



## Answers to Nine Common Questions about the Old Testament

*In this chapter I will* answer nine of the most common questions I have both had and heard regarding the Old Testament. Before we begin, though, I want to provide some introduction to the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, because I am writing this book with the assumption that many people who read it will do so because, like me, they are hoping to begin with the basics and proceed from there without getting lost in a forest of untaught assumptions, unknown words, and unexplained concepts. Therefore, before we examine the Old Testament in particular, I want to first briefly explain the entire Bible in general.

The New Testament speaks of the Old Testament as Scripture, for which the Greek word is *graphe*, meaning “writing.” The word *bible* comes from the Greek word for book. *Holy Bible*, therefore, means “Holy Book.”

Our Bible, like history, is divided into the period prior to Jesus’ coming (BC or “before Christ”) and the period following his coming (AD or *anno Domini*, which is a Latin phrase meaning “in the year of our Lord”). The Bible actually contains sixty-six separate books. Thirty-nine books are in the Old Testament, which is a record of time from God creating the world and our first parents Adam and Eve up until the coming of Jesus Christ into human history. The twenty-seven books of the New Testament begin with the four Gospels, which record the life, death, burial, resurrection, and return to heaven of Jesus, and then proceed to instructions to various

Christians and Christian churches about how to think and live in light of who Jesus is and what he has done. In this way, the Bible is really more of a library of books rather than a single book. However, there is unity and continuity between the various books of the Bible and their Old Testament and New Testament groupings. This point is illustrated by the fact that the New Testament has roughly three hundred explicit Old Testament quotations, as well as upwards of four thousand Old Testament allusions. In many ways, the Old Testament is a series of promises that God makes, and the New Testament is the record of the fulfillment of those promises.

The Bible was originally written over a period of roughly fifteen hundred years by more than forty authors in three languages (the Old Testament in Hebrew, with a bit of Aramaic in Ezra and Daniel, and the New Testament in Greek). Authors of the Old Testament include kings, peasants, philosophers, fishermen, poets, statesmen, scholars, and more. Some books of the Bible clearly state their author (e.g., Josh. 24:26 says that Joshua wrote the book bearing his name). Other books of the Bible do not reveal to us who wrote them (e.g., 1 and 2 Kings). Some books of the Bible are deeply personal, so they require knowledge of the author to be fully appreciated (e.g., Lamentations and Nehemiah 1–7 are essentially journal entries). Meanwhile, other books are historical and literary works that do not necessitate an awareness of who penned them.

Regarding its style, the Bible includes historical records, sermons, letters, a hymn-book, love songs, geographical surveys, architectural specifications, travel diaries, population statistics, family trees, inventories, and numerous legal documents. The Bible is very multicultural, as people from varying continents (Asia, Africa, and Europe), periods of history, backgrounds, incomes, and cultures contributed to the writing of its books.

When first reading through the Old Testament, some people are understandably confused because they simply read through the books of the Bible in the order that they appear, only to find that they are not in chronological order and therefore are difficult

to interrelate. This is because our Bible is organized by literary type, much like the books on the shelf at your local library. Therefore, if you would like to read the Old Testament in chronological order, you may want to purchase a chronological Bible so that you can see the timing and relationship between people and events. To help you better understand the books of the Bible according to their literary type, I will later explain each of the Old Testament genres (Pentateuch, history, wisdom, and prophets).

As one reads the Bible, especially the Old Testament, it quickly becomes clear that it includes many records of people, places, and events explained in their historical context. The settings of the Bible range from ancient Egypt under king Pharaoh to Rome under the rule of Augustus. The Bible reveals to us that God is sovereign over history and works in history for individuals, family lines, and nations. What makes the biblical account of history unique is that it does not merely tell us of people, events, and ideas, but it also explains their theological meaning in relation to God. Therefore, the historical record of the Bible is written with the primary purpose of revealing who God is through his work in history so that we can see our lives as inextricably connected to him in every way and only meaningful when understood in light of him.

For these and innumerable other reasons, the Bible is the bestselling book of all time and is available in nearly three thousand languages. However, when you pick up a Bible, while its content will be the same as the ancient version, there are a few differences. The Old Testament was written on papyrus—a form of paper made out of reeds; the New Testament was written on parchments (prepared animal skins). A lecturer at the University of Paris created the Bible's chapter divisions in the early 1200s, which accounts for our current 1,189 chapter divisions. The Bible's 31,173 verse divisions were fully developed by 1551, in an effort to provide addresses (not unlike those on our homes) that would help us find particular sections.

Roughly three-quarters of the Christian Bible is the Old Testament. The Old Testament has 929 chapters and 23,214 verses. The New Testament has 260 chapters

and 7,959 verses. In the Old Testament, the longest book is Psalms and the shortest book is Obadiah. In the New Testament, the longest book is Acts and the shortest book is 3 John.

With this brief introduction to the Bible in general, we are prepared to examine the Old Testament in particular. For many, the Old Testament is particularly difficult to comprehend and navigate because of its sheer size and cultural distance from our present age. To make matters worse, theological giants like Martin Luther and John Calvin never produced a single volume dedicated to Old Testament theology. Meanwhile, the majority of Old Testament “scholarship” during the past few hundred years has greatly undermined the message of the Old Testament; such “scholarship” critiques the Old Testament as a very primitive and naïve spirituality that we should evolve beyond, which only further distances Christians from the majority of their Bible.

Some of the devaluation of the Old Testament may be caused by its very title. The term “old” seems to denote information that is archaic, dated, and irrelevant in comparison to the New Testament. It was the early church father Origen (185–254) who first coined the phrases Old and New Testaments. Prior to this designation, the Jews and early church would have only known what we call the Old Testament as the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings, or the Scriptures. Origen’s confusion came from misunderstanding Jeremiah’s use of the old and new covenants in Jeremiah 31:31. By “new,” Jeremiah did not mean something detached from the prior works of God, but something renewed or fulfilled. Therefore, the new covenant is the renewal or fulfillment of the old.

Likewise, the New Testament is inextricably linked to the Old Testament as its renewed fulfillment. By way of example, God’s people in the Old Testament received saving grace from God in the same way that Christians in the New Testament do, simply by having faith in God’s promises that Jesus would pay the penalty for sin

through the cross and empty tomb.<sup>1</sup> In an amazing illustration of just how the New Testament is the renewed fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testament, Paul says that Abraham believed by faith that his seed (Jesus) would save him—and this is the gospel or good news about Jesus Christ that Christians today still trust.<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, the Old Testament was the Bible that Jesus read, believed, and taught because the New Testament had not yet been written. Furthermore, the Bible says that because of studying the Old Testament, “Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.”<sup>3</sup>

In the pages of the Bible you will read brutally honest accounts of the pain and joy of human life. Most importantly, you will meet One God who reveals himself as “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”<sup>4</sup> It is this Lord, also known as the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the great hero of the Old Testament. It is he who crushes false gods, heals the sick, redeems the enslaved, lifts up the downcast, cares for the poor, disciplines his people, and powerfully rules over human history with a perfect blend of love and justice.

Finally, as we read the Old Testament we must remember that our position in history is not entirely unlike the Old Testament Christians. They read the Old Testament in faith, anticipating the first coming of Jesus to fulfill the promises of the Old Testament. We now read both the Old and New Testaments in faith, eagerly awaiting the second coming of Jesus to fulfill the remaining promises of Scripture given to his people.

1. For example, see Hebrews 11.
2. Gal. 3:8, 14.
3. Luke 2:52.
4. Ex. 34:6–7.

Having examined the Bible in general and the Old Testament in particular, we will now answer the nine most common questions I have had and heard about the Old Testament.

### 1. Who Wrote the Old Testament?

This question, in many ways, is the most important question we will answer, because how we answer this question in a very real sense determines how we will answer the remaining eight questions. Therefore, it is very important that we consider this question with the utmost seriousness because in it we are determining our personal opinion of the degree to which the Bible is both perfect and authoritative.

