl necklace we think an idiot, but to save her child, a hero. The man who gives a kidney to save someone else is one thing, but if we heard of someone who sold one of his for money which he then spent in a few weeks of wild living we would be astonished at his stupidity. Everyone is sometimes forced to choose between different things they value and love. People sell beloved possessions to feed their family. They leave their family in order to defend their country, or leave their country in order to find a better future for their children.

Since we all do this every day, it would be hypocritical not to allow God the same freedom. Have you ever considered that when God created a cause-and-effect universe that follows logical rules and then put in it free creatures to whom He gave the ability to choose, He was willingly confining Himself to having to make the same kinds of choices? He cannot both cast Adam and Eve from the Garden for their own protection, and allow them to live there. He cannot choose more than one man in each generation through whom Jesus would come. He cannot settle His people in a land of their own in a way that insulates them from the influence of their pagan neighbors and leave those neighbors to possess the same land.

As you read and come to understand God more, you will see these choices more and more. He cares for nature and the environment. He made laws to protect it and even made a covenant

with the animals ([Genesis 9:8-10](#)), but in an unusual circumstance, he killed the Egyptians' cattle and destroyed a lot of nature with massive hailstones and even fire from the sky. He loves people, and He took the lives of all the firstborn sons in Egypt. Is this evil, or evidence that even God has to make choices? Would you look over a surgeon's shoulder and say to him or her, "That cut is too big; why does there have to be so much blood? Why didn't you go through the other side? Don't you know cutting here will leave an ugly scar?" Unless you are a surgeon yourself or a fool, you recognize that what the surgeon is doing is beyond your knowledge. You assume the surgeon intends good and is doing the best he or she can and that this is much better than you could ever do. Do you have the same attitude toward your Creator?

To understand God's wrath it's important to ask what is God angry about? Is He the kind of person who has frustrations he keeps to himself, adding them to a secret storehouse, until he can't hold it in and then some small thing causes an explosion of rage at the people around him? We all know people like this, but does this describe God? As you read the Old Testament you will see that what God gets angry about is injustice. He hates oppression. He hates cruelty. He hates the arrogance, pride and selfishness which lead to them. He is not an indifferent God. What we do matters to Him. The god many of us picture is one who dislikes evil, but doesn't hate it. We like the idea of a policeman who doesn't punish us when we break the law, but just gives us a warning. We like this idea until he does the same thing to the people who broke into your house and smashed everything you own. Is the God who rules the universe really like this nice policeman? Do you want Him to be like that?

I said that this harsh image of God comes from an incomplete reading of the Old Testament, but I should have said an incomplete reading of the Bible, because part of the problem is missing how much judgment there is in the New Testament. Where is the most obvious and incredible example of the mercy and grace of God? It's clearly the fact that He died for us. So the story of mercy is actually a story of a bloody and painful death. It is, in fact, a story of judgment, of judgment on our sin. Jesus, who gave His life as a ransom for us, spoke more about Hell than He did about Heaven. He talked about it because He doesn't want people to go there.

Another way to look at it is that there is more diversity in how God is portrayed within each Testament than there are between the Testaments themselves. The God who sent his Son to

suffer and die in our place as a ransom for us, who paid such a price, and who offers forgiveness freely, also struck three people dead in the Book of Acts. Need I mention the devastation of the earth in Revelation? Don't forget that Jesus will kill all the armies of the earth with a word and invite the birds of the air to come feast on their flesh ([Rev. 19:11 - 21](#)). Just like the New, the Old Testament reveals a God who is unbelievably generous and merciful, one who forgives sin, but will not make peace with it. This should not be surprising, since it is the same God.

Judgment tends to be much more sudden and dramatic than mercy and, therefore, much more memorable. Stories of judgment stand out. The kind of story that does not stand out, and is even hard to tell in an interesting way, is a story of patience. God's judgment stands out in the Old Testament against a backdrop of incredible mercy, but it's hard to see this when we just pick and choose a few stories rather than reading the whole thing.

When you read the Old Testament you will meet a God who loves his creation, and especially humanity, with a fierce love. He hates evil because of the destruction it brings to what He loves. He is absolutely determined to heal and restore His creation. He is absolutely determined to bless humanity. As we come to understand God and what He is doing better, we move from not understanding His judgment at all, to grudgingly admitting that it does sometimes have a point, to accepting it, to seeing it as an expression of love. Eventually we feel God's sadness with Him that human behavior has created situations where judgment is necessary.

Reading the Old Testament will reveal to you God as he really is. This is very important because we all have false ideas about God. He is kind and good, but what this kindness and goodness look like may be different than you expect. God is not a harsh taskmaster who gives love in return for good behavior as long as you keep being good, but is quick to punish those who offend him. God is not like this, but He is also not a nice old man who doesn't mind what the kids do as long as they visit him once a week to give him a quick hug and kiss on the forehead. That would be ignoring his responsibilities as Father and Creator. He loves us far too much to abandon us in this way.

He is not a live-and-let-live God. He is a God who seeks us out even though we flee from Him. When Jesus spoke of the Shepherd leaving the ninety-nine sheep to seek the one that was lost,

He was not saying something new. He was reminding people of how God described Himself in the Old Testament.

“I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me;
I was found by those who did not seek me.
To a nation that did not call on my name,
I said, ‘Here am I, here am I.’
All day long I have held out my hands
to an obstinate people,
who walk in ways not good,
pursuing their own imaginations—
a people who continually provoke me
to my very face,” (Is. 65:1-3 NIV)

Before we go further into this topic, we need to look at your attitude. If you are approaching this demanding an explanation from God, or if you are asking God to justify his actions and then, after you have gotten an explanation which satisfies you, you will submit to Him, then I can tell you now that no explanation will satisfy you. This is because you are sitting in judgment of your Creator, making him the accused in this court case. Such a God, one that you can question in this way, does not exist. He is not applying for a job with you, wringing his hands, hoping that you will hire him to the much desired position of being your god. He is your Creator and you must recognize that He understands things you do not. Having said that, God does give us A LOT of explanation for his actions because He wants us to understand Him, but you must do this as His creation, not His master.

This leads to something else we all have to keep in mind. There are actions that would be wrong for a human to take which are not wrong for God to take. This isn't just because of the position He occupies, but the difference in our natures. Let's look at murder as an example. I think we can agree that, except under very unusual circumstances, it is wrong for you to take the life of another human being. Why is it wrong? First, the other man's life doesn't belong to you. You didn't make him. Second, you are on the same level as the other person. You are both created human beings. When you judge and condemn him you are ranking yourself as more important and higher than he is. Third, you don't know everything. You might not know all the circumstances that surrounded whatever it was that caused you to want to kill this man.

Also, you can't see inside him. You don't know his motives or what he has gone through that has made him the person he is. If you did, perhaps you would be merciful. Fourth, you don't even see inside yourself very well. What are your motives? Are they really pure? Are you better than this man? Finally, who are you to take this man out of the world? Perhaps if he lives he will do some great good some day, save the life of a child, maybe even a child dear to you. Who are you to end this man's chance to become a follower of Jesus, to be forgiven and transformed into a different and better person? Who are you to take everything from this man, and this man from everyone who knows him or may know him one day?

None of this is true of God. He is the perfect judge. He knows our hearts better than we know them ourselves. He knows what has happened and what would have happened if things were different. He knows what will happen if the man continues to live. He knows the state of the man's soul and whether he has entered into the [eternal life offered by Jesus](#) or if he would ever surrender himself to God and receive it. God is also this man's creator and this man only continues to exist because God wills that he exist. God has even more right to decide the man's fate than a human potter has over the shape of his pots, since the potter did not create the clay he is forming. This is true of every man, woman and child ever created. What's more, God is perfect in His motivations, completely pure and totally loving. He loves the one He is judging more than anyone else loves him. So as you read the Old Testament, keep in mind that God is not a human being like you are. Instead of saying, "Here's another place God gave out some harsh judgment," ask, "Since our God is perfectly loving, how was this an act of love?" It will take some work to come to understand, but if you ask God for help, keep seeking and keep knocking, you will find the answer and be satisfied.

Let's look now at a place where we see God's judgment in the Old Testament. This passage was not specially chosen, but typical. I found it right now just by flicking through my Bible. Amos 3:11 says

"Therefore,' says the Sovereign Lord, 'an enemy is coming! He will surround them and shatter their defenses. Then he will plunder all their fortresses.'"

God was sending an enemy army to destroy His own people. This happened because God set it in motion, but why would He do something like this? The verse before tells us why He did this,

“My people have forgotten how to do right,' says the Lord. 'Their fortresses are filled with wealth taken by theft and violence.’” (3:12 NLT).

He did this because his people had become oppressors. Later God says, “Though you build beautiful stone houses, you will never live in them. Though you plant lush vineyards, you will never drink wine from them.” (Amos 5:11 NLT).

The reason is, “How you hate honest judges! How you despise people who tell the truth! You trample the poor, stealing their grain through taxes and unfair rent.” (Amos 5:10-11 NLT)

Do you like corruption and injustice? Do you like it when people use their position of power to steal from the weak or take a bribe to let someone escape justice? Well God doesn't like it either and His judgment is Him doing something about it. Don't people complain that God allows evil to prosper and doesn't judge it enough? Which way do we want it?

Let's finish by listening to someone from the Old Testament tell what he saw of God's judgment and what, in the end, he understood about God's character. The most severe judgment God brought on Israel, His people, was when, after centuries of warnings to turn from their evil ways, God sent the Babylonians who destroyed Israel's cities, took Jerusalem and God's temple, razed them to the ground, killed most of the people and took all but the poorest survivors away to live in a foreign land. It's hard to think of a worse experience a nation can go through. Jeremiah, who lived through this, wrote,

“I am the one who has seen the afflictions that come from the rod of the Lord’s anger. He has led me into darkness, shutting out all light. He has turned his hand against me again and again, all day long. He has made my skin and flesh grow old. He has broken my bones . . . And though I cry and shout, he has shut out my prayers.” (Lam. 3:1-4, 8 NLT)

This sounds like what you would expect from a harsh and unforgiving God, an easily offended God who only loves people who are good and likes to crush people who are bad. We could stop reading there and go away having our prejudices confirmed, but that wouldn't be fair.

Jeremiah has more to say about what God is like and his own experience of God. He then writes:

The faithful love of the Lord never ends!

His mercies never cease.

Great is his faithfulness;

his mercies begin afresh each morning ...
The Lord is good to those who depend on him,
to those who search for him ...
For no one is abandoned by the Lord forever.
Though he brings grief, he also shows compassion
because of the greatness of his unfailing love.
For he does not enjoy hurting people
or causing them sorrow. (Lam. 3:22-23, 25, 31-33 NLT).

These words, written by a man who has suffered just about as much loss as it is possible to suffer, have been read and echoed through the centuries by countless other sufferers. They all testify that God does not enjoy human suffering. It is not His desire to strike us, but our rebellion has made it necessary. Even a human mother does not enjoy disciplining her children, but she does it because if she doesn't the child will grow up to be much less than he or she could be: angry, or uncontrolled, or lazy, or dishonest.

If a mother knocks her little boy to the ground and hurls herself on his back it would be painful and scary for the boy. But if we know that the boy's shirt had caught on fire, we see the mother's smothering the flames with her own body as an act of sacrificial love. This is our God, the God of the Bible, which is to say, of the Scriptures: the Old and the New Testaments. He is the same God who never changes, who always acts in a way consistent with His character. He loves us and the rest of His Creation too much to allow it to slide into ever-increasing evil and chaos. That this God, a God this loving, would do something such as flooding the world, or destroying Sodom, shouldn't cause us to question His love. It should cause us to question if we really understand how damaging sin is.

Getting Started

We have seen that it is very important to understand the message of the Old Testament if you want to know your Creator well. We have also seen that the God the Old Testament tells us about is generous and loving, not harsh and uncaring even though He appears to be so if we don't read carefully. Now what do you have to do to read and understand the Old Testament.

Let's Start

I have good news. It's not hard to basically understand the Old Testament. You do have to do some work in order to learn, but it's not like learning advanced mathematics or abstract philosophy or some other “hard” subject from school. Learning to comprehend the Old Testament is more like understanding a story a friend is telling you. You have to actually listen and you may have to ask some questions, but it isn't hard and almost anybody can do it. If you can read this, you can certainly understand the Old Testament.

If you think of the Old Testament as a friend telling you a long story, in order to understand your friend's story you'll need to learn a few key things. You need to know the basic story line. You need to clarify some of the new words or new ideas he uses, like what he means when he talks about “covenants.” You also need to understand the way he is talking, how to tell the difference between a story, a joke, an angry rant, a song or a command.

To start with, you should know the Old Testament consists of thirty-nine books written over a space of about one thousand years. They cover a period of history beginning with the creation of the world and stretching to about four hundred years before Jesus was born. It was written in this time period by Jewish people and all but a few chapters is written in Hebrew. The fact that it was written in Hebrew shouldn't bother you, though. Since God speaks, all languages, His truth translates into your language in a way that you can understand and which will accomplish what He wants in your heart and life. Most of the Old Testament relates to God's dealings with the nation of Israel, but it's really about God's plan to bless the human race. This is because God had chosen Israel and was working through Israel so that He could use them to

bless everyone else.

First, there are seventeen historical books. Not surprisingly, these tell history and mostly consist of stories. The next five are called the poetical books. They consist of the Psalms, which is Israel's song and prayer book, and four books of wisdom. The Wisdom books, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon, deal with questions about the meaning of life and practical issues of how to understand the world and live well in it. They are called poetical because they are mostly written in poetic form. The final seventeen are the prophetic books. These were written by men who spoke directly for God. You can think of them as the letters God wrote his people. They are a wonderful way to grow to understand God. Imagine that you have a grandfather you never knew and would like to know what he was like. It would be hard to imagine a better way than to find and read a collection of personal letters he had written to your grandmother over the years.

Historical	Poetic	Prophetic
Genesis	Job	Isaiah
Exodus	Psalms	Jeremiah
Leviticus	Proverbs	Lamentations
Numbers	Ecclesiastes	Ezekiel
Deuteronomy	Song of Solomon	Daniel
Joshua		Hosea
Judges		Joel
Ruth		Amos
1 Samuel		Obadiah
2 Samuel		Jonah

1 Kings		Micah
2 Kings		Nahum
1 Chronicles		Habakkuk
2 Chronicles		Zephaniah
Ezra		Haggai
Nehemiah		Zechariah
Esther		Malachi

Many people have heard individual stories from the Old Testament, or at least have heard of characters from the Old Testament. However, when Noah, Moses, David, Jonah, and others lived in relation to each other is a big mystery and can be confusing. This makes it very hard to understand their significance. There are also many people who know nothing from the Old Testament at all. Both of these beginning points have their advantages and disadvantages. The first group has more information to start with, the second group doesn't have to unlearn anything, so it doesn't matter which of these two groups you fall into. If you read the Old Testament, you can understand it.

I am going to take you through the whole Old Testament twice in this lesson, with the second time being longer than the first to help you have a framework to understand the stories of the Old Testament. Think of it as building shelves in your mind so you have somewhere to put the information.

Two Overviews

Very Short Overview

God made the world and the human race. He made the world a good place and he made humanity good. His intention was that the earth would be the place where we would meet Him and have a relationship with Him.

However, our first ancestors, Adam and Eve, were tempted to disobey God. They believed that they knew what is good and what is evil better than God does, and they sinned. When this happened, they brought death into the world. Nevertheless, God did not reject the human race or his Creation. He was determined to bless us and the fact that we had rejected Him did not change this. Since we could not save ourselves, He would save us.

He chose one man, Abraham, to establish the nation salvation would come through. This was the nation of Israel. They became slaves in Egypt and so God saved them using Moses. He gave them his Law to obey and a land to live in. He eventually gave them kings. One of these kings, David, he chose to be the person through whom the Savior would eventually come. Before the Savior came, Israel was evil and disobeyed God. He sent many prophets to warn them, but they would not listen, so He expelled them from their land. After seventy years, He allowed them to return. The Old Testament ends with a small group of Israelites living near Jerusalem wondering how God would fulfill His promises. We know that they would have to wait four hundred year to find out: that God would come as Jesus to save them Himself.

Now that you know roughly where the story goes, I'll go over it again with more detail.

Longer Overview

Foundations

This is found in Genesis chapters 1-11. There we learn the starting point of our story and many things that are familiar to us such as marriage, families and nations.

Creation - God made the world and he made it a good place. He designed it to be the place where mankind would meet Him and have a relationship with Him. He placed the first humans, Adam and Eve, in a wonderful Garden where they were supposed to enjoy working and being friends with God.

Rebellion – However, Adam and Eve were tempted by the Devil to disobey God. They believed that they knew what is good and what is evil better than God does, and they chose to trust the Devil and their own judgment instead of God. When this happened, they brought the curse of death, toil and suffering into the world. God kicked them out of the Garden for their own good, but also promised that one day someone would be born to a woman who would

crush the Devil's head. This was the first hint that death is not the end of the story.

Flood – After Adam, humanity became so bad that God started over, in a sense, by wiping the earth clean with a flood and saving only one man, Noah, and his family.

Languages – After the Flood, the human race was supposed to spread out across the land, but we wanted to stay together because we still think we know what is good for ourselves better than God does. He confused our languages to divide us into nations, limit the amount of mischief we could get into, and force us to spread out.

