

THE OLD TESTAMENT IS HISTORY

- A. Introduction: We're working on a series about the importance of becoming a regular Bible reader. To help us be successful in that effort, we are discussing what the Bible is, why and how we need to read it, and why we know that we can trust what it says.
1. The Bible is a collection of sixty-six books and letters written by more than forty authors over a 1500 year period. Despite many authors, and the amount of time it took to complete, the Bible has continuity.
 - a. Together, these documents tell the story of God's desire for a family and the lengths He has gone to to obtain this family through Jesus. Each book adds to or advances the story in some way.
 1. God created human beings to become His sons and daughters and made earth to be a home for Himself and His family. Both the family and the family home have been damaged by sin.
 2. In the opening pages of Scripture, God began to unfold His plan of redemption—His plan to deliver the family and the family home from sin, corruption, and death. The Lord promised that a Redeemer would come—the Seed (Jesus) of the woman (Mary). Gen 3:15
 - b. The Bible is unlike any other book in existence because it was inspired by Almighty God (II Tim 3:16; II Pet 1:21). The authors were not trying to write a religious book. They were recording what God revealed to them about Himself and His plans for mankind.
 1. The Bible is primarily a historical narrative. The various writers recorded what they saw and heard as God's plan unfolded, and as they witnessed God's power and presence in their lives.
 2. The Bible is redemptive history, a record of people and events related to God's unfolding plan of redemption. Since those events occurred, and those people lived, in the Middle East, the action described takes place primarily in present-day Israel and surrounding regions.
 2. Early in the Bible narrative, the Lord identified the people group through whom the Redeemer (the promised Seed of Gen 3:15) would come into this world, the descendants of Abraham. Gen 12:1-3
 - a. Abraham was from Mesopotamia (modern Iraq). At God's direction, he moved to Canaan (modern Israel), and his descendants grew into the nation of Israel, the Jewish (or Hebrew) people.
 - b. They were tasked with recording and preserving God's written record of Himself and His plan of redemption. "The Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God" (Rom 3:2, NIV).
 1. The Bible as we know it has two major divisions: The Old Testament (39 books), originally written in Hebrew, and the New Testament (27 books and letters), originally written in Greek.
 2. The Old Testament is primarily the history of Abraham's descendants up until 400 years before Jesus was born (1921 BC to 400 BC). The New Testament records Jesus' coming and work.
 3. Last week we began to talk about how the Bible developed, starting with the Old Testament. We aren't going to do a detailed study of the Old Testament, but some additional information will help us see how it developed as a historical record that we can trust.
 - a. People have a bias against the historical reliability of Bible because of its supernatural element. But, when Bible documents are assessed with the same standards used to assess other ancient books, it stands up to the scrutiny. The Bible is a reliable historical document.
 - b. When we understand that it came into being as a record of verifiable events, it increases our confidence in what it says.
- B. The Old Testament was written by men that God spoke to audibly, as well as through visions, dreams and theophanies (appearances). Most of the writers were eyewitnesses to many of the events they recorded. With the exception Genesis and Job, the books written during or just after the time of the events described.
1. Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible. The information in Genesis came from oral traditions and books passed down from the time of Adam, Noah, and Abraham (Gen 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; etc.)
 - a. Genesis says that during a time in famine, in the third generation, Abraham's descendants (75 in all)

traveled from Canaan to Egypt, where they remained for four centuries. They were eventually enslaved by the Egyptians, but God delivered them by His power, under the leadership of Moses.

b. Moses was an eyewitness to the events recorded in the books of Exodus and Numbers, which describe Israel's deliverance from slavery and return to Canaan.

1. In addition to the events Moses witnessed, he received information from the Lord at Mount Sinai—God's Law and instructions for setting up a system of sacrifices (recorded in Leviticus).

2. Moses also set up a tent outside the Israelite camp at Sinai. When Moses went into the tent, the visible presence of God would hover at the entrance and, "inside the Tent of the Meeting, the Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Ex 33:11, NLT).

3. Many scholars believe Moses also wrote the Book of Job. He encountered Job's story during the forty years he lived in Midan, before God commissioned him to lead Israel out of Egypt.

c. Deuteronomy is Moses' final book. It is a record of three sermons he gave to the Israelites just before they entered Canaan. Remember, the generation originally delivered from Egypt refused to enter Canaan due to fear of the obstacles in the land. Moses spoke to their sons and daughters.

1. In his sermons, Moses restated the Law God that gave them at Sinai, and he led them in a renewal of the covenant that God made with them when He appeared Mount Sinai. Ex 19:4-6

2. Moses warned Israel that if they worshipped the gods of the Canaanites, they would be overrun by their enemies and removed from the land. He died without entering Canaan. Deut 4:26-30

2. The Book of Joshua was written mostly by Joshua, the man who took Moses' place. It is a record of their settlement in Canaan. Their victories came, not through numerical or military superiority, but through trust in God and obedience to His Word—a tremendous history lesson for future generations.

a. After Joshua died, the Israelites failed to fully drive the Canaanites from the land, as God had instructed them to do. And, over the next 350 years, Israel was repeatedly drawn into idol worship.