On one hand, the Old Testament is written by various human authors, and it clearly tells us who they were. Examples include David writing various psalms,<sup>5</sup> Moses writing all but the closing of the first five books of the Old Testament, also known as the Pentateuch or Law,<sup>6</sup> Joshua writing the book bearing his name,<sup>7</sup> Solomon writing Ecclesiastes,<sup>8</sup> Nehemiah writing the book bearing his name,<sup>9</sup> Daniel writing the book bearing his name,<sup>10</sup> Ezekiel writing the book bearing his name,<sup>11</sup> Jeremiah writing the book bearing his name,<sup>12</sup> Isaiah writing the book bearing his name,<sup>13</sup> and Habakkuk writing the book bearing his name,<sup>14</sup> to only list a few. Other books of

5. For example, Psalms 3:1, 4:1, 5:1, 6:1, 7:1, 8:1, 9:1, and so forth.

6. Ex. 17:14; Deut. 31:24–26.

7. Josh. 24:26.

8. Eccl. 1:1.

9. Neh. 1:1.

10. Dan. 7:1.

11. Ezek. 43:10–11.

12. Jer. 30:2.

13. Isa. 8:1; 30:8.

14. Hab. 2:2.

the Old Testament were spoken by a prophet while a trained scribe wrote down what was said. By way of contemporary analogy, this method is akin to a judge who speaks while presiding over a trial and has a trained stenographer faithfully record every word that he speaks for legal and historical record. For a good example of this kind of Old Testament writing, perhaps the best place to read is Jeremiah 36. Therefore, on one hand the Scripture itself is clear that various human authors were used to record the words that fill the pages of our Bible.

On the other hand, the human authors of Scripture are not the only authors of Scripture. God communicated through the authors of Scripture in a real and miraculous way so that his divine truth could be perfectly communicated through men. The divine and human authorship of Scripture is very much like Jesus himself, who was both fully God and fully man. God the Father chose to work through the humanity of Jesus to reveal himself to us in a manner akin to how he had previously revealed himself to us as God through the men who wrote the Old Testament.

Furthermore, the Old Testament is clear that God spoke through his prophets,<sup>15</sup> and so what the prophet said in God's name was what God said. The Old Testament prophets through whom God gave us the Scriptures state this fact clearly. The phrase "thus says the Lord" is repeated hundreds of times throughout the Old Testament by God's messengers. Other similar statements about prophets speaking by divine authority appear, according to some scholars, as many as 3,800 times throughout the Old Testament. The prophets were well aware that in particular moments of divine revelation given to them by God the Holy Spirit, they were in fact speaking the very words of God himself. In some ways, the prophet was God's megaphone.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, to reject what a prophet had said was to reject what God had commanded.<sup>17</sup>

15. 1 Kings 14:18; 16:12, 34; 2 Kings 9:36; 14:25; Jer. 37:2; Zech. 7:7, 12.

16. 1 Kings 13:21, 26; 21:19; 2 Kings 9:25–26; Hag. 1:12, cf. 1 Sam. 15:3, 18.

17. Deut. 18:19; 1 Sam. 10:8; 13:13–14; 15:3, 19, 23; 1 Kings 20:35, 36.

The belief that God wrote Scripture in concert with human authors whom he inspired to perfectly record his words is called *verbal plenary inspiration*. Very simply, this means that God the Holy Spirit inspired not just the thoughts of Scripture, but also the very details and exact words that were perfectly recorded for us as Scripture. Jesus himself echoed this truth when he said that because God gave us Scripture, it could not be broken.<sup>18</sup>

The Old Testament itself teaches this by stressing how important the exact words of divinely inspired Scripture are:

- “You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the *words* that you shall speak to the people of Israel.”<sup>19</sup>
- “Take to heart all the *words* by which I am warning you today, that you may command them to your children, that they may be careful to do all the *words* of this law. For it is no empty *word* for you, but your very life, and by this *word* you shall live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess.”<sup>20</sup>
- “Every *word* of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his *words*, lest he rebuke you and you be found a liar.”<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, when the New Testament reflects back upon the Old Testament, it is very clear that Scripture is unlike anything else that has or ever will be written; it alone is divinely inspired by God the Holy Spirit and perfect, despite the fact that it was penned by human authors through whom God chose to speak. The following New

18. Matt. 5:18; Luke 16:17; John 10:35.

19. Ex. 19:6.

20. Deut. 32:46–47.

21. Prov. 30:5–6.

Testament verses are clear examples that this doctrine comes from what Scripture itself plainly states:

- “The prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.”<sup>22</sup>
- “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.”<sup>23</sup>
- “No prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, the answer to the question, who wrote the Old Testament? is that God wrote the Old Testament through human authors whom God the Holy Spirit inspired to perfectly pen his truth. Subsequently, Christians believe that Scripture is our highest authority, or metaphorical Supreme Court, by which all other lesser authorities are tested. Practically, this means that lesser courts of reason, tradition, and culture are under the highest court of truth, which is divinely inspired Scripture. During the Protestant Reformation, the slogans *sola Scriptura* and *prima Scriptura* became popular

22. 1 Peter 1:10–12.

23. 2 Tim. 3:16–17.

24. 2 Peter 1:20–21.

to summarize this conviction; they mean Scripture alone is our highest authority. This should not be confused with *solo Scriptura*, which is the erroneous belief that truth is only to be found in Scripture and nowhere else. Scripture itself tells us that God reveals truth to us in such things as creation and our conscience, but that the beliefs we may subscribe to from such forms of lesser revelation are to be tested by Scripture. The Old Testament models this for us when it does occasionally quote other books such as the book of Jashar<sup>25</sup> and the Book of the Wars of the Lord.<sup>26</sup> In quoting them, the Bible is not saying that they should be included as sacred Scripture, but rather that they do contain some helpful truth. Practically speaking, this means that a mechanic, doctor, or computer programmer may not consult Leviticus to turn a brake drum, perform open heart surgery, or make an addition to a Linux program, but these experts do possess some helpful truths that, if not forbidden or contradicted by Scripture, are to be gladly received for our benefit.

Having established that Scripture is our highest and most perfect authority and source for truth, we will now examine how the Old Testament speaks of itself.

## 2. What Does the Old Testament Say about the Old Testament?

The Old Testament often speaks of itself in terms that are both truthfully authoritative and practically helpful. These self-revealing statements are incredibly important because if the Old Testament itself does not say that it is true or helpful, then we have no grounds to claim such things ourselves. The Old Testament does indeed have much to say about itself: it is a perfect guide for our life,<sup>27</sup> altogether pure,<sup>28</sup>

25. Josh. 10:13; 2 Sam. 1:18.

26. Num. 21:14.

27. Prov. 6:23.

28. Pss. 12:6; 119:140.

true,<sup>29</sup> flawless,<sup>30</sup> perfect,<sup>31</sup> wise and practical counsel,<sup>32</sup> effective for God's purposes,<sup>33</sup> precious,<sup>34</sup> and sufficient so that nothing should be taken from or added to it.<sup>35</sup>

The Old Testament also provides richly revealing poetic images that further illuminate its characteristics. God invites our creative imaginations to not merely believe that Scripture is true, but to also meditate on the images through which the Holy Spirit will reveal to us a deeper appreciation for his Word. God does so because he is not only Creator, but also creative, and he created us to appreciate such things as poetry, symbolism, and analogy. The Old Testament is painted as sweetly satisfying like honey,<sup>36</sup> a lamp to guide us along life's often dark path,<sup>37</sup> food that nourishes our soul,<sup>38</sup> and a fire that purifies us and hammer that breaks us so that we can be remade to be increasingly more like Jesus.<sup>39</sup>

Lastly, the Old Testament authors appeal to one another's writings as sacred Scripture. For example, Joshua 1:8 refers to the Pentateuch; Daniel 9:2 refers to Jeremiah; and Ezekiel 14:14 speaks of Noah, Daniel, and Job. Having established what the Old Testament says about itself, we can now add what the New Testament teaches about the Old Testament.

29. Ps. 119:160.

30. Prov. 30:5–6.

31. Ps. 19:7.

32. Prov. 1:1–7; 2:1–22.

33. Isa. 55:11.

34. Ps. 19:10.

35. Deut. 4:2; 12:32.

36. Ps. 119:103.

37. Ps. 119:105.

38. Jer. 15:16.

39. Jer. 23:29.

### 3. What Does the New Testament Say about the Old Testament?

As mentioned earlier, because the New Testament has roughly three hundred explicit Old Testament quotations, as well as upwards of four thousand Old Testament allusions, it is not surprising to find that the New Testament also has much to say about the Old Testament. These statements can be grouped into three general categories.