Family

In Genesis chapters 12-50 we see God beginning a special work with one family.

God then chose one man, **Abraham**, through whom he would bless all humanity. Abraham had a son, **Isaac**, who had a son, **Jacob**. God gave Jacob a new name: Israel. Jacob had twelve sons and their descendants are the twelve tribes of Israel. God promised Abraham and his family that they would one day possess the land of Canaan. In the days of Jacob's son **Joseph**, the family of Israel moved to Egypt to escape a famine.

Fulfillment and Failure

In Exodus – I Samuel we see God's promises fulfilled, but also a lot of failure on the part of His people, Israel.

Exodus: Some generations after Abraham the Israelites had grown from a large family into a whole nation and were slaves in Egypt. God used **Moses** to save them and bring them out. Since the Egyptians wouldn't let them go, God sent **ten plagues** against them. Then he led Israel **across the Red Sea** out of Egypt into the Wilderness.

Law: God offered to take Israel as his special people, out of all the nations of the earth. He gave them laws and instructions on how to live, starting with the **Ten Commandments**. They agreed to this. God wanted them to build a society that would show other nations that it is best to worship the true and living God. They were supposed to be a light to draw other nations back to God. However, they failed over and over, doubting God, and rebelling against God. Finally, God said that the whole generation He had brought out of Egypt would die in the wilderness without entering the Promised Land.

Conquest and Judges: After 40 years, when the whole generation was dead. Moses died

and **Joshua** led Israel into the land of Canaan, the **Promised Land**. They captured part of it, but quickly settled into a pattern of abandoning God, being oppressed by enemies, crying out for help, then God sending a judge to deliver them, only to start rebelling all over again after the judge died.

King

In I Samuel – I Kings we see Israel become a kingdom ruled by kings.

Israel was eventually ruled by kings. There were three kings who ruled over the whole nation. These were **Saul**, **David** and **Solomon**. God promised David that his descendant would rule forever. No doubt David thought this meant that his descendants would rule forever one after the other, but we now know that there is one of his descendants, Jesus, who rules and will rule as king forever. David's son, Solomon built the **Temple** of God in Jerusalem.

Kingdoms

In I Kings – II Kings we see Israel split into two nations.

After Solomon, there was a rebellion and the nation split into two, the northern kingdom of **Israel** and the southern kingdom of **Judah**. During this whole time, the nation was often unfaithful to God. They followed other gods and were not particularly concerned to do what God told them and so were not a light for the other nations. The Lord sent many **prophets** to warn them and turn them back from their evil lives, but Israel did not change.

Kicked Out

Because Israel did not keep their agreements with God, He expelled them from their land.

Eventually, the Lord sent enemies against them and they were totally defeated. Their cities were destroyed, and they were taken away to live in **exile** in a foreign land. This happened first to the Northern kingdom and then the Southern.

Came Back

God brought His people back.

After seventy years in exile, God graciously allowed the Jewish exiles to **return** to their land and build a temple, but He did not give them a king. He sent them more prophets to guide them, but then became silent for about four hundred years until he came to them himself as

Jesus. So the Old Testament ends on a note of waiting.

So what we have is: **Foundations, Family, Fulfillment and Failure, King, Kingdoms, Kicked Out, and Came Back.**

This is very important to remember so it will be included in every lesson.

Name	Famous stories and people	Where found	How long
Foundations	Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood	Genesis 1 – 11	Unknown
Family	Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph	Genesis 12 – 50	286 years followed by about 280 in Egypt
Fulfillment and Failure	Moses, the 10 plagues, Exodus, 10 Commandments, wilderness wandering Joshua, Jericho, Rahab, Deborah, Gideon, Samson, Samuel, Ruth	Exodus – I Samuel 10, Ruth	c. 400
Kings	Saul, David, Solomon	1 Samuel 11 – I Kings 11; 1 Chronicles 10 – 2 Chronicles 9	c. 112
Kingdoms	Elijah, Elisha, Ahab, Jonah, Hezekiah, Josiah, Isaiah, Jeremiah	1 Kings 12 – 2 Kings 25, Jonah, 2 Chronicles 10 – 2 Chronicles 36, Jeremiah 1 – 38	345

Kicked Out	Ezekiel, Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar, Fiery furnace	2 Kings 25, 2 Chronicles 36, Jeremiah 39 – 52, Daniel	48 or 70, depending on where you start and end
Came Back	Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther	Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther	c. 100

We will return to this overview again next time, but for now I will answer an important question and explain a little about the social world of the Old Testament.

How much background information do you need in order to understand the Bible?

Do you have to understand ancient politics, religious beliefs and economics in order to understand what is taught in the Old Testament? This simple question does not have a simple answer. Every reader approaches what they are reading with their own preconceived ideas and will naturally read it from their own perspective unless they try to step out of it and read as if they were an ancient Israelite. The greater the difference between the reader's world and the world of the original audience, the greater the chance of misunderstanding. However, our fear of these misunderstandings can be exaggerated. Remember that the Bible is not just an ordinary book. It is God's primary tool for human beings to come to know Him and so He is present whenever someone reads it seeking Him. As a consequence, the Bible is infallible, meaning it will not fail you. It will not mislead you if you read it sensibly, normally and in faith, reading to be taught by it by the Bible, not to judge it. This doesn't mean you will always get everything right, far from it. But if you are reading humbly and sensibly, don't worry about this point.

Because the Bible is God's Word for the whole human race, it contains in itself all you need to understand its central messages. Most of what it talks about are basic human experiences. Family relationships, marriage, people in authority, people under authority, poverty, wealth, war and peace are all universal human experiences that transcend our cultures. The main point of a story in the Old Testament can be understood by anyone, even if there are aspects that you will miss because you don't have all the knowledge of the original readers and don't share their culture.

Old Testament Society

However, I am going to give you a little background information about the way society was organized during the time of the Old Testament, even though you could figure this out on your own if you put in the time. Here a little help can go a long way.

Patriarchs and Obligations

The social structures of the ancient world were very different from the one we see today in movies and television from the Western world. In Europe and most of the English-speaking world, the basic unit of society is the individual and then the nuclear family (parents and their children). Culturally, the focus is on the rights that individuals have, what other people owe you. In the Old Testament, society was organized around extended families, and there was little thought of individual rights. Instead of rights, there were obligations. Instead of your rights being given to you as something you expect, the people around you had an obligation to treat you in a certain way. So we don't read that wives have a right to be well-fed and cared for. We read that a man must provide for his wife. Even if he doesn't love her, he must still provide for her ([Ex. 21:10-11](#)). It focuses on the obligation, not the right. Maybe you who are reading this are from such a society yourself. If not, don't think that it's just a dead idea from the past. More people today live in these types of societies than individualistic ones.

At the top of each family was the patriarch, who ruled the family and was to ensure that the whole family was taken care of. Traditionally, he had the power of life and death over those under him. The patriarch was usually the oldest son of the previous patriarch. Westerners would say that because the patriarch had more power, he had more rights than other people. This thinking is foreign to the world of the Old Testament. A patriarch had more power because he had far more obligations to meet. Don't get me wrong, patriarchs did enjoy more power and prestige than others. To be the patriarch was a position people wanted to have, but the position wasn't at all the same thing as a position of wealth and power today in the Western world. Since the West focuses on rights rather than obligations, there isn't much that drives the powerful to care for others. Rising in power and money mostly brings benefits to yourself, because if I have money and ignore the needs of some particular person, I am not violating their rights. That needy person does not have a right to the help of some particular wealthy person. Though there are wealthy people who help needy people, this is not the same

thing as an obligation. Individualistic societies tend to isolate wealth from need. In the time of the Old Testament, people didn't evaluate a patriarch only based on how much wealth he had, but how well-off were those under his care.

Because the patriarch had more obligations, he normally received double the inheritance of his brothers. He needed more property (whether herds or land) because they are the source of the food that families depended on for survival. This is the “birthright” which features prominently in the story of Jacob and Esau ([Gen. 25:27-34](#)). This is why the Law of Moses is focused on land ownership and why there are laws saying that when a man dies and leaves a widow but no son, one of the other men of the family must marry her and provide a son for the childless widow. Since women didn't own property, without a male heir to inherit the property that belonged to her dead husband, she was without means of support. She had married into the family with the expectation that she would be supported from the produce of her husband's property and the family was obligated to make sure that happened. In societies where women can own property, these regulations are redundant, but they reflect God's concern to care for the needs of the powerless in whatever society they live.

Marriage

The case of the childless widow leads to another way ancient societies differ from Western society. People did not have the expectation that they would marry someone because they are in love. For one thing, these societies were very small and people not very mobile, so a young man or woman would only know a handful of possible mates. The chances that one of these would be the “perfect other” was pretty low. Also, people had a lot of close social connections. They lived in small communities and were strongly connected to others because they saw and worked with their family members and friends every day. As a result, they had a lot of daily emotional support from close friends and relatives. There was not nearly as much pressure on the marriage relationship to be the primary source of emotional support and friendship that it is in many societies today, so couples didn't have to be as naturally compatible to make a successful marriage. Some couples didn't even know each other when they married. Their marriage had been arranged by their parents, though sometimes the man would negotiate on his own. This does not usually mean that the woman had no choice. She did have to consent in order to be married. This consent was usually an expression of her trust in and obedience to her parents and the standards of her community. The fact that people did not marry for love

doesn't mean that marriages weren't loving. The idea was that romance grows from commitment, not commitment from romance. We have abandoned this idea in the modern world and have seen the collapse of marriage at the same time. This is another case where most people through history, and even in the world today, can better identify with the customs of the ancient world than our Western individualism.

It was also the custom among Israelites and the nations around them that the groom's family gave a bride price to the family of the bride. This is still a common custom around the world today, but it can be misunderstood by people from individualistic cultures. To an American or European it can look like the husband is buying the wife from her father, as if she is property. Certainly, since humans have sinful hearts, there have been many cases where a father uses his daughter as a way to get more wealth for himself. However, this is an abuse of the system. What is really happening is that the groom is showing that he is financially capable of caring for a wife and is committed to this relationship. The bride's father was supposed to keep the bride-price in case the husband divorced the wife or he died and his family was unable to care for her. This is why in the story of Jacob, when he asked his two wives (who were sisters) what they thought of his plan to move far away from their father, they responded, "What does it matter to us? He's already spent our bride-price." ([Gen. 31:14-16](#)) Their father had broken faith with them by spending the wealth he should have been saving to ensure their security. Since he has spent it, he was not a source of financial security to his daughters and so it cost them nothing financially to move away.

The Redeemer

The fact that ancient societies were organized around extended families who were mutually obligated to each other resulted in the position of the "redeemer." When some major event damaged the family, when something happened which made the family no longer whole, the family needed to fix the problem and set things right. The one who set it right was the redeemer. Examples of the kind of damage a redeemer would fix was when a poor family member fell into debt and had to sell his land, another family member would buy it back, or redeem it. Sometimes debt forced a person into slavery (since most slavery in Israel was a temporary condition a person was in while they paid back a debt), when this happened, often a wealthier family member would redeem him. In the case I mentioned above, the man who married the widow of his relative in order to care for her was a redeemer. When someone

killed a family member one of the victim's relatives would pursue the killer and ensure that justice was done for him. All of these actions were redemption. They rescued those in need and restored wholeness to the family. The Old Testament often describes God as the redeemer of His people, both as a group ([Is. 47:4](#)) and as individuals ([Ps. 19:14](#)). So when Jesus came and accomplished redemption, this was not a new or even surprising idea. The New Testament idea of redeemer and redemption are taken entirely from the Old Testament.

This also shows us that when God deals with the people of a particular culture He does not break their culture and force them to rebuild it into some ideal society. What He does with cultures is like what He does with individuals. Just as He enters the life of everyone who comes to Him and slowly transforms them to be like He is without erasing their personality, so when He enters a society, His truth slowly transforms that culture into a unique expression of godliness. The culture is still recognizable as itself, but justice and goodness can flourish there as it could not before God intervened.

Remember:

Foundations – Family – Fulfillment and Failure – King – Kingdoms – Kicked Out – Came Back

Overview with Geography

Foundations – Family – Fulfillment and Failure

King – Kingdoms

Kicked Out – Came Back

Now that you have some framework for understanding I will tell you the story of the Old Testament a third time. This time I will focus more on communicating to you the chronology and geography of the stories. Being able to visualize where things are happening is helpful to understand and remember a story. Before I go into that, I want to give you some advice.

What about the “boring” sections?

One of the problems you might have when reading the Old Testament is what to do with the boring sections. Calling them boring doesn't demean them. It does not mean that they are not inspired by God or valuable. It is really a comment on us readers. It is true that some sections are much harder for us to read with interest than others. The most obvious ones are sections that are mostly information intended for someone other than ourselves. These include genealogies, instructions for ceremonies, geographical descriptions of borders, or the details of constructing certain buildings. I think that many people who try to read the Old Testament quit because there are three genealogies in the first 11 chapters. I want to give you some advice here on how to deal with genealogies, and detailed ceremonial or building instructions. Here is my advice for you as you begin to read the Old Testament: Skip the boring sections. Please skip them. Even though they are valuable and useful, for you they will only be a hindrance at this point. Later, you can go back and read them, but for now, just skim past them.

Remember, reading the Bible does not make God love you more. You are not penalized if you do not “do it right.” You do not get bonus points for reading the whole thing. The reason we read the Bible is not to master its contents, but to know the God who speaks through it, so if part of it hinders this, leave it for now. Reading it in order to know more is actually harmful and results in Christians who know their Bible far better than they know their God.

Foundations

The Bible begins with stories that focus on the foundation of the world, the human race's rebellion, (or the Fall of Man), and how God dealt with the human race in the earliest times. These are the stories of Creation, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel and Noah and the Flood. They establish the foundation for everything that follows by explaining why the world is the way it is. These stories answer basic human questions such as why the world seems on the one hand so good and on the other so bad. They tell us about the origins of such universal issues as good and evil, marriage, society, God's purpose for us and so forth. You will find them in the first 11 chapters of Genesis.

Family

God chose one family to use to bless the world. The rest of the book of Genesis contains the stories of this family: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. They tell how God chose one man, Abraham, whose offspring would grow into a nation, Israel, and using that nation God would bless all the families of the earth. This blessing He promises includes the repair of what we have destroyed and forgiveness for the sins we have committed. Jacob, whom God renamed Israel, had twelve sons. The descendants of each of these sons would collectively be a distinct tribe. These are the “twelve tribes of Israel.” The nation these tribes constitute will collectively be known as “the sons of Israel” or just “Israel.” God sent this large family to Egypt. The story pauses here at the end of Genesis with some of God's promises fulfilled (Abraham had many descendants), but others not yet fulfilled, because they were not yet a nation and did not have the Promised Land. They were waiting.

Fulfillment and Failure

After several hundred years in Egypt the story begins again. Israel had grown from a large family into a nation. They also became slaves. This is the situation at the beginning of the book of Exodus. The Lord heard their cries for relief and sent Moses to them. God used Moses to strike their oppressors, the Egyptians, and to lead his people to the land He had promised them. He led them through the Red Sea, fed them daily with manna from heaven and, in the form of a covenant, called the Sinai Covenant or the Law of Moses, gave them His instructions including the Ten Commandments. These instructions also included directions for building a tent where the nation would worship God, called the Tabernacle. God also selected the tribe of

Levi to perform the services at the Tabernacle, and the family of Moses' brother Aaron to be priests that would offer sacrifices for the people. However, the people grumbled, disobeyed and rebelled again and again so that the Lord decreed that the generation that had been brought out of Egypt would not go into the Promised Land. Their children would. Therefore, they had to wait in the wilderness until that whole generation died before God gave them the land. This part of the story is found in Exodus – Deuteronomy. So, just like Genesis, the first five books also end with forward movement of God's plan (Israel was now a nation), but not final fulfillment (they weren't in the Promised Land). Again, this section ends on a note of waiting.

Finally, Joshua led the nation into the land of Canaan. The generation that entered the land was generally faithful to God, listening to his voice and obeying his instructions. This is found in the book of Joshua. Sadly, as soon as Joshua died, the people began to turn away from the true God to serve other gods. Israel descended into a time of chaos, recorded in the book of Judges, where each person did what they thought was the right thing. For several hundred years Israel experienced a cycle. They would abandon their mission to be a distinct people who only followed the Lord and began worshiping the gods of their neighbors. So the Lord allowed them to be conquered by their neighbors. Since they didn't want to serve God, the Lord let them see what service to others was like. Eventually, the people would cry out for deliverance, and the Lord would be moved by the cries of his people. He would send them a deliverer (translated “judge” in most Bibles), who would lead Israel to victory over their enemies. Israel would then live faithfully as long as the deliverer was alive, but after he died, they fell back into sin, starting the cycle again. This was not a good time for Israel. The book of Judges makes it clear that even the deliverers themselves were not always faithful and godly people.

Kings

The last of the deliverers was Samuel. When he was an old man, Israel asked for a king so they could be like the nations around them. Even though the Lord knew that this was a rejection of Him, He selected a king for Israel. His name was Saul, and he was tall and handsome – exactly the kind of king the people had had in mind. Sadly, Saul was not a faithful king. He had a mixed legacy, uniting Israel, but being more concerned with maintaining his own power than with following what God desires. He was a king just like the kings of Israel's neighbors.