1. During these periods of idolatry, the people living around them would oppress Israel, and they would turn to the Lord and cry out for deliverance. God raised up judges (military leaders) to deliver the Israelites from their enemies. These events are recorded in the Book of Judges.

2. The author of Judges is anonymous (the author doesn't identify himself in the text). Jewish tradition (in the Talmud) credits the book to Samuel, the last of Israel's judges and the first in a line of prophets who would influence the entire nation. Remember, history is being recorded.

3. Like Moses, Samuel lived in the period he wrote about. And, like Moses, the Lord appeared to him and "revealed himself to Samuel in Shiloh by the word of the Lord". I Sam 3:21, (KJV)

b. The Book of Ruth was written at the end of the period of the judges. It's an individual account of covenant faithfulness when the majority of Israel was unfaithful. Ruth is in Jesus' lineage. Matt 1:5

3. At this point in their history Israel had no king. They were ruled by God through His spokesmen, first first Moses, then Joshua, then Samuel. When Samuel was an old man, the leaders of the twelve tribes that made up Israel asked for a king, and chose Saul. Saul was followed by David, and then Solomon.

a. Under David and Solomon's leadership Israel became a respected, prosperous, and peaceful nation in the Middle East. During this period, God identified David's family, from the tribe of Judah, as the one through which the promised Seed will come. II Sam 7:12-16; Ps 89:3-4

b. When Solomon died his son Rehoboam took the throne (931 BC). His poor leadership led to a revolt that divided the nation into two kingdoms—the ten northern tribes (known as the kingdom of Israel) and the two southern tribes (known as the kingdom of Judah).

1. The entire nation sank into idol worship and all its associated immorality, until both kingdoms were destroyed by foreign invasion. The Assyrian Empire conquered the northern kingdom in 722 BC. The Babylonian Empire conquered the southern kingdom in 586 BC.

2. Assyria removed much of the northern kingdom's population, scattering them throughout their empire. Babylon deported all but the poorest people in the south to Babylon.

- c. The books of Samuel and Kings cover this dark period. These books are anonymous, but Jewish tradition assigns I and II Samuel to the prophet Samuel (with additional information added by the prophets Gad and Nathan after Samuel's death), and I and II Kings to Jeremiah the prophet.
 - 1. Prophets generally served as historians, who researched their information and compiled history under the inspiration and direction of the Holy Spirit. Among their sources were official state records of the activities of the kings of Israel and Judah that were preserved in royal archives.
 - 2. Samuel references the Book of Jasher as an information source (II Sam 1:18). Kings mentions three books as primary sources of information: the Acts of Solomon (I Kings 11:41), Chronicles of the Kings of Israel (I Kings 14:19), Chronicles of the Kings of Judah (I Kings 14:29).
 - 3. Jeremiah, like Moses and Samuel, actually lived in the time of some of the events he described, and God also spoke to him a number of times. Jer 1:1-3
 - A. During this period of the divided nation, God raised up numerous prophets and sent them to His people to call them to repentance and warn them of coming destruction. Sixteen of those prophets wrote the books that are preserved in the Old Testament, Isaiah to Malachi.
 - B. Much of the content of the poetry books (Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon) was also written in the period covered by I and II Samuel and Kings.
- 4. In 539 BC the Persians conquered Babylon and permitted the Jews to return to their land after 70 years of captivity. Only a remnant returned to their ancestral land. The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah record their return to rebuild the Temple and the walls of Jerusalem which had been destroyed by Babylon.
 - a. Both books were written by Ezra, a priest (Levite) who went to Canaan to teach God's Law and to restore proper worship. Nehemiah, a Jew who served in the Persian court, returned to help rebuild.
 - 1. Ezra also wrote Chronicles (I and II). It restates the history recorded in Samuel and Kings. Ezra's purpose was to remind them of God's faithfulness to His covenant despite their failures.
 - 2. The Lord had not abandoned Abraham's descendants. They were back in their land, the family of David (the line of the Seed) was still intact, and the people never again worshipped idols.
 - b. The Book of Esther was recorded in this period (author unknown). It provides the only glimpse we have of life in Persia (formerly Babylon) for those Jews who did not return to Canaan.
- 5. A significant event occurred after Israel returned to their land. A council of 120 men was formed under Ezra's leadership. Among other things, they set the canon of the Old Testament.
 - a. Canon comes from a Greek word (*kanon*). The word was used for a hollow reed that grows along the Nile River. The Greeks cut the reeds into particular lengths and used them as measuring sticks.
 - 1. The word came to mean a measuring rod or rule—or the set standard. Eventually the word was used for the writings recognized as the inspired Word of God.
 - 2. The 66 books in today's Bible are called the cannon. These books are recognized as inspired by God and are the standard by which ancient writings claiming to be from God are judged.
 - b. This council of men didn't pick the books for the Old Testament. They recognized them. This process of recognizing inspired documents had been going on for centuries.
 - 1. Obviously, the books given directly to Moses by God, not only at Sinai, but on the journey to Canaan, were recognized as inspired by God—everyone saw and heard God. By the time Moses died, his books were recognized as the standard (canon) for judging other revelations.
 - 2. As each new book was written, it was accepted as inspired by God if it was written by a known prophet or spokesman for God, could be traced back to the time and place of that person, and was consistent with and amplified Moses' books.
 - c. First century Jewish historian, Josephus, referred to the 22 books that Ezra's council said were inspired by God. Although grouped differently, the information corresponds to our 39 books.
 - 1. The Old Testament was the Bible of Jesus' day. He, first century Jews, and the first Christians regarded it as history. (Jesus authenticated Himself by rising from the dead. Rom 1:4)