First, the New Testament clearly, repeatedly, and emphatically declares that the Old Testament is divinely inspired, sacred Scripture and the very words of God. An entire book could and perhaps should be written on this point, but for the sake of brevity I will simply list many of these instances in a note.<sup>40</sup>

Second, the New Testament makes many statements about the truthfulness and usefulness of the Old Testament. For example, the Old Testament comes with God's power,<sup>41</sup> was written by God's inspiration,<sup>42</sup> is sufficient for all that we truly need to know about God,<sup>43</sup> is true and the source of truth,<sup>44</sup> is for all people regardless of their culture or nation,<sup>45</sup> is necessary to raise children,<sup>46</sup> and ultimately is to be obeyed so that it is not merely a source of information but rather a means of transformation.<sup>47</sup>

Third, like the Old Testament itself, the New Testament uses poetic images to reveal to us how we are to receive the Old Testament. The Old Testament is a sword for battle

40. Matt. 21:42; 22:29; 26:54, 56; Luke 24:25–32, 44–45; John 5:39; 10:35; Acts 17:2, 11; 18:28; Rom. 1:2; 4:3; 9:17; 10:11; 11:2; 15:4; 16:26; 1 Cor. 15:3–4; Gal. 3:8, 22; 4:30; 1 Tim. 5:18; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:20–21; 3:15–16.

41. Heb. 4:12.

42. 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:19–21.

43. Luke 16:29–31.

44. John 17:17.

45. Rom. 16:26.

46. 2 Tim. 3:15.

47. James 1:22.

against Satan, sin, and demons,<sup>48</sup> a seed that God plants in us that grows up as a life of fruitfully faithful living,<sup>49</sup> and milk that nourishes us for life and growth not unlike the feeding of a newborn baby.<sup>50</sup> Having studied what the Old and New Testaments say about the Old Testament, we will now examine what Jesus himself said about it.

#### **4. What Does Jesus Say about the Old Testament?**

Jesus summarized the Old Testament Scripture as existing in three parts: the Law, Prophets, and Psalms.<sup>51</sup> He accepted the Old Testament canon as it exists today without any modifications and came to fulfill it.<sup>52</sup> As a rabbi, or preacher and teacher of Scripture, Jesus' entire ministry involved the instruction and application of the Old Testament. Jesus' public ministry even began with him reading from the Old Testament book of Isaiah and stating that his ministry was to fulfill the Old Testament promises about his coming.<sup>53</sup> Jesus clearly stated that his ministry was an Old Testament ministry in that it was to fulfill all of the Old Testament promises and longings that pointed to him.

Consequently, it is impossible to be a faithful Christian and not fully embrace the Old Testament as God's Word. Occasionally, someone will claim to be a Christian yet not embrace all of the Old Testament. One example is an ancient heretic (false teacher) named Marcion. He said that the Old Testament was in fact a far lesser book than the New Testament and encouraged Christians to remove it from their Bible.

48. Eph. 6:17; Heb. 4:12.

49. James 1:21.

50. 1 Pet. 2:2.

51. Luke 24:44.

52. Matt. 5:17.

53. Luke 4:16–21.

Unlike Marcion, however, Jesus clearly accepted and taught the Old Testament as sacred Scripture without reservation. Subsequently, we must either accept Rabbi Jesus as our most trustworthy Old Testament teacher or confess that he was a poor Bible teacher who made errors—and in turn elevate some other teacher over him that we trust more fully. I am refuting the seemingly endless parade of Bible “scholars” who somehow simultaneously claim to be faithful Christian Bible teachers while disagreeing with the teaching of The Bible Teacher, Jesus Christ. Without seeming too negative on this point, I must say that this is a constant issue with the college students who attend our church. Many of them take classes on the Bible at both public and private colleges taught by professors who claim to be Christians. Yet, many of these professors belittle their Christian students for simply believing the Scriptures. These students often speak to me about their confusion, asking what they should do. I share the following points with them and tell them to humbly defend the teachings of Jesus, even if it should result in scorn and getting a lower grade, because Jesus himself was poorly treated by the self-appointed “scholars” in his own day who were too arrogant to see that there is no Bible scholar greater than Jesus.

First, the parts of the Old Testament that are most commonly rejected as erroneous are also those sections of Scripture that Jesus clearly taught. This includes the literalness of Genesis 1 and 2,<sup>54</sup> Cain and the murder of Abel,<sup>55</sup> Noah and the flood,<sup>56</sup> Abraham,<sup>57</sup> Sodom and Gomorrah,<sup>58</sup> Lot,<sup>59</sup> Isaac and Jacob,<sup>60</sup> the manna,<sup>61</sup> the wil-

54. Matt. 19:4–5; Mark 10:6–8.

55. Matt. 23:35; Luke 11:51.

56. Matt. 24:37–39; Luke 17:26–27.

57. John 8:56.

58. Matt. 10:15; 11:23–24; Luke 10:12; 17:29.

59. Luke 17:28–32.

60. Matt. 8:11; Luke 13:28.

61. John 6:31, 49, 58.

derness serpent,<sup>62</sup> Moses as lawgiver,<sup>63</sup> the popularity of the false prophets,<sup>64</sup> and Jonah in the belly of a great fish.<sup>65</sup>

Second, in matters of controversy, Jesus used the Old Testament as his court of appeals.<sup>66</sup> On many occasions when an Old Testament teaching was questioned, Jesus simply believed the clear teaching of Old Testament Scripture and defended himself by saying, “It is written.”<sup>67</sup>

Third, in times of crisis, Jesus quoted from the Old Testament, indicating that it was his source of truth, solace, and defense. For example, when tempted by Satan, Jesus quoted from the book of Deuteronomy.<sup>68</sup> At the moment of his death, Jesus quoted Psalm 22:1: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”<sup>69</sup> And breathing his last in Luke 23:46, Jesus quoted Psalm 31:5, saying, “Into your hands I commit my spirit.”

Fourth, Jesus repeatedly taught that Old Testament prophecy had been fulfilled.<sup>70</sup>

Fifth, Jesus named the authors of some Old Testament books. Some of the most common critiques launched at the Old Testament are in regard to authorship. For example, many Old Testament “scholars” boldly claim that Moses did not pen any of the first five books of the Old Testament, or that two or three authors penned

62. John 3:14.

63. Matt. 8:4; 19:8; Mark 1:44; 7:10; 10:5; 12:26; Luke 5:14; 20:37; John 5:46; 7:19.

64. Luke 6:26.

65. Matt. 12:40.

66. Matt. 5:17–20; 22:29; 23:23; Mark 12:24.

67. Matt. 4:4, 6, 10; 11:10; 21:13; 26:24, 31; Mark 1:2; 7:6; 9:12ff.; 11:17; 14:21, 27; Luke 2:23; 4:4, 8, 10, 17; 7:27; 10:26; 19:46; 22:37; John 2:17; 6:31, 45; 8:17; 10:34.

68. Matt. 4:1–11, cf. Deut. 8:3; 6:13, 16.

69. Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34.

70. Matt. 11:10, cf. Luke 7:27; Matt. 26:24; Matt. 26:31, cf. Mark 14:27; Matt. 26:53–56, cf. Mark 14:49; Mark 9:12–13; 14:21; Luke 4:21; 18:31–33; 21:22; 22:37; 24:25–27; 24:44–47; John 5:39–47; John 13:18, cf. Ps. 41:9; John 15:25, cf. Ps. 35:19; John 17:12.

Isaiah—none of whom was actually Isaiah. But Jesus taught that Scripture was authored by Moses,<sup>71</sup> Isaiah,<sup>72</sup> David,<sup>73</sup> and Daniel.<sup>74</sup> Therefore, we are again left with the simple decision of whether we will accept Jesus as the most accurate and trustworthy Old Testament teacher or replace him with another teacher or school of thought that we consider to have greater integrity and insight.

In summary, Jesus taught that the Old Testament was perfectly inspired and totally truthful Scripture. Jesus devoted his ministry to teaching the Old Testament, defending the Old Testament, fulfilling the Old Testament, and using the Old Testament. Having established the authorship of the Old Testament and reflected upon what the Old Testament, New Testament, and Jesus have to say about the Old Testament, we will now examine how its thirty-nine books were chosen to be in the Bible.