Eventually the Lord announced that because of Saul's disobedience he was through with Saul. He would appoint another king.

He selected David. David was a faithful king who desired to follow the Lord and lead the people well. He was a successful military leader. Among other things, he conquered Jerusalem and made it his capital city. Under his rule, Israel was never defeated and the nation prospered. After this, the people of Israel would always look back at this time period as their golden age. The Lord promised David that his descendants would reign over Israel forever. This is called the Davidic Covenant. David had an eventful life, wrote many of the Psalms, committed a grave sin, and experienced God's gracious forgiveness. When he died he passed the kingdom on to his son Solomon.

Solomon was a king with a mixed legacy. When the Lord came to him in a dream, offering to fulfill whatever Solomon asked of him, Solomon asked for wisdom to rule well. The Lord was pleased with this and gave Solomon not only wisdom, but wealth, peace and success as well. He built a glorious Temple in Jerusalem to replace the Tabernacle that the nation had been using since the days of Moses. As he ruled, Solomon grew in wealth and power until he was the richest king Israel ever had. In his wealth he took many foreign women to be his wives and these wives drew him away from the Lord so that he even participated with them in worshiping other gods. His rule grew oppressive so that when he finally died, the people were glad to see him go.

Kingdoms

Because Solomon abandoned the Lord for other gods, when he died God tore away most of the nation and gave it to another man to rule, Jeroboam. The divide of the Kingdom of Israel into two occurred just a little north of Jerusalem. The bulk of the nation followed Jeroboam. Solomon's son, Rehoboam, ruled the smaller southern kingdom. The previous era, before Israel was divided, was called the United Kingdom and lasted about 120 years. This new situation, called the Divided Kingdom, lasted for a little over 200 years, with the Northern kingdom, called Israel, being richer but much less stable than the Southern. Assassinations and civil wars led to many changes of the ruling family. One reason for this was that the Northern kingdom never really enjoyed the blessing of God because their first king, Jeroboam, made two golden calves and put them in two different cities for the people of Israel

to worship instead of their true God in the temple in Jerusalem. Until the end of the kingdom, every northern king continued this policy which was in direct disobedience to the instructions the Lord gave through Moses. The Southern kingdom, called Judah after the large and powerful tribe that was the core of it, continued to be ruled from Jerusalem by the descendants of David, as the Lord had promised. These kings varied in their faithfulness, but most of the time Judah was ruled by generally good kings.

It was during this time that the Lord began sending prophets to warn the people about their disobedience to the Mosaic Covenant and it was in this time period (the Divided Kingdom) that the Prophetic books began to be written. Under the kings, tribal and clan life slowly broke down and was replaced by centrally-controlled royal administrators. The traditional legal protections God had given were ignored. These ensured that families could not permanently lose their land and that Hebrew slaves could only be kept for six years. More and more a small wealthy elite oppressed the poor. This was the consequence of abandoning God's ways and is largely what the prophets spoke against. Eventually, the time came when the Lord's patience with the Northern kingdom came to an end. As God had long warned them, He sent the Assyrians, who conquered them and took many of the Israelites to settle as exiles in other lands the Assyrians controlled, far from the Promised Land.

The time period that follows is called the era of the Surviving kingdom, because only the Southern kingdom remained. It lasted about 135 years. Prophets continued to warn the people and rulers that they, too would be cast out of the land if they did not live faithfully according to what Moses had commanded them. Some of the kings in this period were good and some were bad, but the trajectory of the nation was downward. They continued to disobey the Lord, ignoring and killing His prophets until God finally sent the Babylonians who captured Jerusalem, leveled it to the ground, and brought the people back to Babylon to live as exiles. This part of the story is recorded in the book of Jeremiah.

Kicked Out

This period of time, which lasted about 70 years, is called the Exile. Though it was the time of the prophet Daniel, not much else happened in it. But the fact that it happened is very important to the history of the Old Testament.

Came Back

Even though they did nothing to earn a reprieve, God allowed Israel to return to Jerusalem and rebuild its walls and the Temple. People wondered why they were not ruled by a descendant of David, and the Lord told them that he had not forgotten his promise to David, but that they must be ruled by other nations for a time. This is the era of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. The Old Testament ends at this point, with Israel waiting for a future deliverance – specifically for a son of David to take the throne. They had to wait about 400 years and then, at the right time, Jesus, a descendant of David, was born. Notice that the pattern of waiting runs through the whole Bible. The Old Testament ends on a note of waiting. God had done great things, but more was coming. It is the same for us today. Jesus has come, died, and rose from the dead. Yet we are waiting for the next move in God's plan, just as Israel was in the years before Jesus.

Geography

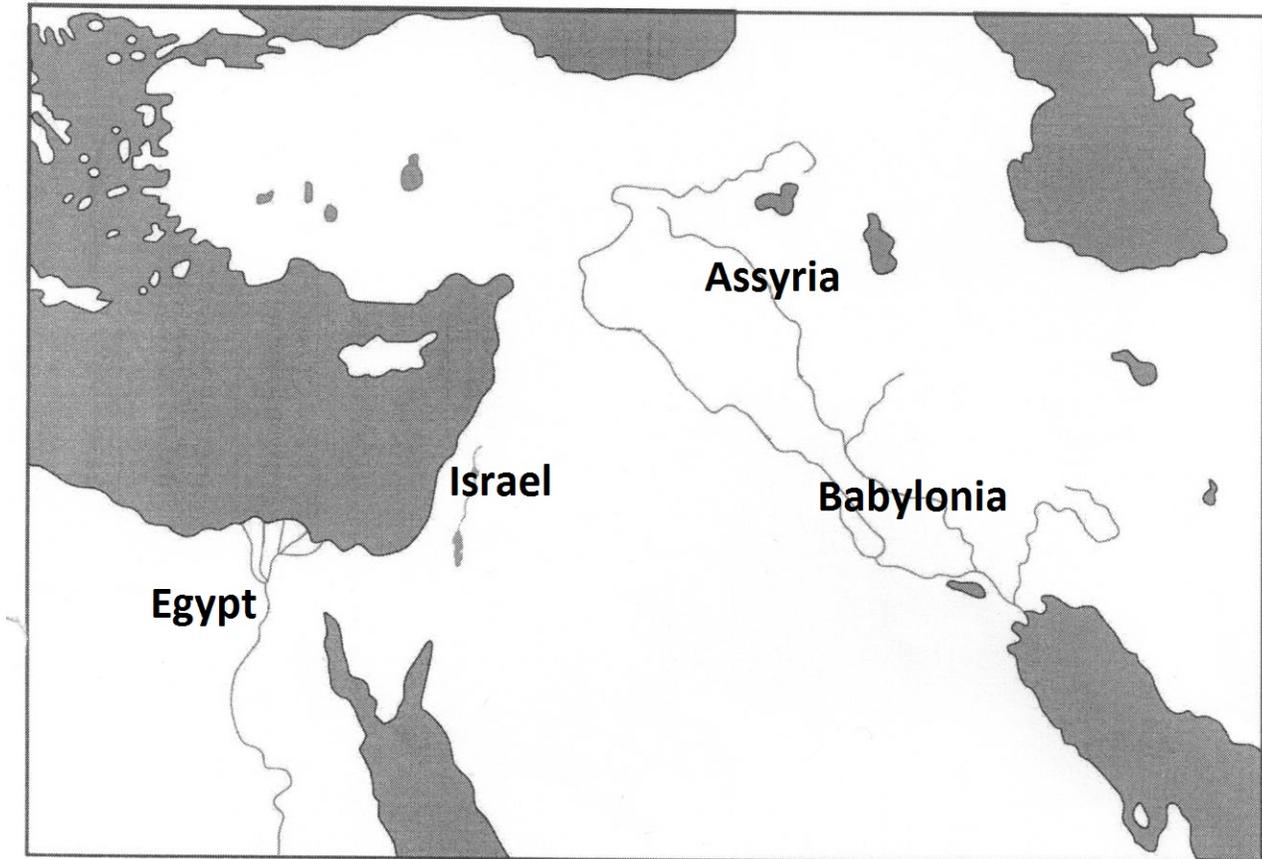
One thing that makes the Bible stand out from many other religious books is that it is about real events that really happened at a particular place and a particular time. Jesus was a real man who lived in Palestine in the first century who actually died and rose from the dead. We can visit the place he died and see the empty tomb. The Old Testament is also about real events that really happened in the real world. It isn't a bunch of ideas that exist in the spiritual realm.

Because the Old Testament is about real events it often mentions geographical places where these events occurred. So having some understanding of the geography of these events will help you make sense of what you are reading. A lot of detailed information is available. However, most of this you don't have to know in order to understand what is going on. In fact, when I was a child of, say, ten, I read and basically understood these stories even though I had no idea where hardly any of these locations were. I knew where Egypt was, the Jordan River, the Dead Sea (which wasn't that helpful, since it isn't mentioned very often), and a few other places. But to know where the Hill Country of Ephraim was or Bethel, or Beersheeba, I had no idea. I could still follow what was happening. When I learned the geography it did sometimes help me understand what was going on better, but it didn't change the point of the story.

Because geography is important, but not very important, I won't give you very much of it, just

enough to get you oriented.

Most of what happened in the Old Testament happened in the land of Canaan, or, as it was later called, Palestine. This is where the nation of Israel lived. Here is a map that shows where it is in relation to other nations. I have labeled it “Israel.”

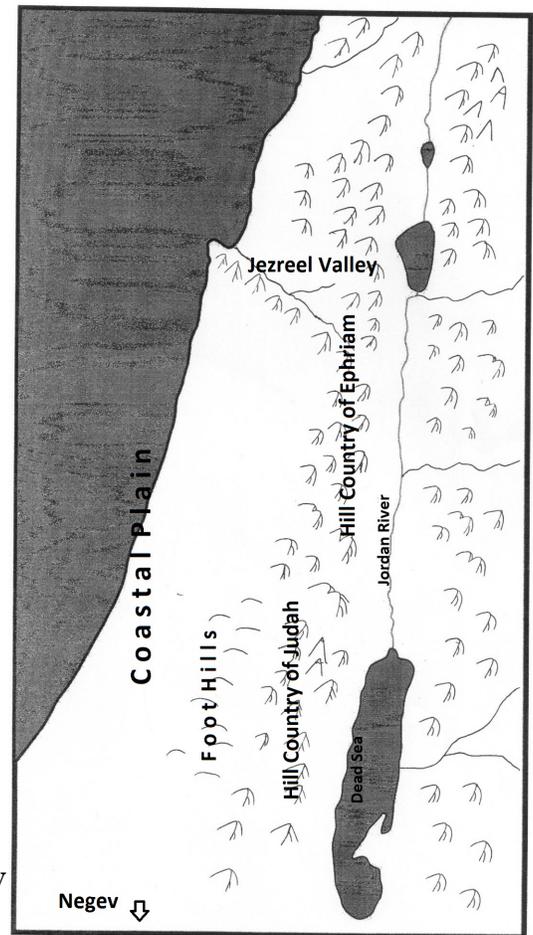


The most important things to know on this map are where Israel is in relation to Egypt, Assyria and Babylon. Egypt was Israel's rich and powerful neighbor to the south. Assyria and Babylon are important because Abraham was living in this part of the world when God called him. This is where Israel was taken into exile. Although Assyria and Babylonia was mostly east of Palestine, the land directly between them was desert, so to get there you had to travel north. That is why the Bible will sometimes talk about the Assyrians or Babylonians as being in or from the north. The region I have labeled Babylonia is where the Tower of Babel was built. It is also where Abraham was when God called him and where the Israelite exiles were taken

into captivity after Jerusalem was destroyed.

Here is a map of Palestine showing its physical characteristics.

You see that starting from the Mediterranean Sea, first there is a coastal plain, then foothills, then much more rugged hills and valleys. The hill country was where Israel settled when they first entered the Land under Joshua and it remained the heart and most important part of their territory. Most of the stories that take place within the Promised Land take place in the hill country. If you want to picture the land back then by looking at photographs of Palestine today, you should know that Palestine went through two periods of serious deforestation after the days of Joshua, so the hill country was greener in the time of the Old Testament than it is today.



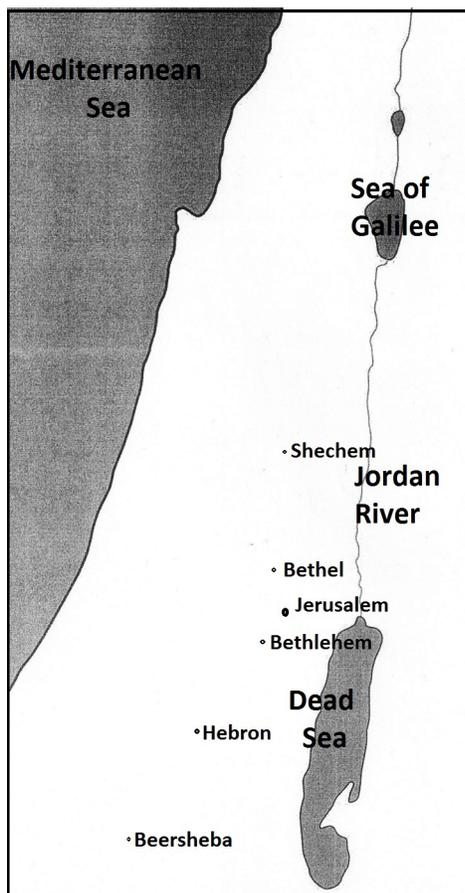
I have divided the hill country into that of Judah and that of Ephraim. This is because sometimes a story will use these terms to specify where in the hill country something takes place. Knowing exactly where these regions are is not vital to understanding the story, but it is good to know that Judah is in the south.

The Jezreel Valley was the most fertile part of the land, but was not controlled by Israel until they had had several generations of powerful kings. Many of the later stories that take place in the Northern Kingdom of Israel (in 1 and 2 Kings) take place here.

The Negev was desert during the dry season (May - September), but green during the rainy season (October – April). Because of this, people couldn't live there year-round unless they lived near a well. The Negev was important, though, because shepherds such as Abraham, would take their flocks to the nearer portions every year when there was grass, and return to the settled areas during the dry season to graze their flocks on the stubble of farmers' fields.

Here is the Promised Land with a few basic locations.

Besides the Mediterranean Sea to the west (or Great Sea, as they called it), the most obvious feature of the Promised Land was the Jordan River which runs from the Sea of Galilee in the north to the Dead Sea in the south. Typically, civilizations spread along rivers, but since the



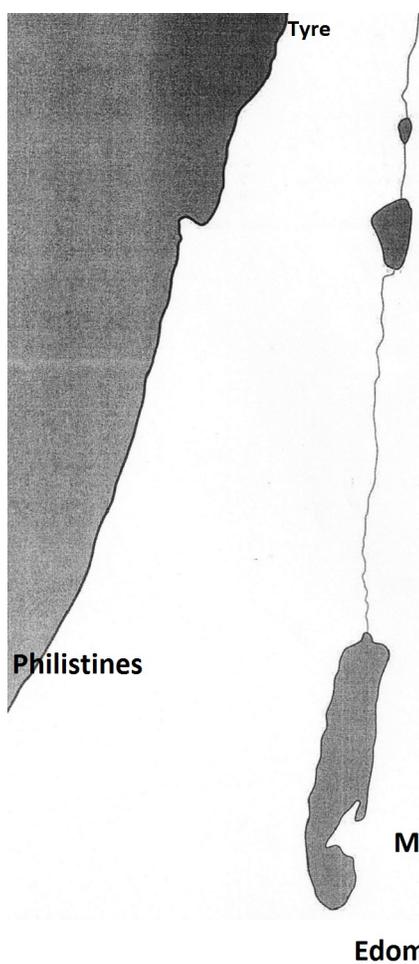
Jordan river moves too fast for boats and is too dirty for good drinking water, as far as we can tell, no city has ever been on its banks. The area around the river was actually more wild than the rest of the land. Because the Jordan is so wild and unfriendly and the Israelites were not a sea-faring people, these bodies of water only serve as borders and barriers in the Old Testament.

The Jordan River is the most important border because it divides the Promised Land into an eastern and western side. Stories will mention crossing it or use it as a way to explain where locations are by saying it is “across the Jordan.” This phrase always refers to the land on the east side of the Jordan river, even though from the point of view of someone living on that side, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and other places are “across the Jordan.” In the Old Testament, the point of view is always centered in

the land of Palestine between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean sea.

Another way the Old Testament writers explained something to be on the east side of the Jordan, they referred to that area as **Gilead**. This was a large region on the east side of the river. So whenever a place has the word “Gilead” in the name, it is on the east side.

I have put some important places on the map for you to see. You can see that they are all in the hill country except for Beersheba which is in the Negev. Beersheba is important because it was perceived as the southernmost city in Israel. Dan (off the map to the north) was the northernmost city, so the phrase, “from Dan to Beersheba” means, “the whole land.”



Here is a map to show you where Israel's most important immediate neighbors lived.

Ammon, Moab and Edom were small kingdoms that were present in the land before Israel came to the Promised Land. God told Israel that He had given the Ammonites, Moabites and Edomites the land they each lived on and so Israel must not take it from them.