2. Paul the apostle said this about the Old Testament Scriptures: They give us hope and encouragement as we wait patiently for God's promises (Rom 15:4, NLT). Myths, fables, and legends entertain people, but they don't give hope and encouragement because they are fiction.

- C. A number of criteria are used to assess the reliability of ancient documents. Let's consider how the Old Testament stands up to two important ones—manuscript copies and archeological evidence.
1. There are no original manuscripts of the Old Testament documents (or any other ancient books) because they were all written on perishable materials that disintegrated long ago (animal skins, papyrus).
 - a. Today we only have copies. The issue is how reliable are the copies? Critical to determining their reliability is: How many copies exist (so they can be compared to make sure they say the same thing) and how close to the originals were the copies made (less passage of time means less chance that information was altered). How does the Old Testament stand up to other ancient books?
 1. Homer's *Iliad* (written in 800 BC) is one of the most recognized and historically reliable works of antiquity. There are more than 1,800 manuscripts and the earliest copy dates to 400 BC.
 2. However, least 17,000 Old Testament Hebrew scrolls and codices (forerunners of bound books) copied earlier than the 1700s (AD) have been found.
 - b. How close to the time of the originals are the copies? Up until 1947 the oldest copy of the Old Testament (the Aleppo Codex) dated to about AD 925. In 1947 the greatest manuscript discovery of all time was made—the Dead Sea Scrolls (over 1,000 years earlier than the Aleppo Codex).
 1. In a cave at Qumran (a village NW of the Dead Sea in present day Jordan) the first of over 1,000 ancient documents were found in eleven caves in the area.
 - A. More than 300 of the scrolls are Hebrew and Aramaic copies of the Old Testament (every book except for the Book of Esther). Many of the other scrolls have information about early Judaism and emerging Christianity.
 - B. The earliest scrolls date from about 250 BC. This means that the time between Moses' books and the earliest Dead Sea Scrolls is 1,100 years. The other Old Testament books were written later, some as late as 460 BC, just 200 years before the Dead Sea Scrolls.
 2. When compared with modern versions of the Hebrew Bible, the Dead Sea Scrolls are word for word identical more than 95% of the time. The 5% consists primarily of spelling variations.
 3. Early in Israel's history a clan of scribes or professional copiers emerged to preserve the written Word of God. To insure accuracy, they eventually developed detailed practices for copying manuscripts down to counting letters on each page. The Dead Sea Scrolls show their accuracy. 2. Modern archaeology (began around AD 1800) has regularly and consistently supported the Bible. Over 25,000 finds that relate directly or indirectly to the Bible have been found. And, only a small portion of possible biblical sites have been excavated thus far. No find has ever undermined the Scriptures.
 - a. For years Bible critics said that there was no Assyrian or Babylonian Empire. But both were found in the mid-1800s. In 1899 archaeologists discovered the 2500 year old ruins of Nebuchadnezzar's great city of Babylon, about 50 miles south of modern Bagdad.
 - b. Archaeology has confirmed King Jehu of Israel and King Hezekiah of Judah. The Black Obelisk, a large stone monument that records the military victories of King Shalmaneser of Assyria, mentions a visit by King Jehu to the king. A similar clay monument, Sennacherib's Prism, records an account of this Assyrian king's siege against Hezekiah and Jerusalem. II Kings 9-10; II Kings 18-19

D. Conclusion: The Old Testament more than meets the standard of reliability used for other ancient documents. It is a historical record that chronicles the supernatural actions of Almighty God as He worked out His plan to bring the Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ, into this world to undo the damage done by sin. We can trust the record. We can trust the Bible. Much more next week!