### 5. How Were the Old Testament Books Chosen as Scripture?

*Canonization* is the process by which some books were included in the Old Testament while others were excluded. *Canon* is a word meaning “a measuring rod.” The canon is the standard that all scriptural books must meet. The books of the Bible were authoritative, and the Old Testament books shared the following five particular traits that distinguished them from other mere books:

1. They were written by a prophet of God.<sup>75</sup>
2. That prophet’s authority was confirmed by an act of God.<sup>76</sup>

71. Mark 7:10.

72. Mark 7:6; Matt. 13:14.

73. Mark 12:36.

74. Matt. 24:15.

75. Deut. 18:18–22; 1 Pet. 1:20–21.

76. Heb. 2:3–4.

3. The prophetic writings told the truth about God in harmony with God's other prophets.<sup>77</sup>
4. The prophetic writings were accompanied with the power of God to change people's lives.<sup>78</sup>
5. The prophetic writings were accepted by the people of God as true.<sup>79</sup>

There is little if any dispute about the books of the Old Testament. God's people in the Old Testament quickly accepted those books as inspired by God.

When an Old Testament prophet spoke, it was clear that God had spoken. For example, the tablets of the Law were preserved in the Ark, which was the place of God's presence on the earth. This placement indicates the sanctity with which they were considered.<sup>80</sup> The Five Books of Moses (also called the Pentateuch, which means "one book in five parts") were placed alongside them as soon as Moses wrote them.<sup>81</sup> The writings of the other prophets were added.<sup>82</sup> The Scriptures were eventually moved to the temple to be cared for by the priests in the days of Solomon.<sup>83</sup>

To this very day, Jews continue to have the same exact books as their Bible. The "Hebrew Bible" of Judaism is virtually identical to the Christian Old Testament, with a few organizational exceptions. For example, their books are in a different order than the Christian Bible, and sometimes they combine two books into one, such as Ezra–Nehemiah.

77. Deut. 13:1–5; 18:22; Gal. 1:8.

78. Heb. 4:12.

79. Deut. 31:24–26; Josh. 24:26; 1 Sam. 10:25; Dan. 9:2; Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 2:13; 5:27; 1 Tim. 5:18; 2 Pet. 3:16.

80. Ex. 25:16–21; 40:20; Deut. 10:5; 1 Kings 8:9.

81. Deut. 31:24–26.

82. 1 Sam. 10:25; Josh. 24:25–26; Isa. 8:20; 29:18; 34:16.

83. 1 Kings 8:6–9; 2 Kings 22:8.

Nonetheless, Jews and Christians agree that the content of the Old Testament as we have it is the total canon of Scripture before the time of Jesus. Jesus himself agrees with this. By the time of his birth, the content of the Old Testament was a settled matter, and Jesus accepted, learned, and taught the Old Testament as we have it without modification.

Furthermore, Jesus summarized the Bible as existing in three parts: the Law, Prophets, and Psalms.<sup>84</sup> Jesus also spoke of the Old Testament as existing from Abel (from Genesis, the first book of the Old Testament) to Zechariah (a contemporary of Malachi, the final book of the Old Testament).<sup>85</sup>

The Hebrew canon was closed and settled with the final book of the Old Testament, Malachi, around 400 BC. Malachi concluded with the promise that the next event in redemptive history would be the coming of John the Baptist, who would prepare the way for Jesus, and Jesus would come to the temple.<sup>86</sup> Importantly, the temple was destroyed in AD 70, which means that the Jews who are still waiting for a Messiah today wait in vain because Jesus was that Messiah and after AD 70 the promise of Malachi could not be fulfilled.

During the four hundred years of silence between the end of the Old Testament and the coming of Jesus, many other works were written, including books of history, fiction, practical living, and end-times speculation. These books are also known as the *apocrypha*, which means “hidden” or “secret” because the religious leaders of that time preferred that the books not be widely read by the people.

While these books were read by some of God’s people, they were treated like popular Christian books in our own day, such as those by C. S. Lewis; they were

84. Luke 24:44.

85. Matt. 23:35; Luke 11:51.

86. Mal. 3:1; 4:5–6, cf. Matt. 3:1–17; 17:9–13; Luke 1:16–17; 3:1–18.

never accepted as Scripture, for many reasons. First, many of the apocryphal books were also *pseudepigraphal*, meaning that they were written under a pen name so that the true identity of the author would be unknown. The pen names were often those of biblical people (e.g., Enoch, Abraham, Moses, Solomon), deceitfully leading readers to believe the books were written by these biblical men. It would be similar to me putting Billy Graham's name on this book to sell more copies. Second, while the Old Testament is quoted roughly three hundred times in the New Testament, none of the apocryphal books are ever quoted in the New Testament or even alluded to, with the exception of a very debated section of Jude. Third, both Jews and Christians rejected any of the apocryphal books as divinely inspired sacred Scripture until the Catholic Council of Trent in 1546. At that time, the Catholic Church was facing a growing protest movement (now known as Protestantism) that denounced some of the church's teaching as unbiblical. Among the chief critics was the Catholic monk Martin Luther, who pointed out that praying to saints, paying indulgences to the church, and purgatory were not found in the Bible. In an effort to defend themselves, the Catholic Church voted to insert new books into the Bible, more than a millennium after the Old Testament canon had been closed and the apocryphal books had been rejected as Scripture. Why? Because it found some support for its unbiblical doctrines in the apocrypha and, rather than changing its doctrines, it instead chose to change its Bible. Subsequently, if you open Catholic—and even some Orthodox—Bibles today, you will find books with names such as Tobit, Judith, the Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus or the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach, Baruch, 1 Maccabees, and 2 Maccabees, as well as additions to Esther and the book of Daniel (such as the Prayer of Azariah or the Song of the Three Young Men, Susanna, and Bel and the Dragon).

I am not trying to be mean-spirited to or disparaging of Catholics. I was raised in a Catholic family, attended a Catholic school for three years, and as a young boy even assisted the priest with Mass by serving as an altar boy. Many of my relatives are

Chart 1.1 *A Summarized Historical Timeline of Scripture*

<b>Old Testament (1800–400 BC)</b>	<b>Intertestamental Period (400 Silent Years)</b>	<b>Life of Jesus (roughly 0–AD 33)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prophets spoke, “Thus says the Lord.”</li> <li>• Some prophets wrote their books (Jer. 36; Josh. 24:26; Isa. 30:8; Ezek. 43:11; Hab. 2:2; Dan. 7:1–2; 2 Chron. 21:12).</li> <li>• Some prophets had a scribe (Ex. 17:14; 34:28).</li> <li>• Books were treated as sacred:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Placed in ark (Deut. 31:24–26).</li> <li>• Placed in sanctuary (Josh. 24:26).</li> <li>• Placed before God (1 Sam. 10:25).</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Books showed the power of God changing peoples’ lives (2 Kings 22–23; Ex. 24:7; Neh. 8).</li> <li>• Old Testament books appeal to each other for authority as God’s Word:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Joshua 1:8 refers to the Pentateuch.</li> <li>• Daniel 9:2 refers to Jeremiah.</li> <li>• Ezekiel 14:14 refers to Noah, Daniel, and Job.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Old Testament ends with the last prophet Malachi:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promises that the next event will be Jesus coming to the Temple (Mal. 3:1).</li> <li>• Promises that the next prophet will be John the Baptizer (Mal. 4:4–6).</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No new books of Scripture are given.</li> <li>• The Old Testament canon is settled without any significant debates regarding certain books.</li> <li>• Apocryphal (“hidden”) books are written as history, fiction, wisdom, and apocalyptic literature that become popular books but are never considered to be Scripture.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Four hundred silent years end with John the Baptizer and Jesus (Matt. 3:1–17; 17:9–13; Luke 1:8–17).</li> </ul>