Ammon These peoples were related to Israel: Ammon and Moab were descendants of Abraham's nephew Lot and Edom from Jacob's brother, Esau.

Aram: The Arameans were an ethnic and cultural group that lived in powerful city-states in modern-day Syria.

Damascus was the most prominent. They are important

in the books of 1 and 2 Kings.

Philistines: A confederation of city-states. For three to four generations the Philistines struggled with Israel over control of the foothills between Israel's highlands and their own

territory on the coastal plain. Because the Old Testament contains a lot of stories from this time (Samson, Samuel, Saul and David), it gives the impression that the Philistines were Israel's arch-enemies. This was only true for that period of time. Overall, the Philistines seem to have caused less trouble for Israel than most of their other neighbors. The region is today called "Palestine" after the Philistines.

Tyre: A wealthy city of sea-faring Canaanites (today we call them Phoenicians). It always wanted to have good relations with whatever nations controlled the roads that merchants used to travel to Tyre and buy the goods Tyre's ships brought from across the sea. So when Israel was a powerful kingdom and controlled the trade that came from the south, Tyre was a friend. When Israel was not a kingdom or was weak, Tyre ignored it.

Name	Famous stories and people
Foundations	Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood
Family	Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph
Fulfillment and Failure	Moses, the 10 plagues, Exodus, 10 Commandments, wilderness wandering Joshua, Jericho, Rahab, Deborah, Gideon, Samson, Samuel, Ruth
Kings	Saul, David, Solomon
Kingdoms	Elijah, Elisha, Ahab, Jonah, Hezekiah, Josiah, Isaiah, Jeremiah
Kicked Out	Ezekiel, Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar, Fiery furnace
Came Back	Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther

Big Points

Foundations – Family – Fulfillment and Failure

King – Kingdoms

Kicked Out – Came Back

We have now gone over the story of the Old Testament three times. I hope that you are generally familiar with it. When you read, knowing the overall story will help you make sense of the particular section you are in. Now we are going to look at some particularly important points in the story and I will tell you how each of these should influence how you understand the world in general and particularly how you understand the Old Testament.

The Starting Point

In order to understand something, it is usually best to start at the beginning. This is where the Bible starts and at this starting point we learn something very important. The first verse of the Bible reads, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” The verses that follow describe God's act of creation. This introduces us to the most basic fact about reality: there are two types of real things. On the one hand, there is God, and on the other is everything else. God is totally and fundamentally different from everything else that exists. Everything else includes the whole physical universe, you, me, and every other person, and all spiritual beings such as angels, demons and Satan. Everything else derives its existence from God. None of it would exist if God had not chosen to make it exist, and it only continues to exist because God chooses to keep it in existence. In Job it says: “If God were to take back his spirit and withdraw his breath, all life would cease, and humanity would turn again to dust” (Job 34:14-15 NLT).

God, on the other hand, exists in and of Himself. He doesn't need anyone or anything else. His decision to create something else was totally free. He didn't have to do it. He could have existed eternally enjoying the intimate fellowship of the three persons that make up the one God. He didn't create the world because He was lonely. What's more, He will never need

anything else or be dependent on something other than himself. This is what I mean when I say that there are two types of real things. There are dependent real things, which are everything you can see, and there is the independent Source, God the Creator.

The fact that God is the totally independent source of everything should effect the way we think about everything in life, though it may not be obvious at first. All things naturally derive from God and belong to God. The universe is designed by God. Everything takes its meaning from God. This is not the way most people see reality. Most see reality as basically one thing. They view God or their gods as part of the universe in some sense, a being (or beings) that is really powerful, but not different in the sense I described above. They think of their god as needing something from them. They conceive of God as owing us certain things. They think that they have rights that God should respect, as if there is some source of rights other than God himself. Someone who doesn't understand this will misunderstand the whole Old Testament because they are working from a wrong idea of the nature of our relationship with God.

We also see in Genesis 1 that everything God created was “very good” ([Gen. 1:31](#)). The world was made a good place. When the universe is running in harmony with how God wants it to be, then it's good. Because everything else comes from God, we can only define what's good based on God, His nature and His design, just as water can't rise higher than its source.

Goodness can only come from God. When Adam and Eve decided that they, and not God, would choose what is good and evil for themselves, it was incredibly stupid; but we can repeat this same mistake every day. God isn't just the only source of goodness, He's also the only source of power and life. It's impossible that there be another source. This is why God writes,

“Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth;

For I am God, and there is no other.

“I have sworn by Myself,

The word has gone forth from My mouth in righteousness

And will not turn back,

That to Me every knee will bow, every tongue will swear allegiance.

“They will say of Me, ‘**Only in the Lord are righteousness and strength.**’ (Is. 45:22-24 NASB)

Why must people turn to God for deliverance and salvation? Because He's the only source of righteousness and strength, or we could say "goodness and power," and so He's the only one who can actually save. It's a good thing that saving is exactly what He wants to do.

I want to give you a caution here. Knowing that God is the perfect, ultimate being can also be a source of confusion. We each have our own ideas of what a perfect being should be like and make assumptions about what God must be like based on them. Because we get most of these ideas from our culture, we share them with the people around us. Therefore it can be very hard to see that they are just our ideas and not necessarily what God is really like. When He became a man and was born as Jesus the Messiah, the Jewish people had developed ideas about what the Messiah must be like and what he must do; these caused most of them not to recognize Jesus for who He was. The idea that the Savior would be killed by those he came to save is scandalous and shocking, but beautiful when you come to grips with it. We face a similar danger now. In Europe and the English-speaking world, people have the incorrect idea that the highest virtue is acceptance of others and that love means only kindness. This leads many to assume that God must be completely accepting, at least of me. If you are from somewhere else, maybe you are blessed not to have this false idea, but you certainly have your own. Christians have their own set of ideas about what God "must" be like, how he must reveal Himself, how He must deal with us. We must ask the Lord to help us put these ideas aside so that we can clearly see who He really is as we read the Old Testament which He has given us precisely so that we can know Him. Seeing the real God is far more glorious than any of our idols and illusions.

So when you read the Old Testament remember that God is the source of everything, that no move away from Him and no ideas that are out of harmony with His can ever have good consequences. God is the boss, the driving force, and you are about to read the book in which He tells us about Himself. He gave it so that you could know Him and relate to Him in the way He created you to.

Human Creation and Rebellion

The next point also begins in Genesis chapter 1, but stretches to chapter 3. God made humanity, men and women, "in His own image" ([Gen. 1:26-30](#)). This means that we are like Him in many ways. It also means that we are His representatives on earth, meant to ensure

His will was done here, to ensure that everything operates as it should. It also means that God's intention is to relate to us. When I said above that God doesn't need us and we don't have any natural rights as far as God is concerned, this wasn't bad news. It's good news. It means that God relates to us and cares for us because He wants to. God doesn't offer us a codependent relationship, but one based on true, selfless love.

Since we are in God's image, the idea of His relating to us isn't absurd. The question, "Why would God become a man to save humanity? That's like a man becoming an ant to save antkind," forgets the fact that God made us like Himself and made us so that we could relate to Him. God doesn't need us, as I said above, but He does want us. We matter very much to Him. We matter so much to God that each of us will have a personal interview with our Creator in which we review the events and choices of our lives. Many people reject the idea that God will judge us because they don't see it as the honor that it is. They don't see how it demonstrates your value. What's more, He has done the work that takes the sting out of our sins and failures. [Rom. 8:1](#); [John 5:24](#); [Eph. 1:7](#); [Heb. 2:14-15](#).

Here we also find that God has an enemy, described here as the Serpent and later identified as the Devil or Satan. He deceived Adam and Eve by influencing them to doubt God's good intentions toward them. Despite the fact that God had placed this first couple in a perfect garden and told them that they could freely eat from any tree except one, the Serpent said that God was keeping something good from them. They had been warned by God that if they were to eat the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, they would die, but the Serpent said that this was not true. If they ate they would be like God, knowing good and evil. They believed Satan and ate.

When the Serpent said that Adam and Eve would "know good and evil," the Bible is not saying that they would learn right from wrong, for they knew that they should not eat of the tree; they knew it was wrong. It also doesn't mean that they would have an experiential knowledge of good and evil (that they would experience good and evil) because it says that if they know good and evil they will be like God. God cannot do evil, and does not have an experiential knowledge of evil. The idea is that they will know for themselves what is good and what is bad. This means that they will rely on their own understanding. They will make their own way and carve their own path. This is the choice they made and the choice all of us have made. We see the disastrous results in human history.

Understanding the nature of the Fall or Rebellion of humanity should also shed some light on the salvation we are offered today. Adam and Eve turned away from trusting God and chose to trust the Devil and their own judgment. We have all done the same thing. What is required for us is to have a relationship with God, to begin to know God and to have the forgiveness He extends to all who come to Him. This is the reverse of that decision which was made in the Garden. We have to return our trust to God, to take our allegiance from the Devil and give it back to God.

These two stories, of Creation and the Rebellion (or Fall) of Humanity, answer one of the most basic questions of life: what is evil? If God is only good and is all-powerful, then why does evil exist? We see that evil is not a thing, just as a shadow is not a thing. A shadow is an absence of light that happens when something gets between a light source and something else. Evil was not created, but is the natural result when one of the creatures God created chooses to reject God and do what it desires instead of what He desires. So evil is a matter of orientation. Is an action oriented toward God and His will, or away from it? This is also why there are degrees of evil. When a man and woman, who are not married, have sex out of affection for each other, it isn't God's will and so it's evil. But if this happens because one has promised the other a job promotion in return, then this is more evil. At least in the first case, the couple is motivated by affection. This is a good thing connected to the original purpose for sex, even if it falls short of the lifelong commitment which God says must be present if sex is to be good. I don't mean that commitment is necessary for sex to feel good, but it is necessary for it to be in harmony with the nature of life as God made it, for it to have the place in our lives it should have so that it can produce good ultimate results. Both of these cases will certainly have negative consequences, but the second will be worse for the hearts of those involved because it uses sex as a commodity for exchange, something it was never designed to be.

Evil comes from making choices that are out of step with reality as God made it. He made the earth to function in a harmonious way so that it's a good place to live. When a factory dumps chemicals in a river and kills all the fish, this is evil. God makes each human being equally in his image as an independent person to be loved and respected. When we look at others with contempt, we forget that they are made in God's image. When we feed a sexual desire for someone without regard to their desires, we treat them as an object and not a person. Sex was designed to be a union between two committed people. A human being is not something to be

had like a nice meal, or used like a tool. All this behavior is evil because it is out of step with reality as God made it.

In fact, much of God's judgment is just allowing people to experience the consequences of their decisions, giving them the freedom they desire. He says,

“Your own wickedness will correct you,

and your apostasies will reprove you;

Know therefore and see that it is evil and bitter

for you to forsake the LORD your God

and the dread of me is not in you. (Jer. 2:19 NASB)”

This is also why God says that there is no rest (or peace) for the wicked. After offering peace and healing to those far and near, God says:

But the wicked are like the tossing sea,

which cannot rest,

whose waves cast up mire and mud.

“There is no peace,” says my God, “for the wicked. (Is. 57:20-21 NIV)”

“No rest for the wicked” is a phrase you might hear sometimes. This is where it comes from.

Do you see that God is not cursing the wicked here, but describing what happens when

someone insists on finding his own way? He will never find peace because what he is doing

doesn't fit with the nature of the world as God made it. He insists on pursuing his own desires

and since we all have conflicting desires within ourselves, we can never be satisfied when we

make them our goal. The wicked have left the oasis to find another source of water where they

can be king, but there is no other source. Unless they return, they will wander, forever thirsty.

God “leads out the prisoners into prosperity, **Only the rebellious dwell in a parched**

land. (Ps. 68:6 NASB)”

The other very important point we see here at the beginning of the Bible is that human choices have real consequences and so are very important. When God created Adam and Eve with the power to chose, he wasn't bluffing. They made a disastrous choice and the Lord allowed them to do it. The situation has not changed. Your choices have real consequences and are important.

God Gets the Ball Rolling

After the first eleven chapters of Genesis, it appears that this “Creation” idea was a failure, but God doesn't see it this way. The next point in the story we need to take a deeper look at is when God called Abraham. Abraham's story is found in Genesis 12-25. There we read that God chose Abraham to be the founder of a nation which He would use to undo human rebellion and redeem the world. He told Abraham to leave his family and people so that he could become a nation, and Abraham obeyed. In these stories we see themes that will be important through the rest of the Bible: faith in God, righteousness, relationship with God, intercession, and substitution. Abraham acted in faith in God's promises, doing things that only make sense if God is really going to act and intervene in real life. We see that God wanted Abraham to understand justice and righteousness so that the nation that comes from him would be an example to the other nations. Speaking to himself about Abraham, God says

“Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him. (Gen. 18:17-19 ESV)”

God was about to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because they were so wicked. Abraham's response was to intercede for these people. He respectfully argues with God, saying

“Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right? (Gen. 18:23-25 NIV)”

Do you see that when God chose Abraham, He chose someone whose was concerned for the rest of the world, not just himself and his family? This is because his heart was like God's heart. God does not take any pleasure in destroying the wicked. He would much rather that they turn from their evil ways so He can bless them ([Ez. 18:23](#); [33:11](#)). Abraham was also someone who spoke with God, interacted with God, and wanted to relate to God. This is what

the Lord desires from all of us. Later, after waiting for decades, Abraham and his wife Sarah finally had the son they were promised, but then God told Abraham that the promised son was to be sacrificed. Abraham went to obey, but God stopped him and gave a ram to offer as a substitute. In this episode we see a foreshadowing of Jesus, the ultimate promised Son, who was sacrificed. We see that God did not spare his Son, as he did for Abraham and Sarah, but offered Him as the ultimate substitute for the sin of the world.

Exodus

During the life of Abraham's grandson, Jacob (also named Israel), God directed the family to move to Egypt, where they lived for several centuries, isolated from contact with other nations. In Egypt, the Israelites grew in numbers until they were no longer just a large family, but a nation. When it came time for the Lord to resume His work with them and bring them to their land, they were slaves to the Egyptians. The Egyptian's king, the Pharaoh, refused to let them go. The Lord viewed Israel as His firstborn son ([Ex. 4:22-23](#)). A firstborn son had certain responsibilities in that time as they still do in much of the world today. A firstborn is expected to share in and continue the father's work, to take on the responsibility to care for the rest of the family. When it came time for Israel to begin the duty of blessing all the nations of the world by bringing them back to a right relationship with God, Pharaoh would not let them go. This resulted in a contest of power between Egypt's gods and Israel's God. At the end of the most one-sided fight in history, God's firstborn was free to leave, while Egypt suffered the loss of all her firstborns.

God's deliverance of Israel from servitude in Egypt was one of the central events of her history. However, the point is not that God brought Israel out of Egypt to free them from slavery, but He brought them out of serving the world into a life of serving Him. He had a job for them. They were to participate in His work by being a light to the other nations. He made an agreement with them which we call the Mosaic Covenant, but I must skip this because I will write about it later.

King David

After several centuries, the Lord chose David to be king of Israel based on what He saw in David's heart. When David said that he wanted to build a house for God, God responded by saying, "You will not build a house for me. Instead I will build a house for you." ([2 Sam. 7:4-](#)

16) Meaning that God promised that David's descendants (the “house of David”) would rule forever. This is important not only because it meant that the Savior would be a descendant of David, but it reveals that the promised Messiah would be royal. He would not be just a savior from sin, but a king, the ruler of the human race and all creation.

Exile and Return

The final point to focus on is that ultimately, Israel was a failure. Israel didn't keep up its end of the Mosaic Covenant. Israel didn't function as a light to other nations. Israel eventually was thrown out of God's Promised Land, but after seventy years they were allowed to return, but not to have a king. So the Old Testament ends on a note of waiting. They have seen a partial fulfillment of what God promised, but not all. This shouldn't surprise us, since the book of Genesis ended with Israel living several centuries in Egypt, growing, but not having what God had promised Abraham. Then Deuteronomy ends with Israel as a nation who have a special relationship with God, but they don't possess the Promised Land. They have partial fulfillment, and are waiting for the rest. Then the whole Old Testament ends as Israel is brought back to the land, but are waiting for the full promises of God to come to completion. Then, Jesus came and we can think that with His death, Resurrection, and Ascension to rule at the Father's right hand God's promises are fulfilled. We can assume that Israel had to wait, but we have arrived. However, the world is still a broken and painful place. We see that many more of God's promises are indeed fulfilled and we have a much clearer understanding of God's plans than did the believers in the Old Testament, but we don't have everything yet. Christians, too, are waiting. We experience a mix of fulfilled promises and waiting for the final fulfillment.

The Story of Israel and Humanity is Completed in Jesus

One important question that may be on your mind when you think of the Old Testament is what is the relationship between it and Jesus, or what is the role of Jesus in relation to the Old Testament? The answer is multifaceted because there are different ways of looking at it. The first thing to know is that, in some sense, Jesus is the fulfillment of all God's promises ([2 Cor. 1:20](#)).