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>New Testament (AD 45–95)</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Pseudepigrapha</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jesus spoke of Old Testament history as existing from Abel (Genesis) to Zechariah (the time of Malachi) (Matt. 23:35; Luke 11:51).</li> <li>• Jesus described the Old Testament as Law, Prophets, and Psalms (Luke 24:44).</li> <li>• Jesus quoted the Old Testament freely for teaching.</li> <li>• Jesus and the New Testament writers never quote any apocryphal books. They accepted the Old Testament as we have it.</li> <li>• Jesus promised the Holy Spirit would inspire his disciples (John 14:26; 16:13).</li> <li>• New Testament writers were nearly all eyewitnesses (e.g., 1 John 1:1–3).</li> <li>• New Testament books claim to be Scripture (1 Cor. 14:37; 1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Thess. 2:15; Col 4:16; Rev. 1:3).</li> <li>• New Testament authors claim works of other disciples were Scripture (2 Pet. 3:15–16).</li> <li>• After all eyewitnesses died, some pseudepigraphal (pen named) books were written by people pretending to be apostles.</li> <li>• Almost all New Testament books were accepted by the second century, and all were finalized by the fourth century.</li> <li>• No apocryphal books were accepted until the Catholic Council of Trent in 1546.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Authors under pen names pretend to be eyewitnesses to Jesus and write various false gospels (e.g., the Gospel of Thomas).</li> </ul>

Catholic, and I have some dear friends and relatives who are Christian Catholics who love Jesus and will be with me in heaven forever. However, on this point of what books belong in the Old Testament, I disagree with my Catholic friends. To be honest, I have seen the Catholic Church make some changes to its doctrines in recent years in an effort to be more aligned with what Scripture teaches, which is encouraging. Yet there is no more reason to support the politically motivated insertion of apocryphal books into the Bible over fifteen hundred years after they were written and rejected than there is to decide today to include a new list of ancient books that do not claim to be inspired as part of the New Testament Scriptures.

In an effort to summarize much of what I have tried to explain thus far, I have condensed the main points into chart 1.1 as a historical timeline of the writing of Scripture.

## **6. What Is the Central Message of the Old Testament?**

We will now explore how the Old Testament is to be rightly understood in light of its central message. The opening line of Scripture introduces us to its hero, God. Throughout the pages of Scripture this God is revealed. In the closing line of the New Testament Scriptures, we are reminded that the God who is the hero of the true story of Scripture is Jesus Christ. Thus, the written Word of God reveals to us the incarnate (“in human flesh”) Word of God, Jesus Christ. Further, without the written Word we cannot rightly know of the incarnate Word. Therefore, defining the central message of the Old Testament is the key to our interpretive process because without a proper understanding of Scripture we do not have access to truly loving and knowing the real Jesus.

Some people prefer the New Testament to the Old Testament because they wrongly believe that only the New Testament is about Jesus. However, it was Jesus himself

who taught that the Old Testament was primarily about him. While arguing with the “theologians” in his day, Jesus chastised them, saying, “You search the Scriptures [Old Testament] because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.”<sup>87</sup>

Following his resurrection, Jesus opened the Old Testament to teach others about himself: “Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.”<sup>88</sup> Likewise, in speaking to his disciples, Jesus said, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.”<sup>89</sup> We then read that he “opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.”<sup>90</sup>

Jesus’ own words about himself as the central message of the Old Testament are pointedly clear. He said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.”<sup>91</sup>

To emphasize this point, we will examine only a few of the many examples taken from Jesus’ life where he was acutely aware that his acts were fulfilling the promises of the Old Testament. After reading from the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue early in his ministry, “he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, ‘Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’”<sup>92</sup> At the last supper, on the

87. John 5:39–40.

88. Luke 24:27.

89. Luke 24:44.

90. Luke 24:45.

91. Matt. 5:17–18.

92. Luke 4:20–21.

night before his betrayal, Jesus taught about his impending death from Isaiah 53:12 by saying, “For I tell you that this Scripture must be fulfilled in me: ‘And he was numbered with the transgressors.’ For what is written about me has its fulfillment.”<sup>93</sup> Upon his betrayal by Judas and his arrest, Jesus said, “But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled.”<sup>94</sup> Clearly, Jesus saw himself and his ministry as the very fulfillment of the Old Testament promises.

Simply, when the Old Testament is rightly interpreted, it is ultimately about Jesus as God, our Savior, the object of our faith, forgiver of our sins, and giver of eternal life. Therefore, to correctly interpret the Old Testament you will need to connect its verses, concepts, and events to Jesus.

### *Prophetic Promises*

The Old Testament uses various means to reveal Jesus, including promises, appearances, types, and titles. First, the Old Testament teaches about Jesus in the numerous prophetic promises given about him. At the time of its writing, upwards of one-quarter of Scripture was prophetic in nature, promising future events. Neither Islam nor any other world religion or cult can present any specific prophecies concerning the coming of their prophets. However, in the Old Testament we see hundreds of fulfilled prophecies extending hundreds and sometimes over a thousand years into the future. Consider the following Old Testament prophecies and their fulfillment in Jesus Christ:

- Seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus, Isaiah promised that Jesus’ mother would be a virgin who would conceive by a miracle.<sup>95</sup>

93. Luke 22:37.

94. Matt. 26:56.

95. Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:18–23.

- Seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus, Micah promised that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem.<sup>96</sup>
- Seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus, Hosea promised that Jesus' family would flee as refugees to Egypt to save his young life.<sup>97</sup>
- Four hundred years before the birth of Jesus, Malachi promised that Jesus would enter the temple. Since the temple was destroyed in AD 70, this prophecy could not be fulfilled anytime after AD 70.<sup>98</sup>
- Five hundred years before the birth of Jesus, Zechariah promised that Jesus would be betrayed for thirty pieces of silver.<sup>99</sup>
- One thousand years before the birth of Jesus, David promised that lots would be cast for Jesus' clothing.<sup>100</sup>
- One thousand years before the birth of Jesus (and hundreds of years before the invention of crucifixion), David promised that Jesus would be crucified.<sup>101</sup>
- Seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus, Isaiah promised that Jesus would die and be buried in a rich man's tomb.<sup>102</sup>
- One thousand years before the birth of Jesus, David promised that Jesus would resurrect from death;<sup>103</sup> seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus, Isaiah also promised that Jesus would resurrect from death.<sup>104</sup>

96. Mic. 5:2; Luke 2:1–7.

97. Hos. 11:1; Matt. 2:13–15.

98. Mal. 3:1; Luke 2:25–27.

99. Zech. 11:12–13; Matt. 26:14–15.

100. Ps. 22:18; John 19:23–24.

101. Ps. 22:16; Luke 23:33.

102. Isa. 53:8–9; Matt. 27:57–60; Luke 23:46.

103. Ps. 16:10.

104. Isa. 53:10–12; Acts 2:25–32.

The fulfillments of these prophetic promises show the divine inspiration of Scripture and prove that there is a sovereign God who rules over human history and brings events to pass just as he ordains them. Because of these facts, we can trust the internal consistency of the Bible to be a chorus of faithful witnesses who sing together in harmony about the glory of Jesus Christ.

### *Christophonies*

Second, the Old Testament teaches about Jesus through appearances that he makes before his birth, or what are called *Christophonies*. Examples include walking with Abraham,<sup>105</sup> wrestling with Jacob,<sup>106</sup> appearing to Moses,<sup>107</sup> joining Daniel in the fiery furnace,<sup>108</sup> and calling Isaiah into ministry.<sup>109</sup> Other examples may include the occasional appearance of “the angel [messenger] of the Lord” who is sometimes identified as God.<sup>110</sup> This angel provided the sacrifice in Isaac’s place<sup>111</sup> and spoke and journeyed with Moses.<sup>112</sup>

### *Types*

Third, *types* are Old Testament representative figures, institutions, or events that foreshadow Jesus. Examples include Adam, who foreshadows Jesus as the second Adam; the priesthood, which prefigures Jesus as our High Priest; David and other kings, who prefigure Jesus as the King of Kings; Moses and the prophets, who pre-

105. Genesis 18, cf. John 8:56.

106. Gen. 32:30.

107. Ex. 3:2–6, cf. John 8:58.

108. Dan. 3:24–25.

109. Isa. 6:1–5, cf. John 12:41.

110. Judg. 6:11–14; 13:22.

111. Gen. 16:7–13.

112. Ex. 3:14; 23:20–21, cf. John 8:56–59.

figure Jesus as our ultimate Prophet; animal sacrifices, which prefigure Jesus as the sinless Lamb of God slain for our sins; the temple, which prefigures God's presence dwelling among us in Jesus; shepherds who care for their sheep, which remind us we are as foolish and vulnerable as sheep but that Jesus our Shepherd keeps constant watch over us; judges, who foreshadow Jesus as the final judge of all people; and many others.

We also see people in the Old Testament who perform various kinds of service analogous to the services that Jesus performs perfectly. Unlike the first Adam, Jesus Christ is the Last Adam who passed his test in a garden and in so doing imputed his righteousness to us to overcome the sin imputed to us through the sin of the first Adam. Jesus is the true and better Abel who, although he was innocent, was slain and whose blood cries out for our acquittal. When Abraham left his father and home, he was doing the same thing that Jesus would do when he left heaven. When Isaac carried his own wood and laid down his life to be sacrificed at the hand of his father Abraham, he was showing us what Jesus would later do. Jesus is the greater Jacob, who wrestled with God in Gethsemane and, though wounded and limping, walked away from his grave blessed. Jesus is the greater Joseph who serves at the right hand of God the King, extends forgiveness and provision to those of us who have betrayed him, and uses his power to save us in loving reconciliation. Jesus is greater than Moses in that he stands as a mediator between God and us, bringing us the New Covenant. Like Job, innocent Jesus suffered and was tormented by the Devil so that God might be glorified, while his dumb friends were no help or encouragement. Jesus is a King greater than David, who has slain our giants of Satan, sin, and death, although in the eyes of the world he was certain to face a crushing defeat at their hands. Jesus is greater than Jonah in that he spent three days in the grave and not just a fish to save a multitude even greater than Nineveh.

Furthermore, when Boaz redeemed Ruth and brought her and her despised people into community with God's people, he was showing what Jesus would do to redeem his bride the church from all the nations of the earth. When Nehemiah rebuilt Jerusalem, he was doing something similar to Jesus, who is building for us a New Jerusalem as our eternal home. When Hosea married an unfaithful whoring wife whom he continued to pursue in love, he was showing us the heart of Jesus, who does the same for his unfaithful bride, the church. Finally, when God's people sought to keep their homes free from filth through various Old Testament rituals, they were showing that their lives were filled with the filth of sin and they desperately needed Jesus to come and make them clean.

We also see Jesus in the Old Testament through various events. For example, in the Exodus account of Passover, Moses met with the elders of Israel to instruct all the people to follow the Lord's commands for the Passover Feast. They were to place blood over their doorframes with hyssop (a common herb bundled for cleaning), and no one was to leave home until the morning. By being marked with a lamb's blood, death would not come to the home but would pass over. Paul says that we see Jesus in this because "we have now been justified by his [Jesus'] blood, much more shall we be saved by him [Jesus] from the wrath of God."<sup>113</sup> Peter also says our salvation is given by Jesus Christ and "sprinkling with his blood."<sup>114</sup>

Likewise, the exodus serves as the pattern of our own salvation: Jesus crushed Satan like he did Pharaoh and liberated us into freedom that we might worship him like the Israelites did. The meaning of the crucifixion of Jesus was revealed in the annual celebration of Yom Kippur or the Day of Atonement. This was the most important day of the year. It was intended to deal with the sin problem between humanity

113. Rom. 5:9.

114. 1 Pet. 1:2.

and God. On that day, two healthy goats without defect were chosen to represent sinless perfection. The high priest would slaughter one goat, which acted as a substitute for the sinners who rightly deserved a violently bloody death for their many sins. This goat's blood was shed as a price for sin, showing us how Jesus would die in our place for our sins. The second goat was allowed to run free with its sins forgiven, showing us how Jesus would not only die for our sins but also take them away.

### *Titles*

Fourth, there are many titles for God in the Old Testament that refer to Jesus Christ as God. In Daniel 7:13–14, God is called the “son of man,” and Jesus adopted that as his favorite title, using it some eighty times in the four Gospels. Jesus is the Suffering Servant that was promised in Isaiah.<sup>115</sup> Jesus is also known by many other Old Testament titles for God, including First and Last,<sup>116</sup> Light,<sup>117</sup> Rock,<sup>118</sup> Husband or Bridegroom,<sup>119</sup> Shepherd,<sup>120</sup> Redeemer,<sup>121</sup> Savior,<sup>122</sup> and the Lord of Glory.<sup>123</sup>

Much more could be said, but all of these examples illustrate the one big idea that Jesus is the central theme of the entire Old Testament. To properly understand the Old Testament we must connect it to the person and work of Jesus. This should not be done in an allegorizing manner where arbitrary meanings foreign to Scripture are

115. Isa. 42:1–4, 49:1–7, 52:13–53:12, cf. Phil. 2:1–11.

116. Isa. 41:4, 44:6, 48:12, cf. Rev. 1:17, 2:8, 22:13.

117. Ps. 27:1, cf. John 1:9.

118. Pss. 18:2, 95:1, cf. 1 Cor. 10:4, 1 Pet. 2:6–8.

119. Hos. 2:16; Isa. 62:5, cf. Eph. 5:28–33, Rev. 21:2.

120. Ps. 23:1, cf. Heb. 13:20.

121. Hos. 13:14, Ps. 130:7, cf. Titus 2:13, Rev. 5:9.

122. Isa. 43:3, cf. John 4:42.

123. Isa. 42:8, cf. 1 Cor. 2:8.

assigned to Old Testament words and images, thereby changing their meaning. Rather, the message of the Old Testament includes symbolism and identity that are most fully revealed in Jesus.

It is my desire that you really embrace this simple but transforming truth. Unless Jesus is the central message of the Old Testament, many errors abound. The most common is moralizing. Moralizing is reading the Old Testament not to learn about Jesus, but only to learn principles for how to live my life as a good person by following the good examples of some people and avoiding the bad examples of others. That kind of approach to the Old Testament is not Christian because it is not about Christ. It treats the Bible like any other book with moral lessons that are utterly disconnected from the example and empowerment of Jesus.

Therefore, the issue of Jesus is the difference between how Christians and adherents of other religions (e.g., Jews and Muslims) understand the Old Testament. This point was made painfully clear to me one day while driving home from the church that I pastor. I had just finished a sermon from Genesis when I heard an advertisement on Christian radio. A group of churches in our region were getting together for a conference on understanding the message of the Old Testament. I was glad to hear that . . . until I heard the rest of the details. The Christian churches were bringing in a non-Christian rabbi who did not believe in Jesus to teach all the Christians how to study the Old Testament. My heart was absolutely broken because I knew he would not tell them anything about Jesus and in so doing would only be able to moralize. The sad result of moralizing is that people become proud like Satan if they think they are obeying the moral commands of Scripture, or depressed if they are honest enough to admit their sinful shortcomings. God's intention for our study of the Old Testament is never demonic pride or hopeless despair, but rather Jesus Christ—who not only shows us how to live but transforms us so that we can.

## 7. How Did We Get the Old Testament in English?

Now that we have learned that the Old Testament was primarily written in Hebrew to Hebrews and fulfilled by the Hebrew Jesus, you may be wondering how it came to pass that the Hebrew Bible was translated into English. Many volumes have been written to explain the miraculous and fascinating process necessary for the Bible's existence. The following five-step sequence is a simple way to explain this process.

**God → Revelation/Inspiration → Transmission → Translation → Interpretation → Application → Your Life**

**Revelation** is the miraculous event whereby God revealed himself and his Truth to certain people and inspired them, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to write down what he had to say—perfectly. The original copy is called the *autographa*. The Old Testament autographa was stored in the temple in the days of Solomon until Jerusalem was destroyed in the sixth century BC. At that time, the autographa was either destroyed or scattered. Later, Ezra and other religious leaders collected the remaining manuscripts of the Old Testament books and compiled them as one collection and stored them in an ark made for the second temple.

**Transmission** occurred when the autographa was carefully copied by trained scribes so that other copies could be made available for people to read. This process was painstaking and was the only means by which any ancient document could be reproduced until the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century AD.

Today some Jewish scribes continue the process of transmission much like their ancient counterparts. They arise early in the morning, undergo ritual bathing, spend time praying and reciting religious texts, and then write letter by letter as another

scribe reads a manuscript aloud. The entire process is carefully undertaken, religiously devoted, and a great insight into how the process occurred in the past.