For right now I'd like to emphasize that Jesus came to God's people after they had failed. They had not fulfilled what the Lord wanted them to do and were being ruled by a foreign nation

(this is always a sign that there is a problem between them and God). Jesus came and completed Israel's story. His life paralleled the experiences of the nation of Israel, and he did what they could not do. We see this most strongly in the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew points out that as a baby Jesus escaped a slaughter of baby boys by a ruler, went down to Egypt, and came up out of Egypt; this parallels Israel's experience. He passed through the waters of baptism like Israel through the Red Sea. God declared Jesus to be his beloved Son, like Israel ([Mt. 3:17](#); [Ex. 4:22](#)). He then was lead by God into the wilderness for forty days where He was tempted, much like Israel coming through the Red Sea into the wilderness for forty years. However, unlike Israel, Jesus succeeded in remaining in submission to His Father. Jesus then died and rose from the dead so that now everyone who trusts Him is joined to Him and so is part of the people of God.

We see that the end of human history, a perfect world, is not reached by human efforts, but by God's intervention. God's purposes will be accomplished. The religious leaders in Jesus' day thought that some day the promised Kingdom of God would come because Israel would be faithful enough to cause it. Israel never was and the Kingdom didn't come, at least not in the way they assumed it would. Israel thought that when the Messiah came, that would be the beginning of the age to come. Jesus' disciples had the same expectation, but Jesus didn't bring the end. As I said above, we are still living in tension, just like Israel did. Christians generally have the expectation that when Jesus returns then the story will end. Sin and suffering will end, but not the story. When we read the description of the New Heavens and New Earth in the last two chapters of the Bible, it sounds like the opening of a whole new story. This is the story God had originally intended us to be involved in when He created us. Our sin could not prevent God from the perfect goals He had for us. This must be true because God is who He is.

Name	Famous stories and people
Foundations	Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood
Family	Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph
Fulfillment and Failure	Moses, the 10 plagues, Exodus, 10 Commandments, wilderness wandering

	Joshua, Jericho, Rahab, Deborah, Gideon, Samson, Samuel, Ruth
Kings	Saul, David, Solomon
Kingdoms	Elijah, Elisha, Ahab, Jonah, Hezekiah, Josiah, Isaiah, Jeremiah
Kicked Out	Ezekiel, Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar, Fiery furnace
Came Back	Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther

What Kind of Material am I Reading?

Foundations – Family – Fulfillment and Failure

King – Kingdoms

Kicked Out – Came Back

What is Genre?

Any time you read anything it is important to be aware of what type of thing you are reading. You read a news report of a crime differently than you do a mystery story. Both are about crimes, but one is a real crime and one is fictional. Your emotional reaction will be different reading them. Your expectations will be different. You read the mystery story to find out who did it in the end; you read a news report hoping they catch whoever did it. A news report that includes the catching of the criminal is satisfying (unless it turns out the criminal is a friend of yours), but you know that this doesn't always happen, so if the report ends with the police still looking into the crime, you accept it.

If you read or watched a whole mystery story and then at the end they don't tell you who did it, it would make you mad, because the rules of the genre of mystery story include finding out who did it. Publishers know that misunderstandings of genre can be disturbing, which is why if a novel contains non-realistic elements such as magic or super science, they find a way to tell the reader that before he starts to read.

If you are reading what you think is a realistic novel about a young woman aging out of an orphanage in Kenya, you expect to watch her grow in her knowledge of herself and her world. You want to see her mature, build connections, find contentment and begin to lead a fulfilling life. You would not expect that half-way through she would find a wrecked alien space ship and use its technology to defeat a group of vampires who are secretly ruling the world. If she did, many readers would throw the book away in disgust (though some of us might think that the story had taken a very interesting turn).

The different kinds of written and artistic materials are called genres. We discern genre all the time without thinking about it. Let's say someone on television claims that a new type of car is the safest, most comfortable and most fuel-efficient ever made. To really understand him you need to know if he is a researcher reporting scientific findings, a test driver giving an opinion, or an actor in a commercial. If you were watching thinking he was reporting the results of research and then you find out it's a paid advertisement, you would probably be irritated. You'd also have to change how you understand everything that you just heard. This is entirely because of the differences in the expectations we have for the genre of advertisement as opposed to news report. Sometimes a person will say something that sounds ignorant or stupid, then claim that it was a joke. They are trying to move what they said into a different genre to escape embarrassment because it's acceptable to sound ignorant in a joke, but not in normal conversation.

Being aware of the genre you are reading will have a significant effect on how you interpret it. Misunderstanding the genre can be disastrous. In the 1930s a radio station did a dramatic narration of the novel *The War of the Worlds*, in which Martians invade the earth, but instead of telling the story from one man's perspective, as the book does, they presented it as a live newscast. Before the broadcast, the station explained that what follows was fiction, but not everyone heard the beginning. People who tuned in after the program had begun thought that they were listening to a real newscast of a real invasion. Thousands of people fled in a mass panic. The problem was entirely a misunderstanding of genre.

The same thing happens in reading the Bible. We read that Samson burned the grain fields of the Philistines because Samson's father-in-law, who was a Philistine, had given Samson's wife to another man. Some people might think that this shows that it is sometimes good to take revenge, or that whole communities should bear the punishment for the sins of a few of its members, but this is a mistake of genre. The story of Samson is a narrative, that is, it describes what Samson did. It isn't a law telling us what to do. It doesn't even imply that God approved of the action. Since God commands us not to take revenge ([Lev. 19:18](#); [Deut. 32:35](#)), we can know that Samson did the wrong thing. Learning to understand genre will help you avoid this kind of mistake and notice it when you hear it from others.

These lessons will explain the foundational genre of the Old Testament, which is the genre of narrative, or story. The reason this is important is because misunderstanding genres is

possibly the most common source of misinterpretation of the Old Testament. Understanding the various types of writing is the most important step to being a competent reader, and so is pretty important. After you have finished this course, you can read the additional materials I will post on other, harder, genres.

At the highest level you can break the Old Testament into two genres: prose and poetry. Prose is what we think of as normal communication. We usually speak to each other in prose. Prose is composed of sentences and paragraphs. It's mostly literal and is used to impart information. Instructions and stories are both prose.

Poetry is a special form of speech that is in an artistically arranged pattern so that it has a rhythm of some kind, often a pattern of rhyming words, but it could also be a repeated sound in the middle or beginnings of words, or a pattern in the number of syllables or even in the meaning of the phrases. Poetry is usually intended to stir an emotional response more than prose does. Poetry is composed of lines, which may not be complete sentences, and may just consist of a figure of speech.

Prose and poetry can each be divided into further genres. The most common and important prose genres of the Old Testament are narrative, law code and didactic (or teaching). The most important genres of poetry are wisdom, prophecy, apocalypse and psalms, a type of poetry including both songs and prayers,.

You should be aware that not all genres are equally easy to understand. Some are definitely easier to master than others. Fortunately, the one that is easiest to master is also the one with the most foundational information and is the one you should start with. Since the goal of these lessons is to get you started reading the Old Testament, we will look at how to understand the stories (called “narrative”) so that you can read them with some confidence. Being familiar with the content of the stories allows you to understand the world in which the other materials were written. You really need to be familiar with the narratives of the Old Testament before you try to understand prophecy.

The books from Genesis through Esther are mostly narratives, though the first few books also contain law codes and genealogies and they all have some poetry. Parts of other books are narratives as well, such as Jonah, Job, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

You will learn to understand poetry by reading the Psalms. These are usually not too hard to

understand and many of them you will find easy to relate to. They are written from and about the whole range of human emotion and experience. When you read the Psalms you will certainly find some that reflect your current thoughts and feelings. Because of this, some of them are as easy for a Christian to understand as the narrative stories. Their humanness makes them accessible and this is probably why many Bibles are printed as just the New Testament and Psalms, because the Psalms are the only part of the Old Testament many people read. They aren't the place to start if you want to read the rest of the Old Testament though, not the way the stories are. When you get to them, they will help you develop an instinct for how to read Hebrew poetry. Since the prophets wrote mostly in poetry, this is a vital step to understanding them.

Start with the Stories

When you start reading the Bible from Genesis, the first book, it soon becomes clear that what you are reading are stories. It is important to actually notice this since about half of the Old Testament consists of stories. God did not have to begin with stories, but he did. The Old Testament begins with books that tell the story of God's relationship with the human race so that we human readers can understand Him. Then there are books of wisdom and prophecy that talk more directly about what His plans and desires are.

Notice that the New Testament follows the same pattern: there are the gospels and Acts, which tell a story, then the epistles and Revelation. This is no accident. There is a reason that stories come first. In both cases, these stories are vital to understanding the books that follow. Many of us would have begun with teaching and some basic facts, then used stories to illustrate the teaching. But we find that stories take first place in the Bible and there are good reasons for this which might challenge some of our assumptions.

Many of us assume that God should prefer to teach in the same way that teachers in modern schools do. But God teaches us in story form much more than in a direct teaching format because it is a better method for teaching truths that have complex application. In this case, the application is how to live our lives. Stories are not as good as direct statements if you are explaining something simple such as how to use some piece of equipment, how to cook a particular food or how to get to someone's house. Since mastering life is harder than

mastering a computer, another way is needed.

Stories are also better than direct statements at getting to know a person. Here's a story.

When David, who later became king, came to bring supplies to his brothers who were in the army, he saw and heard the giant Goliath challenging the armies of Israel and asked about what reward would go to the man who won the challenge. This big talk from an inexperienced little brother made his oldest brother angry. He said,

David's oldest brother Eliab listened as he spoke to the men, and became angry with him. "Why did you come down here?" he asked. "Who did you leave those few sheep with in the wilderness? I know your arrogance and your evil heart—you came down to see the battle!" "What have I done now?" protested David. "It was just a question." (1 Sam. 17:28-29 HCSB).

Who hasn't heard an older and younger brother have just this kind of interaction? You see the whole relationship in a few sentences. If I try to summarize their relationship directly, how should I do it? Eliab resented David? He didn't like David? David was intimidated by Eliab? David avoided conflict, but his brother didn't? You see that none of these really capture what is communicated in the two verses above. None of them even feel completely correct. Direct statements can rarely capture the complexities of personality the way a story can.

There is more, though. As we reflect on these verses we see that Eliab didn't have a pure heart and he assumed David didn't either. Eliab's assumptions about David's motives gives us an insight into his own motivations. We see, too, that Eliab didn't see the issue as David did – that what was at stake is the honor of Israel's God. Not only did he not believe in David, he didn't believe in God's ability to deliver them from this giant. Do you see how all this was contained in just two verses? It actually takes more time to directly state this content than to tell the story, and even what I've said here does not exhaust what is contained in those verses.

Stories can also drive home a point that goes against our assumptions when we think we understand something, but really don't. In Genesis 28, Jacob was sent away by his parents to find a wife. On the way, God appeared to him and repeats to him the promises made to his grandfather Abraham. God specifically promised to protect Jacob and never abandon him. When he woke up Jacob was afraid and we read,

Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to

my father's household, then the Lord will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth." (Gen. 28:20-22 NIV)

Do you see a problem with Jacob's attitude? He said "If God will be with me...and will give me food to eat...so that I return safely...then the Lord will be my God..." How much does he trust God? What is he looking for from God? Does he think that God is worthy of worship even if He doesn't give Jacob what Jacob wants? No. We see a self-centered relationship with God. Jacob thinks that if he wants something, he has to get it for himself. Jacob decides what is good for himself and sets his own goals. For Jacob, God is a potential partner in this scheme. If God backs him up, then he will give God a share of what he gets. Jacob suffers a great deal in life as a result of this attitude.

Jacob's story is a journey of him letting go of control, trusting God and genuinely worshipping God. The Bible could have just told us this about Jacob in a few sentences, but this would not have the same power to challenge us about our own attitudes toward God. When you read Jacob's vow, you might hear the echo of some of your own prayers and be reminded of some of the "deals" you've made with God.

The Old Testament is not a book that lends itself to simple truths and easy answers. You have to be willing to grapple with truths that point in different directions. You will see that obeying God does not guarantee a trouble-free life. Being financially blessed is sometimes associated with faithfully following God (Abraham), but often isn't. In [1 Samuel 25](#) the arrogant and self-centered Nabal is wealthy, while David is an outlaw on the run.

Knowing God is not an easy thing. It involves ups and downs. The choices we make as we go through our life with God are vitally important. The New Testament writers understood this, but rarely wrote of it directly. They didn't need to because their Bible was already full of this message.

One reason Christians abandoned the Old Testament in the first few centuries after Christ (Okay, they didn't abandon it, but they came close) is because they didn't know what to do with it. They were culturally Greek and Roman and weren't steeped in the Old Testament like the Jewish leaders of the early Church. They were overwhelmed by its size and complexity. The Old Testament was written in a different cultural world, whereas the New Testament was

written within their own culture and so was much easier to identify with. It is not surprising that these early leaders concentrated on the New Testament. They were also put off by the Old Testament's ambiguity, its lack of simple answers. It leaves the reader with as many questions as it answers and these early Christians made the assumption, like many of us do, that answers are always better than questions. But unanswered questions lead us to explore further in a way answers do not. Do you know anyone that thinks they already have all the answers and know everything? What do you think of them?

How to Read Narratives: Part One

Hebrew narratives are “stories.” It's too bad that today many assume that if something is a story, with plot and characters, it is fictional, because this is simply not true. When you tell a friend about a strange thing that happened to you, this is a story, but, unless you are a liar, it is also true. These stories in the Bible really happened, and are perfectly true, since they are the words of God who cannot lie ([Titus 1:2](#); [Heb. 6:18](#)).

These stories are selective in what they tell us because all stories are selective. It would be impossible to tell a story containing every visual detail and answering every question. Anyone who has tried to tell a story to an inquisitive child knows this. The child can ask so many questions that, unless you cut them off, the story will never finish.

It's also important to remember that these stories are a form of history. They are true retellings of actual events. They are not allegories or fables, nor are they filled with hidden meanings. This doesn't mean that they have to fit with our idea of history, whatever that may be. Some people suppose that if a history book is trying to make a point, it isn't really history because it isn't written from a neutral perspective. They view it as propaganda. Since the Bible's stories all have a theological point, they don't look like “good” history if that assumption is made, but we don't have to make it. The books should be judged against what the authors were trying to do, not what people today think they should have been trying to do.

Many well-meaning, godly people through the years have interpreted Old Testament stories as allegories. This means that they see the characters as representing something else. So they might say that Abraham, called by God to leave his people and go to a new land represents the Church, which is called out of the world to follow God to Heaven. They did not deny that

Abraham was a real person who really was called by God, but they thought that the way a Christian profited from the story was to read them as symbolizing something else. This type of teaching was well-meant, coming from a genuine desire to apply the Bible to people's lives when these teachers couldn't see any other way to use these stories because the accounts are filled with lying, murder and adultery.

Other well-meaning people try to see in everything a foreshadowing of Jesus. They might tell us that Joseph foreshadows Christ because he was sold for silver and saved his people. Or, more extreme, the Ark of the Covenant foreshadows Christ because it was made of boards which were cut and so Jesus was cut off from His people (I have actually read this).

There are foreshadowings of Jesus in the Old Testament, and there is a sense in which Jesus is the fulfillment of the whole Old Testament. However, there is a problem with this approach that is not immediately obvious. Besides missing the plain meaning of what's written, this method robs the text of its ability to challenge us. It does this by replacing the original meaning with a safe one we already know. Interpreting this way assumes that we already know what we need to know and already have full understanding of God and the world. It fixes the stories by making them say what we expect them to say before we read them. What this looks like in practice is that the reader searches for something that reminds him of Jesus, or a teaching familiar from the New Testament, and once he finds it, he stops searching the passage. He thinks that he has found the treasure he was digging for and so doesn't see most of what God has for him to learn. Hopefully, what follows will help you to use the stories profitably and not to look for hidden meanings.

One of the reasons people read narratives in these ways is because they expect direct teaching, and don't find it. This is because it is not the purpose of these stories to teach directly. They are not children's stories that each have a lesson at the end or even have only one point. They illustrate teachings given elsewhere in the Bible. In them we observe real people having real encounters with God and so what we learn, we learn indirectly. This means that not every particular episode has a lesson we are supposed to learn. Often, the profit comes from reading many stories which together build a picture we can learn from.

Numbers records many instances of the children of Israel complaining and rebelling against God. Few of these stories, by themselves, contain a unique lesson, but when we read them

together we can see an answer to one of the biggest questions humans have pondered through the centuries.

Notice that the children of Israel in the wilderness saw God in the form of a cloud by night and a fire by day. He performed a miracle every day to feed each of them by giving them manna to eat. Everyone always had just enough to eat every day. God spoke to them directly through Moses. They had seen him part the Red Sea for them.

Were these people a really strong and faithful group? Did they love the Lord with all their heart? No, whatever faith they had was very weak. Their trust in God was all but nonexistent. So when you wonder why God doesn't show himself with miracles, speaking from heaven, and shaking the earth on a very regular basis, remember the children of Israel. Did this help their faith? It seems that the more God intervenes in this way, rather than creating greater faith in his people, it actually weakens it. Why this is the case, it doesn't say, but we can know that it's true because we've seen it in these narratives.

This is why we shouldn't read the stories of the Old Testament looking for a single lesson from each. We should also be careful about reading them to get a general principle, because once a principle is extracted, we tend to discard the story like an orange we've squeezed of juice. The stories are there for us to experience again and again, learning about countless numbers of things. Learning from the stories is like learning from life.