While the handwritten copies had the occasional minor error (e.g., spelling or punctuation), the existence of multiple copies allowed the scribes to determine which scrolls had mistakes. For example, if two hundred scrolls spelled a word one way and two scrolls spelled it another way, it was evident which scrolls were actually in error. Thus, the copied scrolls were accepted as accurate and authoritative by God's people in the Old Testament.<sup>124</sup> Also, the apostles, who were the senior leaders in the early church, taught from copies of the Old Testament books of the Bible.<sup>125</sup> The early church tested all teachings against the existing Old Testament scrolls.<sup>126</sup> Furthermore, Jesus himself taught from copies of the Old Testament books, not the autographa, and treated them as authoritative.<sup>127</sup> In conclusion, God's people have always relied on manuscripts, and these writings have proven to be accurate and trustworthy. Jesus' own perfect example assures us of their trustworthiness. In addition, we trust this same process when reading every other ancient document because we do not usually have access to their original copies either, but have depended on copies for our modern translations.

The copies of Old Testament manuscripts we possess today generally fall into three categories. The largest grouping is the Masoretic texts, with the earliest copies dating anywhere from AD 600 to AD 1000. The second category is the Dead Sea Scrolls. These scrolls are some of the most important findings in the history of biblical literature. In 1947, a shepherd boy stumbled across jars of scrolls in some caves while searching for a lost goat. The age and quality of many of the scrolls was unprecedented, with some dating as far back as 400 BC, which was as many as one thousand years

124. Deut. 17:18, cf. 1 Kings 2:3; Ezra 7:14; Neh. 8:8.

125. Acts 17:2; 18:8.

126. Acts 17:11.

127. Matt. 12:3–5; 21:16, 42; Luke 4:16–21; 10:26.

earlier than any previously discovered scroll. My family and I had the privilege of seeing some of these scrolls and fragments of scrolls on display in Seattle as part of a traveling exhibit that gives tremendous instruction on the entire process of transmitting the Old Testament. The Hebrew manuscripts of the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament) that were preserved in Samaritan non-Jewish communities make up the final grouping of Old Testament manuscripts from which various translations are drawn.

**Translation** occurs in service to people who want to read the books of the Bible but are not familiar with the original languages in which they were written (Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic). Teams of language theory scholars carefully undertake the painstaking process of translating the original languages into the languages of other peoples.

Two of the most important early translations of the Old Testament were the Septuagint and the Vulgate, which translated the original Hebrew into Greek and then Latin when they became the primary languages of the Western world. Today, the Bible has been carefully translated into nearly three thousand languages. John Wycliffe initiated the first translation of the English Bible (from Latin), and John Purvey completed it in AD 1388. William Tyndale, who was educated at Oxford and Cambridge, translated the first English Bible from the original Hebrew and Greek.

While the thought of a translation may concern some people, the fact remains that most of the canon of Western literature has also been translated because we do not use their original languages, either.

**Interpretation** occurs when someone reads the Bible in a language they can understand and determines the meaning of the verses they read by the enablement of God the Holy Spirit who also inspired the writing of Scripture. Each text of the Bible has

only one true interpretation, and so we must be careful to read the truth out of the Bible (*exegesis*) rather than reading our beliefs and desires into it (*eisegesis*).

A common question arises at this point: is the Bible to be interpreted literally? The answer is yes. There are plain-literal and figurative-literal portions of the Bible. When interpreting Scripture, we begin by assuming the plain-literal meaning, and if that seems absurd then we go with a figurative-literal interpretation. A figurative-literal Scripture teaches a truth in a poetic way and often uses the words “like” or “as” to tip us off that figurative language is being used. But even when figurative language is being used, it is still communicating a literal truth. For example, in the poetic Song of Songs, the man says to his beloved, “your eyes are doves.”<sup>128</sup> In this figurative language, the man is communicating a very literal truth. He likens her eyes to doves, which come in pairs, and when their tail-feathers flutter they appear like eyelashes. Doves have just one faithful mate throughout their lives, possibly indicating that her eyes are focused on him alone. The dove is also a symbol of peace and purity, alluding to her virginity.

I have also been asked many times whether we need to obey all commands in the Old Testament. The short answer regarding law is that all of the Old Testament commands/laws were fulfilled in Jesus Christ.<sup>129</sup> This does not mean that we do not love and value the Old Testament law. But it does mean that we are no longer under it. Similarly, when I was in high school I had to sign an attendance sheet every day, go to assemblies, and bring a note if I had been sick. Since the graduation requirements have been met, I am no longer bound to do those things. This does not mean they were bad, only that they are completed. However, there are some laws from high school that are still binding on me. For example, at my school I was not allowed to

128. Song 1:15.

129. Matt. 5:17–18.

kill anyone, sell drugs, or steal. These laws are still applicable to me, even though I have graduated.

Likewise, there are three kinds of laws in the Old Testament. First, there are ceremonial laws, which are related to the priesthood, sacrifices, temple, and cleanness. These are now fulfilled in Jesus (for example, nearly the entire book of Hebrews addresses this issue for Jews who struggled with the Old Testament laws once they were saved). These laws are no longer binding on us because Jesus is our priest, sacrifice, temple, and cleanser. Second, there are civil laws, which refer to the governing of Israel as a nation ruled by God. Since we are no longer a theocracy, these laws, while insightful, are not directly binding on us. As Romans 13 says, we must now obey our pagan government because God will work through it, too. Third, there are moral laws, which prohibit such things as stealing, murdering, and lying. These laws are still binding on us even though Jesus fulfilled their requirements through his sinless life. Jesus himself repeats and reinforces nine of the Ten Commandments. The only exception is the Sabbath, because that is part of the ceremonial law. Now our rest is in the finished work of Jesus, not just a day. In summary, the ceremonial and civil laws of the Old Testament are no longer binding on us, while the moral laws are.

**Application** means taking what we learn from the principles in the Bible and making changes in our thoughts and actions by God the Holy Spirit's empowering grace so that our life is congruent with the Bible. There are a seemingly infinite number of applications for a text of the Bible. For example, when the Bible says that we should love people, the applications for that principle are endless.

In this five-step process (Revelation/Inspiration → Transmission → Translation → Interpretation → Application), we see how God speaks to us and cares deeply

about our lives. We also see how the chasm between God and us is graciously filled by God's revelation, which is more accurate and true than our human speculation (e.g., religion and philosophy). While the first step (Revelation/Inspiration of the autographa) is the only one that is guaranteed to be perfect, the other steps are indeed accurate and therefore trustworthy. We must be increasingly careful as we move through the steps, however, because the opportunity for error increases at each step. Lastly, the third step of translation is incredibly important because that is what we depend on for the learning and living of our Christian faith. This point will now be explored more fully.

## **8. Why Are There Different Bible Translations?**

In translating the Bible into English, including the Old Testament, four general categories of translation are most common: word-for-word translations, thought-for-thought translations, paraphrases, and corruptions. The same four options are also used in the translation of other ancient books into English.

### *Word-for-Word*

Word-for-word translations (also known as literal translations) make a special effort to carefully interpret each word from the original Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic into English. Word-for-word translations emphasize God, the divine author of Scripture, over the human reader of Scripture. The result is a striving for the precision of what the Bible says, much like one would expect in other important communications, such as legal documents, marriage vows, or contracts. Word-for-word translations are generally at high school reading level.

Word-for-word translations tend to be the best for studying because of their accuracy, though they sometimes lose the poetic nuances of the original languages. The best-known word-for-word translation is the King James Version (KJV). However,

because of its use of archaic English, it is very difficult for some people to read. Probably the best word-for-word translations are the English Standard Version (ESV), which I preach from, the New American Standard Bible (NASB), and the New King James Version (NKJV). Noted theologian and ESV General Editor J. I. Packer reflected, “I find myself suspecting very strongly that my work on the translation of the ESV Bible was the most important thing that I have done for the Kingdom, and that the product of our labors is perhaps the biggest milestone in Bible translation in the past fifty years or more.”<sup>130</sup>

The philosophy of word-for-word translation guided virtually every English Bible translation until the middle of the twentieth century. At that time, thought-for-thought translation became popular.