Imagine a three-year-old girl and ask yourself what did she learn today. Since she isn't in school, the answer might be that she learned how to run a little more steadily, how to say some words a little more clearly. Maybe she noticed a word her mother uses, but doesn't yet know what it means. Maybe she figured out where her mother keeps the sugar and tomorrow she will figure out how to climb up to it and soon after that learn that she should not do so. Her learning is in a hundred areas and almost impossible to specify, but without learning of this kind, she will never become an adult. We should read the stories the same way.

For example, the book of Judges says a lot about women. Women feature in the book from beginning to end in a wide variety of roles. It is something I have contemplated many times, but I still couldn't tell you with any confidence what Judges is actually saying about women. I don't believe it has only one message. It is just a feature of the book that the Lord included to develop and challenge everyone who reads it regarding their understanding of women.

Different readers will be effected in various ways based on the background they bring to the story, and, obviously, whether they are a man or a woman. It is a tool the Holy Spirit can use to draw anyone into a more balanced understanding of this topic, one a little closer to the truth. It will enable the reader to understand the women in his or her life a little better (including understanding herself if the reader is a woman), to appreciate them and to love them more effectively. The reader will be just a little more like God.

This has hopefully introduced you to the idea of the genres of the Old Testament. We should read each of these types of Scripture with somewhat different expectations. Of these genres, narrative is a good one to begin to with and it's the one you will start with if you just begin reading the Bible in Genesis. The next lesson will be specifically about the narrative genre and give you a some ideas about what to look for as you read and how to better understand the Scriptures Jesus read.

Name	Famous stories and people
Foundations	Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood
Family	Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph
Fulfillment and Failure	Moses, the 10 plagues, Exodus, 10 Commandments, wilderness wandering Joshua, Jericho, Rahab, Deborah, Gideon, Samson, Samuel, Ruth
Kings	Saul, David, Solomon
Kingdoms	Elijah, Elisha, Ahab, Jonah, Hezekiah, Josiah, Isaiah, Jeremiah
Kicked Out	Ezekiel, Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar, Fiery furnace
Came Back	Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther

How to Understand the Stories

Foundations – Family – Fulfillment and Failure

King – Kingdoms

Kicked Out – Came Back

Advice when Reading Old Testament Narratives

Last time I talked about the different genres of the Old Testament with a focus on narrative. Now I'm going to give some advice on how to read Old Testament narratives because this is where you should begin reading. You really should read all the historical books before you read Job or the Prophets. The Psalms and Proverbs are easier to read and so you could read those earlier, but having read the narratives will help you understand even these simpler books.

1. Read the stories as stories

The first thing to remember about stories may seem obvious: they are stories. Read the narratives as stories, true stories, but stories. They have plots, characters, problems, development and resolutions. They're complex and multifaceted, not fables that each have one lesson to tell us. These stories are far more useful than that.

In Jonah we have an example of why it is important to read the stories as stories. There, we read that Jonah was told to go cry out against the wickedness of the city of Nineveh, but Jonah fled the other direction. Why did he do this? The author does not tell us. It is common for teachers (especially those teaching children) to fill in this detail and say, "but Jonah was afraid, so he ran the other way," but this isn't actually written in the story. We should honor the storyteller by waiting and observing Jonah to figure out why he ran away. If we were supposed to know in chapter one, the author would have told us. When we keep reading, our patience is rewarded. In [4:2](#) Jonah tells God why he ran away and it wasn't because he was

afraid: he didn't want to give the people of Nineveh a chance to repent and change. He knew God was merciful and would forgive them. Our patience in not jumping to conclusions is rewarded by seeing one of the greatest plot twists in the Bible. The “hero” of the story didn't run away because he was afraid of the people of Nineveh, but because he hated them and wanted them to die. He didn't want them to have the same mercy that he himself experienced. This leads to an important point about how we can learn from these stories. As we watch the characters in the story, we see them learning as they experience life and interact with God. The story of Jacob is a wonderful picture of God's patience with a man who thinks that if he wants things in life, he has to get them for himself. We see Jacob's growing understanding and faith in God, but also that he falters. His growth is not steady. Sometimes he seems to be taking steps backward. As we read Jacob's life story, if we are honest, we can see ourselves in similar situations and grow in our own faith.

2. Details are important, but not clear, the main point is usually clear.

The second thing to know when reading Hebrew narratives is that details are important, but not always clear. However, the main point is almost always clear. Another way to put this is that details are always important, but two different readers may disagree over the significance of a particular detail. On the other hand, they are probably going to agree on the main point. When you read a story for the second, third and fourth time you will find your understanding of certain details changing because you have changed. You have matured, you know more, the Lord has brought you through additional and different experiences, so your perceptions have changed. This isn't going to happen with the big idea. The story of Noah and the Flood will always be about God bringing judgment on evil, but saving His people.

Even though you might change your understanding of a detail, you must remember that every detail is important. There aren't that many details in these stories. This can make them feel primitive and unsatisfying, but this is because the stories of the Old Testament are not told in the style you are used to in your culture. Stories in Western culture, for example, tend to have a lot of descriptions unnecessary to the plot. We usually know roughly what the various characters look like and what their location is like. There is usually some attempt to help the reader or listener have a visual image of the action. Usually it makes no difference what color

hair the hero has or that he is talking to the villain in an abandoned warehouse, but we are told these things anyway. These kinds of descriptive details are included because the readers or listeners expect them and find them satisfying.

Descriptions and details are not at all common in the stories of the Old Testament and so we conclude that the details that are present are always purposefully included. They either give information vital to the plot or add richness to the story by drawing attention to some aspect of it. In any case, the story would always be less interesting if the detail were not included. This is why physical descriptions of characters are so rare. We have no idea what most characters looked like because it just doesn't matter. In those few cases when someone is described, it is usually simply that he or she was good-looking and we are told this only when it is important to the story. Good looks are more important to a story's plot than other descriptions because human beings naturally judge by outward appearances. Good looks powerfully influence human motivations and actions.

We don't know if Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Deborah, Gideon, Ruth, Sampson or Samuel were good-looking, just to name a few. Then we read that Saul, Israel's first king, is "as handsome a young man as could be found anywhere in Israel, and he was a head taller than anyone else" (1 Sam. 9:2 NIV). Why do we know this about Saul, but not these others? The reason we hear it about Saul is because he is the human king the nation got when they rejected the Lord from being their king. Saul looked exactly like the kind of man people expected and wanted to be their king. He was outwardly pleasing, but his heart was far from God.

The only man in Genesis who is described as good-looking is the patriarch Joseph. This is for two reasons. First, it explains why, after he was kidnapped and sold as a slave in Egypt, his master's wife tried to seduce him. Second, it's good literature, because earlier when his grandmother Sarah, wife of Abraham, was in Egypt, she was taken from her family by an Egyptian ruler who made advances on her, but the Lord protected her. So earlier in Genesis we have the story of a good-looking wife of a patriarch in Egypt taken against her will by a lustful Egyptian ruler. Later, we have a good-looking patriarch taken to Egypt against his will and accosted by the lustful wife of an Egyptian ruler. Seeing the parallelism, the similarities in spite of the differences is interesting and makes for a great story. Our God is an artist and beauty doesn't need a reason. It's good in and of itself. On the more practical side, these

parallels also help us think about the differences in the outcomes of the two stories. Sarah was saved by the intervention of God and returned to her husband with many presents, but Joseph fled from the advances, and was thrown into prison as a result. In the end, prison turns out to have been the exact place he needed to be. Even though God does not appear to have intervened to protect Joseph, is He any less in charge in this story than in Sarah's? Or, to think about your own situation, when something bad happens to you, does it mean that God has abandoned you, or can you expect that it will lead to something good?

3. Get to know characters by observing them.

Another important point is that you get to know characters by watching what they do and listening to what they say. Remember, there is not a lot of description in these stories, so don't expect to be told that Joseph was a responsible and well-organized person. You can tell that by watching him be responsible and well-organized.

In [2 Samuel 14](#), King David's son, Absalom, is living in Jerusalem, but, since his father refuses to see him, no one else will either. (The fact that he had murdered his brother might be the cause of his father's attitude). He can't get anyone to speak to the king for him because no one will speak to him at all. So he orders his servants to set fire to the grain field of David's general Joab. When Joab comes to Absalom in a rage, Absalom uses the opportunity to get a meeting with his father. We don't need to be told that Absalom is intelligent and ruthless. We see it and should not be surprised when he attempts to overthrow his father and almost succeeds.

You should also remember that these characters were real people and that this means they could change and grow. They don't stay the same. For example, unless you understand that Esther begins her story as a weak woman, an always-popular beauty who follows the path of least resistance in order to avoid hardship in life, you won't see the true heroism there.

Retellings of the Esther story usually say that she was chosen as queen because the king saw something in her character that the other girls didn't have, even if they may have been outwardly more beautiful or more glamorous. This assumption comes from seeing how courageous Esther is at the end of the story and assuming that she has been like that through the whole story, but this is not the case. Esther became queen because she was the prettiest and most glamorous, not because of her character. Pay attention to the way the king is portrayed and ask yourself if he is the kind of person who would choose a queen because of

her good character.

In [Genesis 37](#) Judah sold his brother Joseph into slavery, then let his father weep, because he thought Joseph was dead. Judah even pretended to comfort his father. In [Genesis 44](#) he makes an impassioned speech to keep his brother Benjamin from being taken as a slave. He offers himself in Benjamin's place to keep his father from suffering this loss. How did the Lord work this change in Judah? What happened to him in between chapters 37 and 44 that would make him such a different person? If you read the intervening chapters, the answer is there.

4. Judge for yourself.

You need to judge for yourself. The above examples show that you are expected to make your own judgments about the characters by observing them. You aren't going to be fed answers. You have to pay attention. If it weren't this way, the stories would quickly lose their luster and not be very fun to reread.

The judgments you have to make aren't just about the characters. You're also expected to evaluate their actions. It's rare for the narrator or God to directly evaluate someone's actions. *Of all the mistakes that we can make reading Hebrew narratives, misunderstanding this point will probably lead to the worst mistaken conclusions.* Through the ages, many believers have had the assumption that the Old Testament stories are “hero stories” and, as a result, we have often whitewashed what the characters did. The fact that some have tried to interpret Samson, possibly the most self-centered man in the Bible, and Abimelech, Gideon's mass-murdering son, as heroes are cases in point. Attempts to justify Gideon's massacre at Penuel is another ([Judges 8:17](#)). The authors of these stories assume that the reader knows right and wrong well enough to make independent moral judgments. It should be obvious that Samson, a man whose lust for women was only a slight character flaw when compared with his lust for revenge, is not a hero and is not being held up as someone to imitate. There are many examples of morally questionable behavior that is reported without being explicitly condemned.

It is important to understand that there is real danger in thinking that the Old Testament stories are meant to be examples to be follow – some of them are, but only after careful consideration. The Old Testament highlights that these “heroes” the Lord used often failed

(much like ourselves), but that the Lord's purposes were accomplished anyway. Samson did accomplish some things with the tiny faith he possessed, but it doesn't mean he is a hero. Many of the stories are about God's faithfulness despite human failure and show that the true hero is always the Lord.

This very much applies to our lives. The Lord does not work through his followers because they are so great. He works through them even though they aren't so great. If we trust Him, He will work through us even though we aren't so great. This should help each of us be honest about our failings and weaknesses instead of lying to ourselves and others about what we are really like. God does not choose to use and bless us because we're so good, but because He is so good.

Often the stories comment on good and evil behavior indirectly by simply laying out the consequences. Polygamy and lying are two obvious examples. The Old Testament does not directly condemn polygamy, but we can observe that, though there are many instances of it, there isn't a single happy one. Similarly, many characters lie in these stories, but evil almost always comes of it.

5. Pay attention to what God is doing and how people are relating to God.

Since the purpose of the Bible is not for us to know the contents of the Bible, but to know the God of the Bible, ask yourself how the characters are relating to God. Are they trusting Him? Are they obeying Him? How is God reacting to what they do? Remember that God is also a character in these stories. In fact, He is what ties all the stories together. Other characters come and go, but He remains. He is the ultimate point of the stories. After all, Jesus said that they testify to Him ([Jn. 5:39](#)). As you read the stories and think about them, ask the Lord to reveal Himself to you through them. Tell Him that you want to know Him. You will find that gradually your understanding of God will sharpen. You will see that certain attitudes and patterns of relating to God are correct and reflect a proper understanding of Him and other attitudes show a misunderstanding.

For example, one common attitude that you will never see commended in the Bible is fatalism. Many people assume that because God is all-powerful and all-knowing, what we choose has no impact on what happens. This is the kind of misunderstanding that comes from

drawing conclusions from our ideas about God or from theological statements in the Bible without paying attention to the records God gave us of how He actually interacts with us.

From the first stories God shows us that human choices are important because God wants them to be important. He had Adam name the animals. He did not give Adam the names of the animals. Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the Garden and the consequences of that choice are still rolling on. In [1 Samuel 2:27-36](#) and [3:11-14](#) God tells Eli the priest that both his sons will die and his family removed from being the priests because of all the evil they have done. Eli's response was to say, "It is the Lord, let Him do what seems good to Him" (1 Sam. 3:18b NASB). In the same book (since 1 and 2 Samuel are actually a single book that was divided in two because it is too long to fit on one scroll), God tells David that the child he conceived when he committed adultery would die. When the child became sick, he didn't react like Eli and treat God as if He is fate or karma. "David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground" (2 Sam. 12:16 ESV). He explained later, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, 'Who knows, the LORD may be gracious to me, that the child may live'" (2 Sam. 12:22 ESV). David knew that God is personal and He is moved when people humble themselves and cry to Him for mercy. Which of these men understood God better? Which one had a heart that the Lord tells us was generally right towards Him? It was certainly not the fatalistic Eli.

A fatalistic attitude is one that conceives of God as distant, not really interacting with human beings, but just speaking from on high. Whatever we say back doesn't really have an impact. It isn't even important that we say anything back. What's important is that we accept His will and obey Him. This is not the God we see revealed in these stories.

6. The Narrator is reliable, but the characters are not always reliable in what they say.

The stories have a Narrator. He is all-knowing and always right. He can tell us what was happening in someone's heart and even what God was thinking. When a character says something that conflicts with what the Narrator says, the character is wrong. They are, after all, human and can either lie or be misinformed. Comparing what a character says to what we know to be true because the Narrator has told us, is a valuable way to come to understand that character's motivation and how they view the world.

A good example of this lies in the two stories of the death of Saul. [1 Samuel 31:3-6](#) records

King Saul's death – that he fell on his sword and died. Then in [2 Samuel 1:5-10](#) a young man comes to David and claims that Saul, while standing up, asked the Amalekite to kill him, which he did. Now it is possible, if you assume that both stories are true, to decide that Saul fell on his sword, but didn't die right away. Instead, he stood up again and asked a passing stranger to do it for him. However, it is much simpler and more natural to decide that the Amalekite is lying. Remember that the first version of his death is told by the Narrator and is absolutely reliable. On the other hand, while we can be certain that the Amalekite really said what is recorded, we can't be sure that what he said was true. We can surmise that he came across Saul's body and looted it, then, not understanding David's attitude towards Saul, thought he would get a reward if he claimed he had killed Saul.

Particular difficulty: Repeated Stories

When you read you will sometimes come across a story that seems to be repeated somewhere else. For example, there seem to be two stories of Creation. Also, King Saul prophesied in two different stories and both stories are said to be the origin of the same idiom. I'll explain these two examples to give you some ideas of how to understand repeated stories, and also so that you won't worry about them very much.

Repeated stories have been a source of concern because in the 19th and 20th centuries, and even today, scholars studied the Old Testament as if it were only an ancient human document. They saw these double stories and concluded that they are present because the author had two different folk tales to explain the same thing and so he just shoved both of them into his story. They developed the idea that the Old Testament is a disjointed mishmash of contradictory stories.

Scholars did this because they assumed their own expectations for storytelling were universal, that standards for storytelling were the same everywhere and at all times. The idea that a book written by a different culture might reflect different storytelling techniques, assumptions and expectations didn't cross their minds. They judged Ancient Near Eastern literature by modern European standards and so wrote with great confidence out of a deep ignorance of their subject. Though they had a great deal of knowledge about the Old Testament, misunderstanding some basic points such as this lead them badly astray. As Erasmus, the

great scholar of the Renaissance era, wrote, “Nothing is so arrogant as ignorance.”

However, to the original audience, repeated stories did not contradict each other. They existed to cast light from different angles onto the events of the story. In the case of Creation, we first read about the Creation of the world from an outside point of view. We are watching with a perspective like that of an angel. In the second story we see the creation of humanity and of the Garden of Eden from a more earthly point of view. We aren't seeing it from heaven, but are closer to the action. We human readers are invited to this more intimate perspective on the creation of our first ancestors and the portion of the earth God prepared specifically for them.

As far as the two stories of Saul go, Saul prophesied once at the beginning of his reign as king ([I Sam. 10:9-12](#)). This was a positive and surprising event and was a spiritually positive experience for him. From this came the phrase, “Is Saul one of the prophets?” Since no one uses this phrase any more, we can only guess what it meant, but it seems that it was used for a surprising, positive event that exceeded expectations. Up to this point, Saul had not been a spiritually interested person. He didn't even seem to know who Samuel was, even though Samuel had been the spiritual leader of Israel for decades. But when he became king, he prophesied.