### *Thought-for-Thought*

Thought-for-thought translations (also known as dynamic equivalence or functional equivalence translations) attempt to convey the full nuance of each passage by interpreting the Scripture’s entire meaning and not just the individual words. Thought-for-thought translations may include words that were not included in the original text in an effort to give the same meaning that the reader of the original languages would have had.

The best and most widely read thought-for-thought English translation is the New International Version (NIV). Other thought-for-thought translations include Today’s New International Version (TNIV), New Living Translation (NLT), Contemporary English Version (CEV), and the Good News Bible (GNB). The benefit of thought-for-thought translations in general, and the NIV—my favorite thought-for-thought

130. Michelle Bennett, “The ESV Bible Reaches Five-Year Milestone,” Good News and Crossway, September 26, 2006, <http://www.gnpcb.org/page/news.2006.09.26>.

translation—in particular, is that they are easy to understand and make the Bible accessible to a wide number of people.

Going one step further than thought-for-thought translations are paraphrases, which combine both Scripture and interpretive commentary into the translation method.

### *Paraphrase*

Paraphrased translations pay even less attention to specific word meanings than thought-for-thought translations in an attempt to capture the poetic or narrative essence of a passage. For this reason, many paraphrased translations do not even have verse divisions in them. Examples of paraphrased translations include The Message (TM), The Living Bible (TLB), and The Amplified Bible (AMP).

### *Corruption*

Corruptions are “translations” of Scripture that clearly seek to undermine the very teaching of Scripture. These “translations” are very poor and should not be used as credible translations for study. These include the Jehovah’s Witness translation called the New World Translation, which was written in large part to eliminate the deity of Jesus Christ. This is in no way a translation but rather a terrible corruption of Scripture.

While some translations are better than others, it is important to note that various translations have various strengths and weaknesses and that the student of Scripture benefits from enjoying multiple translations. Furthermore, rather than fighting over translations, Christians should praise God for every good English translation and trust God the Holy Spirit to use them to transform our lives.

It is beneficial to one's studies to take advantage of multiple good English translations of Scripture. However, I would encourage you to use the English Standard Version or another good word-for-word translation as your primary study tool while using other translations as secondary resources for your studies. On this point it is important to be both clear and emphatic. The student of Scripture is best served by enjoying multiple translations of God's Word. Personally, I use both the English Standard Version and the New International Version most frequently, in addition to many other translations.

### **9. How Can I Get the Most Out of the Old Testament?**

The remaining practical question pertains to what you can do to get the most out of the Old Testament. Before answering that question, I want to tell you a story about a peculiar German metalworker, inventor, and business entrepreneur named Johannes Gutenberg (1398–1468), who invented the moveable type printing press. His invention made the mass production of books, like this one, possible for the first time in human history.

Consider this for a moment. My personal library at my home is perhaps four thousand books and growing by the day thanks to God's grace and the guy in the brown truck who shows up every twenty-four hours. If we were living in 1450, my personal library would perhaps be the size of the library for many towns. At that time all books were hand-copied and took years to write out, with a Bible taking upwards of twenty years to complete. Consequently, all of the books in Western Europe totaled roughly the same number in a modern public library. But by 1500, the number of books exploded into the millions because Gutenberg's press, adapted from the presses used in wine making, enabled rapid printing. By 1500 there were 151 print shops in

Venice alone. In Martin Luther's city of Wittenberg, one hundred thousand Bibles were being printed.

Legend has it that as a little boy, Gutenberg was carving his name onto wooden blocks on his father's work bench when an "h" fell into a bucket of purple dye. Apparently Gutenberg took the block out of the dye bucket and set it on a piece of paper to dry, causing a stamp imprint that some forty years later would inspire him to create a metal press to print books in similar fashion.

Among the first things Gutenberg published were the now-famous Gutenberg Bibles in 1455. The two-volume Bibles had 1,282 pages and cost roughly the equivalent of three years' wages for a common worker. He printed two hundred copies on an expensive imported paper and thirty copies on vellum, which required the slaughter of ten thousand calves for their hides. To finance his start-up costs, Gutenberg borrowed a considerable amount of money. Shortly after his invention proved successful, his lender called in his debt, bankrupting Gutenberg and causing his printing presses to be seized. Tragically, Gutenberg never profited from his invention and died in poverty living off of a pension that was gifted to him by the Catholic Church.

Gutenberg's invention is among the most important in the history of the world. It sparked the information revolution, which led to the scientific revolution, the Renaissance, and the Protestant Reformation. At the end of 1999, A&E Biography named Gutenberg the most influential person of the millennium. Every time we pick up a printed document, especially a Bible, we honor his labor.

Therefore, the first step to getting the most out of the Old Testament is to recognize that it took roughly fifteen hundred years to be written, was hand-copied into manuscripts by scribes who devoted their life to that work, was translated by scholars who have devoted their lives to the biblical languages, and is published in mass market forms that have only been possible in the last half a millennium. In addition, many people died so that you could hold in your hand a copy of the Bible and read the Old

Testament for yourself. My fear is that in an age when the Bible is so readily and cheaply available, and in so many translations and forms, many people will overlook the incredible gift we have been given to be able to simply pick up the Bible and read it.

The second step to getting the most out of the Old Testament is to purchase a good Bible. While purchasing a study Bible can be quite expensive, it is imperative that all serious students of the Bible invest some money purchasing at least one nice Bible with some helps (footnotes, cross-references, etc.) and room for their own notes. When buying a Bible, the general rule is that the more money you spend, the better the quality of paper, binding, and leather you will receive. Because your primary Bible will be filled with notes and become so familiar to you, it is wise to invest in a good Bible that will last. If you cannot afford a good Bible, then perhaps asking your friends and family to chip in for a birthday or holiday such as Christmas to buy you one would be an option.

The third step to getting the most out of the Old Testament is knowing that Jesus actually prayed for you to do so. In John 17:17 Jesus prayed for us saying, “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.” Therefore, to increasingly grow to be more and more like Jesus, we must have regular time in God’s Word. Practically, this means that when we read the Old Testament and in it meet Jesus, his prayer for us is being answered.

The fourth step is to practice the various spiritual disciplines that relate to Bible study. The Old Testament itself tells us to study, obey, and then teach the Scriptures.<sup>131</sup> It also models for us how to pray as we read Scripture, humbly asking God to teach us.<sup>132</sup> It promises to make us wiser.<sup>133</sup> The Old Testament also tells us that it is to be memorized.<sup>134</sup> To help you, you may want to listen to God’s Word through an audio recording as you exercise, do chores, or commute to work, because faith, we are told

131. Ezra 7:10.

132. Ps. 119:73.

133. Prov. 9:9; 10:14; 23:12.

134. Ps. 119:11; Prov. 22:17–19.

in the New Testament, comes through hearing God's Word. Furthermore, because Jesus humbly entered into history as a human being, he had to grow and learn just like we do.<sup>135</sup> Subsequently, when we see Jesus frequently quoting the Old Testament from memory throughout his life, we must infer that he spent considerable amounts of time hearing, reading, studying, praying, memorizing, and obeying the Old Testament. We should gladly follow in his example.

The fifth step to getting the most out of the Old Testament is to repent of sin. As you read, God the Holy Spirit will convict you of sin in your life, including sins of commission where you are doing wrong, sins of omission where you are failing to do right, and sins of thought, word, deed, and motive. When you are convicted, your propensity will be to suppress the truth and continue on in sin.<sup>136</sup> But Jesus asks that we not harden our heart when he speaks to us, but rather humbly receive his words and respond in repentance. In repentance we are agreeing with God, thanking Jesus for dying to remove our sin, and trusting Jesus for the empowering grace of the Holy Spirit to enable us to live lives of obedience in conformity with Scripture and his example.

The sixth step to getting the most out of the Old Testament is being in the community of a local church with fellow Christians. Most of the Old Testament was written to communities of God's people and not just individuals. Although you do need a personal relationship with Jesus, you are also part of God's family, the church, which means that personal relationships with Jesus' people are also vital. By being actively involved in a church that is Bible-based and Jesus-centered, you will be able to serve others and be served, learn Scripture, and grow as a worshiper of Jesus in all of your life.

135. Luke 2:52.

136. Rom. 1:18.