Later, Saul has turned away from the Lord and is trying to kill David, the man God had chosen to replace Saul as king. Once when Saul is going to kill David, he is overcome by the Holy Spirit and prophesied ([1 Sam. 19:23-24](#)). However, this time it seems more like raving (The Hebrew word “to prophesy,” also means “to rave.”), and Saul striped himself naked and lay down all night. This is the opposite experience from the first time. It is a spiritual degradation and it is towards the end of his reign, just as the first time was at the beginning. Now the phrase, “Is Saul one of the prophets?” takes on a darker meaning. Perhaps it would be used when someone would attempt something for which they aren't at all suited. When a Hebrew would use this phrase, tone of voice and context would communicate which way the idiom was meant.

I hope this gives you some idea of what to do with repeated stories. Most of the time you should just pass over them and not worry too much, though. Repeated stories are mostly the kind of thing you will think about when you are a more advanced reader.

This has been an overview of the narrative genre and how to read it. Hopefully, the following tips will help you as you read.

- 1. Read the stories as stories**
- 2. Details are important, but not clear, main point is usually clear.**
- 3. Get to know characters by watching what they do and listening to what they say.**
- 4. Judge for yourself.**
- 5. Pay attention to what God is doing and how people are relating to God.**
- 6. Narrator is right, but the characters are not always right.**

The next lesson will be about something vital to understanding the Old Testament: Covenants.

Name	Famous stories and people
Foundations	Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood
Family	Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph
Fulfillment and Failure	Moses, the 10 plagues, Exodus, 10 Commandments, wilderness wandering Joshua, Jericho, Rahab, Deborah, Gideon, Samson, Samuel, Ruth
Kings	Saul, David, Solomon
Kingdoms	Elijah, Elisha, Ahab, Jonah, Hezekiah, Josiah, Isaiah, Jeremiah
Kicked Out	Ezekiel, Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar, Fiery furnace
Came Back	Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther

What Exactly is a Covenant?

Foundations – Family – Fulfillment and Failure

King – Kingdoms

Kicked Out – Came Back

Covenants

One of the most important ideas to understand in the Old Testament is the covenant. As you read you will find covenants featuring in almost every book. Understanding the covenants of the Old Testament will do most of the work in answering the tough question of what parts of it apply to Christians. But what is a covenant? The word has become one that we sometimes hear, but only have a hazy understanding of.

We don't tend to use the word covenant very much today but they were the standard legal form for agreements in the ancient world, including Israel. A covenant is a lifelong agreement between two parties that each will do or not do certain things or else they will suffer the wrath of whatever gods are called upon to protect this particular covenant. Notice that in the world of the Old Testament, gods were involved in covenants as enforcers of agreements between humans, but it was almost unheard of for a god to have a covenant with a nation. There are a few vague references to pagan gods making covenants, but the big exception was the Lord, the God of Israel. He was a God who made covenants and this was very unusual. I will get back to this below.

In society today, our legal systems don't have covenants. Instead we have contracts and treaties. The closest we come to a covenant is marriage, but since marriage is now regulated by governments rather than churches, it has been reduced to just a contract. Contracts and treaties have a lot in common with covenants, but are not identical. For one thing, contracts and treaties can be amended and changed. Covenants cannot be either amended or changed. Also unlike covenants, some contracts and treaties can be canceled without penalty, laid aside,

or suspended for a period of time. Once a party enters into a covenant, the only way out is either to die or to violate the terms and suffer the consequences. This was taken very seriously in the ancient world. When something bad happened, such as a drought or plague, the first thing that the priests would do would be to look to see if the king had violated any covenants and so brought on the wrath of a god. They knew that if they broke one, bad things would happen.

There were three different kinds of covenants in the ancient world and all three appear in the Bible, though I'll only write about the two kinds that are important. The third, the "Parity Covenant" in which two parties of similar strength make promises to each other, is not important for our purposes. First I will tell you the types of covenants, then we'll talk about the specific covenants in the Old Testament.

Promissory Covenant

Stronger promises to weaker

In this type of covenant, a powerful person, such as a king, promises to do something for one of his loyal subjects. This is why this kind of covenant was sometimes called a "royal grant." The king gave something, usually land, as a gift to a servant who had been loyal to him. These were always freely given by the king. He was never required to give them and the servant had not earned them, even though the servant had done loyal service for the king. Sometimes, but not always, the king would even promise never to take back what he has given, even if the subject later proved unfaithful. God's covenants with Noah, Abraham and David are promissory covenants. So is the New Covenant foretold in Jeremiah [31:31-37](#). These are the "Covenants of Promise" that Paul mentions in [Ephesians 2:12](#). They are different from royal grants in one way. God promises to give a certain blessing in the future. Not one human king ever promised to do something in the future in a royal grant.

Vassal Covenant

Weaker promises to the stronger

In this type of covenant a subject (or “vassal”) of a ruler promises to perform some service for the ruler. If he does not he will suffer destruction. These were often promises made by kings of small countries to the kings of larger countries. They would promise to pay certain taxes and provide soldiers in times of war. They would sometimes also promise to “love” their master by being loyal to them and not negotiating with other kings. The master would also provide benefits to the vassal as long as the vassal kept the requirements of the covenant. Usually he promised military protection from enemies.

Since they were so common in the world of ancient Israel, we see many of them in the Old Testament, such as in [Joshua 9](#) between Israel and the Gibeonites, and the many places where one king or nation was said to “bring tribute” to another ([2 Sam. 8:6](#)). However, only one vassal covenant is important for understanding the Old Testament as a whole. This is the Mosaic, or Sinai Covenant. The Sinai Covenant is a vassal covenant between the Lord and the Nation (Sons) of Israel. I'll discuss the implications of this below.

Important Covenants in the Old Testament

Let's look at the important covenants contained in the Old Testament. I will skip the covenant with Noah ([Gen. 9:9-17](#)) because it is a promissory covenant that is not hard to understand.

Abrahamic

[Genesis 12, 15, 17](#)

After God scattered the nations at Babel ([Gen. 11:1-9](#)), God chose Abraham to be the man through whom He would establish the nation by which He would bless the world. We know that this ultimately meant that Jesus would descend from Abraham (who was then called Abram). God promised:

The Lord had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household

to the land I will show you.

I will make you into a great nation,

and I will bless you;

I will make your name great,

and you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you,

and whoever curses you I will curse;

and all peoples on earth

will be blessed through you.” (Genesis 12:1-3 NIV)

God guarantees that these promises will come to pass. They are not something people have to earn through good behavior, however, a descendant of Abraham can reject the covenant and not get its blessings. Here, God promised several things:

1. To bless and protect Abraham,
2. That a nation would come from him,
3. That the whole human race would be blessed through him.
4. He later specifically promises to give the land of Canaan to Abraham's descendants ([Gen. 15:18-21](#)).

This covenant is from the Lord to Abraham and “his seed” ([Gen. 12:7](#); [15:18](#); [17:7](#)). The “seed of Abraham” is not the same thing as all his physical descendants because God later says that the promise is not for Abraham's son Ishmael, but Isaac, and not for Isaac's son Esau, but Jacob. The seed is also not identical with the nation of Israel, because only those who have faith in God, the same faith Abraham had, are included.

It is important to notice that God does not promise to bless Abraham more than He blesses other nations. It promises to bless not just Abraham, but all who bless Abraham. It is also a promise to bless all the other nations through Abraham.

Paul pointed out that Abraham's “seed” is singular and so refers to Christ. The New Testament perspective is that all who trust Jesus Christ are joined to Him and therefore are heirs of the promise to Abraham through their connection with Jesus. ([Gal. 3: 29](#))

Davidic Covenant

[2 Samuel 7:12-16](#); [Ps. 89:20-37](#)

In this promissory covenant, God swore to King David that one of his descendants would rule forever. Specifically, it promises that David's son would succeed him as king, that God would not reject this son (Solomon) even if he sins, and that David's throne would be established forever. This means descendants of David would rule without end. This is not a covenant with Israel, but with David and his Son. Later, David's descendants were so unfaithful to God that he took them off the throne. This does not violate the covenant He made with David, for this was an interruption in the rule of David's house, not an end. Even before God took David's descendants off the throne, the prophet Amos already spoke of the future restoration of "David's tent" ([Amos 9:11](#)). Jesus, the descendant of David, is King of the Universe and this kingdom will have no end. Jesus' reign fulfills the Davidic Covenant ([Luke 1:32-33](#)).

New Covenant

[Jeremiah 31:31-34](#)

The New Covenant is prophesied in the Old Testament, but is not made until the New Testament ([Luke 22:20](#), [Heb. 8:7-13](#); [10:15-18](#)). God says that this covenant will be one in which

He will write His law on the hearts of those who are in it. This means they will want to obey Him. They will all know God. They will have total forgiveness of sin. It will not be like the Sinai covenant, which Israel broke. This is looking ahead to the salvation revealed in the New Testament, based on the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus.

Sinai Covenant

Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers

The Sinai Covenant was a vassal covenant between the Lord and the Sons of Israel that Israel freely agreed to while they were camped at Mount Sinai ([Ex. 24:3-8](#)). God took Israel to be His special people, the people He rules directly. He instructed them to build a tent for Him to live in among them (The Tabernacle) and later the Temple. So God was actually living on earth among people for the first time since the Garden of Eden. For their part, Israel agreed to obey God's laws. God also promised them financial and physical blessing if they obeyed the terms of the covenant. If Israel kept the terms of the Covenant (the Law), then they would be blessed more than the other nations. Notice that this is different from the Abrahamic Covenant where God promised to bless all nations through Abraham's seed. If Israel obeyed, they would have more crops than they would normally expect, their herds would grow quickly, they would be healthy and if anyone attacked them, Israel would lose, even when the enemy was much stronger than them ([Deut. 28:1-14](#)).

This was meant to be a way to show Gentiles the benefits of obeying the God of Israel. ([Deut. 4:6-8](#)). So Israel was to be a light to the nations ([Ps. 67:3,7](#)), but if Israel broke the Law, God would punish them by replacing blessing with cursing. Some of these curses are that their land would produce less than it naturally should. Their armies would lose, regardless of their numbers or strength ([Deut. 28:23-25, 38-40](#)). If they ignored these warnings and continued to disobey God, He would enact the curses of the Covenant by expelling them from the Promised Land ([Lev. 26:14-39](#); [Deut. 28:64](#)). This is exactly what happened.

Understanding the Sinai Covenant and what it means to Christians is one of the biggest sources of confusion regarding the Old Testament. Because of this, this lesson and the next two will deal with it in one way or another.

How do the Covenants Apply to Christians?

First we need to ask why God worked through covenants. The fact that He did tells us something very important about Him. Did He have to make covenants? Couldn't God have

brought salvation to the world without them? Since everything God says is true, why didn't He just tell us His plans without the unnecessary addition of promises? Why would He swear oaths and make covenants? The answer is that, yes, of course He could have saved us without making promises and oaths. He always intended to save everyone who trusts Him and this alone was enough to ensure that He would do this, even if He had never told us so.

However, God did not make oaths for His own sake or to make sure He actually did what He said He would do. He swore oaths (which includes making covenants) because He wanted us to be sure that He would not change His purpose. We see this in [Hebrews 6:13-18](#). Of course He Himself knows that He will do what He says, but He wants us to have security, certainty and encouragement. This is also why He chose the covenant to be the form His assurance came in. Covenants were something people were used to and understood, so God used them rather than inventing some other way of relating to His people to help them understand. God's intentions for the human race have always been good because He is unchanging in his character. No one who goes to Him for refuge will ever be disappointed ([Is. 28:16](#); [Rms. 10:11](#); [1 Ptr. 2:16](#)). He know this and makes covenants so that we can know it too. He wants us to have peace and certainty that we are safe with Him.

We have seen that the Promissory Covenants of the Old Testament all apply to Christians in one way or another. The Abrahamic covenant was made with Abraham and his seed (singular), which is Jesus Christ, the ultimate seed of Abraham. Since all who trust Christ are joined to Christ, therefore all who trust Christ are included in the promises to Abraham ([Gal. 3:15-16, 26-29](#)). The Davidic Covenant is with Jesus, who is our king and we can have confidence that his Kingdom will never end. The New Covenant is the ultimate covenant for us, the one that brings together all the promises of God in Jesus and delivers them to everyone who trusts Him ([2 Cor. 1:20](#)).

However, since covenants do not transfer between parties and the Sinai Covenant was made between the Lord and the Sons of Israel, it does not apply directly to Christians. It is true that Israel was the people of God in the Old Testament and the Church is the people of God now, but the Sinai Covenant was not made with “the people of God,” but the Sons of Israel. The Church is a new entity ([Eph. 2:15](#)) and so God made a New Covenant with the new entity. Christians are not connected to the Sinai Covenant . It has ended and is not in force. This has

a big implication for how you read much of the Old Testament. When the Lord spoke to Israel (or “the children of Israel,” or “the sons of Israel,” or “Judah” or “Ephraim” or “Jacob” these are all collective terms for the nation of Israel or a part of Israel) and gave them particular instructions or promises, He was speaking to them within the context of the Sinai Covenant . Those things He said to Israel are not spoken to you and you should not claim the specific promises He made to Israel that connect to the terms of the Sinai Covenant . However, just because the Sinai Covenant is ended doesn't mean you it isn't very valuable for you to read.

The Mosaic Law and Christians

There is a complication. When we talk about the “Law of Moses” we usually are referring to the parts of the Sinai Covenant that described what Israel was supposed to do: the Ten Commandments, instructions for priests, laws regarding personal injury, and so forth. On the other hand, the “law” or “instruction” (or “Torah” to use the Hebrew word) of God is the books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. These contain the Law of Moses, but also stories and other content. In the Bible, especially in the New Testament, sometimes “the Law” refers to the Sinai Covenant and sometimes to God's instructions in general.

The Sinai Covenant has ended, but this does not mean that God's instructions are not vitally important. This is why God can say that in the New Covenant, His law will not be done away with, but would be written on hearts, even though the Mosaic Law is gone. There is a higher moral law which the Mosaic Law was just a particular outworking of. The moral law of God continues forever because it is just an expression of God's unchanging goodness. This is why the New Testament can criticize Christians for trying to follow the Law, such as in Galatians, and yet can also say that the requirements of the law are fulfilled in Christians when we live according to the Spirit ([Rms. 8:4](#)). God always knew that the human race could never be or become good by following a list of rules like we have in the Sinai Covenant . We need a special kind of help from God to change us from the inside. Israel's failure to keep the law God gave them demonstrates to everyone that this is true. Of course, if someone thinks they can do better than Israel, they are free to try for themselves by living their lives according to a list of rules. Sadly, many people are very busy on this very project, especially in churches.

Since the goal of this course is to help you begin to read the Old Testament, not to make you an expert, I will not spend a lot of time on how to interpret the Mosaic Law. If you regard it as having been given to Israel, that it doesn't apply to you the way it applied to Old Testament Israel, but that it reflects God's unchanging moral nature, you have made a good start. As you become more familiar with it you will see more and more how it shows the kind of world God wants for us. What you should never do is think that it is somehow bad.

God's giving the Law to Israel was actually one of the greatest acts of grace in the history of His dealings with humanity. Not only did it tell them what He desires, and give deep insight into His character, but it is also an indescribably useful description of reality. The Law gives us much insight into how God wants us to live and why. More than this, though, it is God's Word and so has a particular power to heal the human soul. Over and over the Old Testament says that filling your mind with God's instructions will change your heart, heal your soul and transform your life ([Ps.1](#); [Ps 119](#); [Josh. 1:7-9](#))

This is not the same thing as saying, "If you keep these rules, then God will reward you, or you will get good things, or God will love you more, or that your soul will be healed." By the time of Jesus, many people in Israel had taken God's instructions to be something they did in their own strength so that they would be more worthy of God's blessing. The Law could never actually bring blessing in this way because God's love is not something to be earned. If we don't understand this, we don't really know what He is like. We can never earn good things from God, as if God would owe us something, but God's Word inherently has the power to bring wholeness to the human heart when we accept it and let it fill our minds.

I'll close with a verse that reminds us that there are moral principles which are underneath the Law of Moses and that this idea is not even a New Testament one. God reminded Israel of this when His prophet said in Micah 6:8.

He has told you, O man, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to **do justice**, and to **love kindness**,
and to **walk humbly with your God?** (NASB)

This is what God wants from every person: that we live in a humble relationship with Him

doing justice and loving kindness.

Here are the major covenants of the Old Testament.

Covenant	With Whom	What God will do	Human conditions	Sign	Where located
Noahic	Human race and animals	Maintain a stable natural order		Rainbow	Gen. 9 (8:21-9:17)
Abrahamic	Abraham and his seed	Blessing, land, bless all nations	Personal Faith	Circumcision	Gen. 12,15,17
Mosaic	Sons of Israel	Bless Israel above the other nations if they keep the Law	Keep the Law	Sabbath Keeping	Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers
Davidic	David and his son	Ensure a descendant of David would rule forever		None stated	2 Sam. 7:8-16 , Ps. 89:20-37 ; 132:11-18
New	All who believe	Write Law on Hearts, forgive sins	Personal Faith	Baptism, Lord's Supper	Jer. 31:31-34

Questions Christians ask about the Old Testament

Foundations – Family – Fulfillment and Failure

King – Kingdoms

Kicked Out – Came Back

Last time we looked at covenants and saw how they connect the Old Testament to the New Testament. We also saw how understanding your relationship to a particular covenant has a huge impact on how you understand what God wrote to and for people under that covenant. This time we will look at some questions Christians often ask when reading the Old Testament.

When Christians read the Old Testament, there are several questions which naturally come to mind for various reasons. These are questions like, “How were people saved in the Old Testament?” “What were the animal sacrifices for?” “Don't scholars say the Old Testament is unreliable?” “Didn't Jesus disagree with the Old Testament?” “Did people have the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament” and “Why are there Weird Laws in the Old Testament?” I will deal with these now.

How were People Saved in the Old Testament?

I remember the first time I heard this question answered in a way I understood. The answer I heard was that just as we are now saved by believing that Jesus came and died for our sins, people before Christ were saved by believing that He would come and die for their sins. This is a common answer because it is very easy to fit into our understanding of salvation. I held on to that answer for years until I realized that it doesn't have the advantage of being true. It's easy to use because it basically makes Old Testament salvation identical to whatever we perceive as New Testament salvation and doesn't challenge us in any way.

One thing we should notice is that the Old Testament doesn't talk about "being saved," in the sense of going to heaven when we die, very much at all. One reason for this is that people didn't know much about the afterlife because God had told them nothing about it. They assumed that it was a gray, dusty place where the dead had a kind of twilight existence. Life was something lived now and what was important was that God was faithful to be with them through it all, especially when things were hard. What Old Testament believers did was to trust God, to keep growing in their knowledge of Him, and to try to obey Him.

So, were people in the Old Testament "saved" in the same sense we can be and if so, how? Here are some passages. One of the most famous places we see salvation in the Old Testament is Genesis 15:6, "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (NIV). There is also Joel 2:32, "And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (ESV). Paul quotes these to show that people were saved in the Old Testament by faith, just as in the New ([Rm. 4:1-5](#); [Rm. 10:13-14](#); [Gal. 3:5-7](#)). These are good theological verses on salvation because they say a lot in a small space, but they are not the primary way we see salvation in the Old Testament. Old Testament salvation is shown in longer passages in which God speaks or people speak of God.

Isaiah 55:1-3, 6-7 [God is speaking in the first section]

"Come, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and he who has no money,
come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.

2 Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.

3 Incline your ear, and come to me;
hear, that your soul may live;"

6 Seek the Lord while he may be found;

call upon him while he is near;
7 let the wicked forsake his way,
and the unrighteous man his thoughts;
let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. (ESV)

Isaiah 44:22

I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you. (NIV)

Isaiah 45:22

Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth!
For I am God, and there is no other. (ESV)

Micah 7:18-19

18 Who is a God like you,
who pardons sin and forgives the transgression
of the remnant of his inheritance?

You do not stay angry forever
but delight to show mercy.

19 You will again have compassion on us;
you will tread our sins underfoot
and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea. (NIV)

Many other passages besides these contain accounts of salvation. For example, [Rahab](#) and [Naaman](#) were both were pagan gentiles who professed faith in the God of Israel. That is, they transferred their allegiance to the God of Israel. These are both presented as instances of conversion. Does this mean that they went to Paradise? Did they know that heaven awaited them? The short answers to these questions are, “Yes, they did go to Paradise,” and “They probably didn't know it because they knew so little of the afterlife.” The main immediate effect was that they began to have a living relationship with God, which resulted in a changed life in the present world.

People in the Old Testament didn't know much about what would happen after they died, but

they did know that if they trusted God, they would be okay. It is like my friend who was diagnosed with schizophrenia and told another patient in the mental hospital, “I don't have answers, but I do know that holding on to God is the way through this.” Psalm 49 reflects this type of strong faith which was not as informed as is ours. After writing about how foolish people who trust in riches will go down to Sheol (the place of the dead or the grave), “But God will redeem me from the realm of the dead; he will surely take me to himself” (NIV). An Old Testament believer who reflected on the mercies of God could see that since His mercies are without end, they would not end at death, even if they don't have more information than that.

In the Old Testament, God tells people to trust Him – trust Him to take care of their daily needs, trust Him to protect them from terrible dangers, trust Him with every part of their lives. Those that did trust Him found that He is trustworthy. He did take care of them. They found that when they trusted in God, He also put peace in their hearts. This Old Testament foundation is why Jesus in His teachings can assume that God is trustworthy and that His hearers know it. Jesus' original hearers had read or heard the Old Testament which is filled with testimonies of God's faithfulness in the real world.

Jesus taught on Old Testament salvation indirectly when he addressed the subject of resurrection. He said, “And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him, saying, ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? 27 He is not God of the dead, but of the living” (Mark 12:26-27 ESV). Do you see the assumption he makes? The Lord was Abraham's God, and, therefore he will always be Abraham's God. Death will not end this fact. But how was the Lord Abraham's God? It's very simple; he had Abraham's allegiance. Abraham trusted God; entrusted himself to God.

If you live in relationship with God, this will never end because God doesn't want it to. Would anyone who has a loving and healthy relationship with another person ever say, “I want them to die and go away”? The only times this happens is perhaps when the one we love is suffering; but if we could end their suffering and have them back, then we would do it in an instant. This is even true of beloved pets, how much more people God loved enough to die for? What is true of Abraham is true of everyone before Christ. If the Lord was their God, then He is still their God or, in our terms, they're saved. As Jesus said, “To Him they are alive” (Luke 20:38

paraphrase).

In summary, in the Old Testament, people related to God by faith and were given righteousness as a gift based on their faith in God, not their acceptance of something they were told about God, but by trusting Him, giving Him their allegiance, entrusting themselves to Him.

What were Animal Sacrifices for?

You may wonder about the role of animal sacrifices. Didn't people have to make blood sacrifices in order to be forgiven? Clearly, people offered animal sacrifices. In fact, God gave Israel a religious system that included animal sacrifice in a prominent place. If you committed certain sins, you would have to offer a sacrifice in order to be forgiven. So did you have to offer a blood sacrifice every time you sinned in order to be forgiven? No, you did not.

Remember that Israel's covenant with the Lord was unique because it meant that this nation alone could be certain that they were acceptable to God and had the favor of God. The instructions spelled out very clearly what the nation had to do in order to maintain this relationship and what individuals had to do to have access to God. These requirements included sacrifices. If you read carefully, then you will see that there were no sacrifices for the forgiveness of serious, deliberate sin. If you intentionally sinned, then your only hope was to confess it, hurl yourself on God's mercy and hope he forgave you. The overwhelming testimony we see from those who do this is that God forgives everyone who confesses his or her sins to Him. To be forgiven, you just have to ask. We see this in [Ps. 51](#), which is a whole psalm confessing sin and asking for forgiveness. The author, King David, says:

For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it;

You are not pleased with burnt offering.

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;

A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise. (Ps. 51:16-17 NASB)

In the Old Testament, they did not bring sacrifices in order to be forgiven. God even says that he rejects the sacrifices of people whose hearts are not right.

22 Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,

I will not accept them.

Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,

I will have no regard for them.

24 But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream! (Amos 5:22, 24 NIV)

What God was looking for was a genuinely contrite heart, a heart that seeks God's way, the way of righteousness, and not its own way. David also wrote about another time he had sinned.

1 Blessed is the one
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.

2 Blessed is the one
whose sin the Lord does not count against them
and in whose spirit is no deceit.

3 When I kept silent,
my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.

4 For day and night
your hand was heavy on me;
my strength was sapped
as in the heat of summer.

5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you
and did not cover up my iniquity.

I said, "I will confess
my transgressions to the Lord."
And you forgave
the guilt of my sin.

6 Therefore let all the faithful pray to you
while you may be found;
surely the rising of the mighty waters

will not reach them.

7 You are my hiding place;

you will protect me from trouble

and surround me with songs of deliverance. (Ps. 32:1-7 NIV)

So people who brought sacrifices with an unrepentant heart were not forgiven, and people who repented, but did not bring a sacrifice were forgiven, though bringing a sacrifice would be the natural result of a repentant heart. It seems that what actually brought forgiveness was a matter of the heart, not an external action.

Under the Mosaic covenant the sacrifices were a way of maintaining your relationship with God, but what actually brought forgiveness was confession to God (see v. 5 above). No animal sacrifice has ever been the means of forgiveness. When the author of Hebrews wrote, “It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb. 10:4 NASB) he was not introducing a brand new idea. The idea is clearly stated in the Old Testament prophets. Before the Mosaic covenant people such as Noah and Abraham offered blood sacrifices to God for various reasons, but one reason they did not do it was to earn God's forgiveness. Perhaps we should think of it as a very serious way to either express thanksgiving or repentance, though buried in this custom was a powerful sign pointing towards the eventual sacrifice of Jesus, the Lamb of God, for the sins of the world. They, however, did not know this.

If we need an analogy, the sacrifices were something like confession of sin today. Nowadays, a Christian that has sinned needs to confess it, to agree that it was sin, in order to maintain a right relationship with God ([1 Jn. 1:9](#)). When we don't do this, we are either like Adam, hiding in the garden, or Jonah, running from God. Neither of these people were relating to God at these times, and neither are we when we refuse to admit that we sinned.

Didn't Jesus Disagree with the Old Testament?

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,’” and then He goes on to correct this teaching by saying, “but I say to you, do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matt. 5:38-39 NASB). Since “an eye for an eye” is from the Old Testament, this sounds like He is saying that the Old Testament was wrong. However, Jesus is not really

talking about that verse from the Old Testament. He's talking about what people said about that verse. "An eye for an eye" was a call for proportionate and reasonable responses to injury. It was given to be a limit on retaliation and to stop the spiraling cycles of revenge that are so common. Some teachers had turned this on its head, using the verse as a justification for taking revenge, even though the Old Testament specifically instructs people not to take revenge ([Lev. 19:18](#)). This is what Jesus is disagreeing with. He is also going beyond what is taught in this verse by describing how a person who really understands the real presence and nearness of God will naturally react to an insult (since the slap was more an insult than an assault).

When you read the whole sermon in Matthew 5-7, you see that Jesus says in His introduction that He has not come to abolish the Old Testament ([Matt. 5:17](#)). In Jesus' day many Old Testament teachings were being misused by taking them ritualistically or legalistically. This kept the Law from having the good effect it was supposed to. This is what a lot of his "corrections" of the Old Testament really are. Jesus never says that the Old Testament was wrong, only that people have interpreted it wrongly.

Don't Scholars say the Old Testament is Unreliable?

This is an issue that has disturbed many people, and a lot can be said about it. However, the final answer to it is very simple. Jesus treated the Old Testament as totally reliable. He quoted it and referred to it often and never cast any doubts upon its total trustworthiness. He treated it as the very words of God. He even said that the Scriptures are reliable: "...and the scripture cannot be broken" (Jn. 10:35 KJV). You already know that the "scripture" Jesus is talking about is the Old Testament.

We have copies of the Old Testament from Jesus' day, and they are basically the same scriptures you read in your Bible. So no matter what ideas and insights scholars have about the Old Testament, one thing they can not do is show that you should not read it or rely on it. God wants you to read the Old Testament that you have available to you. It is His Word and it is one of the most important ways He wants you to come to know Him better. The Scriptures cannot be broken.

Did people have the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament?

For this question I have to give a very short answer. For some reason this question requires an answer that is very short or pretty long. I've written a longer one and will post it later outside of this course for those who are interested.

The very short answer is that believers in the Old Testament did not have the Holy Spirit in the same way Christians do today, but they had access to God's empowering when He chose them to do a particular job ([Ex. 31:1-5](#)). However, the Spirit might also withdraw from this person. When Saul was made king, the Spirit came upon him ([1 Sam. 10:6-9](#)), but later, after Saul had turned from God, the Spirit left him ([1 Sam. 16:14](#)).

Old Testament believers also could have the Holy Spirit if they asked. This is what Jesus taught ([Luke 11:13](#)). So it seems that the Holy Spirit was available to believers in the time of the Old Testament, but was only present to the degree that people sought connection with God. What kind of empowerment He gave them is also not clear.

Why are there Weird Laws in the Old Testament?

The Law of Moses has some very odd laws, such as not being allowed to yoke two different species of animal together to plow a field, or not being allowed to plant more than one kind of seed in a field, or not to make fabric out of different types of material (they couldn't weave linen and wool together, for example). Then there are the food laws. They may eat fish as long as they have both scales and fins. They may not eat insects except for certain types of unwinged locusts and grasshoppers.

These laws and others seem very strange but there is an underlying concept which explain most of them. This is the concept of holiness.

Israel was a special people, separated out and dedicated to God. He had a particular plan to use them to bless the world, so it was important they kept themselves separate and different from the world. Many laws reflect this truth symbolically. One major explanation for “weird” laws is that some seem to have been aimed at keeping Israel from specific pagan religious practices, such as shaving the sides of the head ([Lev. 19:27-28](#)). This was a way that Israel's pagan neighbors mourned for the dead. God's people were not to imitate their practices, but

were to be different.

Understanding holiness sheds light on more of the “weird” laws than any other. Look at what God says in Leviticus.

24 But I said to you, “You will possess their land; I will give it to you as an inheritance, a land flowing with milk and honey.” I am the Lord your God, who has set you apart from the nations.

25 “You must therefore make a distinction between clean and unclean animals and between unclean and clean birds. Do not defile yourselves by any animal or bird or anything that moves along the ground—those that I have set apart as unclean for you. **26 You are to be holy to me because I, the Lord, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own.** (Lev. 20:24-26 NIV)

To be “holy” means to be “set apart,” to be complete and whole. Perhaps we should say that to be holy means to be a complete, whole, unified thing and so to be set apart or separate because it isn't mixed with other things. It does not always mean “morally clean.” Here the idea is that in order to be the tool God would use to save all nations, Israel had to be different from them. We would say that the most important way they should be different was morally, but God went much farther and called His people to be different in some cultural ways and also symbolically.

It is because Israel was to be separate and unmixed that the Law forbids mixing seeds in a field, fibers in a fabric and yoking different species together. It also explains many of the food laws. The children of Israel were to eat meat from animals that belonged entirely in one category as the people of the time conceived them. A “proper” fish has scales, gills and fins. If an animal lives in the water, but doesn't have one of these, then it crosses categories and is not a proper fish. A proper flying thing is a feathered bird that eats seeds and insects. Birds that hunt animals or eat dead animals are forbidden, as are bats and flying insects.

There are other factors to keep in mind as well. One factor is also symbolic. It has to do with where an animal gets its own food. Shellfish and scaleless fish such as catfish are bottom-feeders and live off trash and excrement and so are not permitted to be eaten. Predators that feed off of other animals are also forbidden, as are animals that feed off of dead things. None of these things are worthy of drawing sustenance from. The other factor is the mercy of God. It

was not okay to eat an insect, with the exception of locusts and their relatives. At this time, locusts would sometimes swarm and devour large portions of the crops a family depended on to survive. God relaxed the prohibition on eating insects to allow people who were afflicted in this way to at least partially offset the loss by eating the locusts themselves ([Lev. 11:20-23](#)) This is a subtle illustration of human need being more important to God than ceremonial requirements.

Another common explanation for these laws is that they reflect God's true “scientific” understanding of the world. Today we see that some of these laws “accidentally” required the Israelites to enforce good practices that relate to public and private health. The law requires quarantine in the case certain kinds of illness, public sanitation, clean food and the avoidance of contact with dead bodies. These things make sense to us today and so we don't think of them as “weird” laws. However, we should remember that in Moses' day, they were as unexplained as were the laws mentioned above. Israelites were supposed to bury their excrement, not because of bacteria or flies or to keep themselves healthy, but because God was among them and shouldn't have to see something dirty like that ([Deut. 23:13-14](#)). This ceremonial law had the side effect of enforcing sanitation, but the stated reason for the law is not good public health practices. Another example is that Israelites understood that they were to avoid contact with dead things because they were dedicated to the God of Life. They didn't know anything about bacteria.

It is easy to take the “accidental benefit” point too far. Some Bible teachers assume that since we can see a scientific sense for some of the laws, that, therefore all of them have a hidden “scientific” basis. What ends up happening is that Christians then return to being under the Mosaic Law because it's taken to be a scientific description of how we should live. This is not the point of the Mosaic Law.

Name	Famous stories and people
Foundations	Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood
Family	Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph

Fulfillment and Failure	Moses, the 10 plagues, Exodus, 10 Commandments, wilderness wandering Joshua, Jericho, Rahab, Deborah, Gideon, Samson, Samuel, Ruth
Kings	Saul, David, Solomon
Kingdoms	Elijah, Elisha, Ahab, Jonah, Hezekiah, Josiah, Isaiah, Jeremiah
Kicked Out	Ezekiel, Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar, Fiery furnace
Came Back	Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther

Important Final Matters

I sincerely hope that this course on the Old Testament has been helpful for you. Before you go, please return to the survey you did at the beginning of this course either by clicking the link below or, if you received an email from the survey, you can use the link it contains. If you use an email link you will not need to enter a password. I really need you to complete this survey. If you do, you have helped me a lot. Thank you.

<https://survey.equiphispeople.com/index.php/371324?lang=en>

Once you have finished the survey, the teacher says you are free to go :)

Continue to read the Old Testament and grow closer to the God it reveals.