



# Old Testament Overview



## What is the Old Testament?

The Old Testament of the Bible is made up of 39 books revealing the works and character of God in history. These writings cover God's work of creating the world, how sin and death entered the world, and God's activity to overturn the results of sin and death. After the creation and fall of man are described, the rest of the Old Testament relates what is called Salvation History. This is the work of God to redeem His creation, starting with one man (Abraham), then his family, and then the nation (Israel) that was descended from him, with the ultimate purpose of renewing the entire world.

The Old Testament describes how God called Abraham and miraculously blessed him with the promise of a family and a destiny to bless the world. His family went to Egypt and was miraculously delivered by God through His servant Moses. The family at that time became a great nation with its laws given directly by God. The Old Testament then gives the history of this nation: its conquest of the Promised Land, its rise to great power, its sin and decline, its being conquered and taken into exile, and God's restoration of the nation after they had been punished for their sins.

## The Writings of the Old Testament

The revelation of the Old Testament is given in two ways: works and words. The works are actual events in history, activities of God or of men that are recounted and described. The words are a message given by God to record these events and explain their significance. He gives instruction and exhortation to His people to respond in a certain way to His works of salvation.

The ancient Hebrews divided the Old Testament into three groups of books: the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. The Law (also called the Torah or the Pentateuch - which means five books) is the first five books of the Bible, these tell of the beginnings of the nation of Israel, especially the miraculous work of God in the Exodus from Egypt and the giving of the law through Moses. These books are commonly called the five books of Moses.

Next are the books of the Prophets. The Hebrews divided this section into the Former Prophets and the Latter Prophets. The Former Prophets roughly correspond to the Historical books of the Old Testament (Joshua-Esther) and tell of the history of God's people from the time of their conquest of the Promised Land to their return from exile. The Latter Prophets are generally the records or writings of the ministry of a prophetic spokesman sent from God to speak a message to His people in a historical situation. These are the authoritative words from God to instruct and direct His people in concrete situations. Sometimes they are words of warning and rebuke, but sometimes they are promises of comfort, hope and love.

The Writings are a collection of different kinds of worship or wisdom writings. The book of Psalms is a collection of songs that were used for worship in the nation of Israel. They basically give words to man's proper response to God in many situations of life. These are highly poetic and very beautiful and moving. The books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and Song of Songs are called wisdom literature. They all in one way or another describe or contemplate a certain aspect of life and the proper way to live in God's universe. They could be described as practical advice to live a successful life.

## Keys to understanding the Old Testament

Here are some keys to understanding the historical books (parts of the Pentateuch, Josh-Esther, and parts of the prophets): When God acts, ask what this act reveals about God, His nature and character, and how does this act further his purpose of salvation.

When men act, ask if what they did was right or wrong, if God approved or disapproved and why? Ask how these things fit into God's overall purpose of salvation. Ask how the relationship between God and man is affected by each activity or event.

Here are some keys to understanding the Law: Ask why God would give this law? What does this reveal about the character of God? What does this law reveal about the character and needs of man? What are the stipulations, promises, punishments attached to the law? How does this law fit into the overall scope of Israel's community life and their relation to God?

Here are some keys to understanding the prophets: Try to understand the historical situation in which the prophet was speaking. For example, Jeremiah spoke at a time where the nation was sinning greatly and thought that God would not punish them. Therefore, Jeremiah has a lot to say about the coming judgment from God. The historical books or the introductions to the books in a good study Bible provide valuable help in placing the prophets in history. The main message of the prophets is to call people back to obedience to God's laws, promising reward and threatening punishment. This is usually along two distinct subjects. One is the following of false gods, such as Baal and Ashtoreth. The prophets speak out against false religions. The other is a call to social justice, to stop oppressing the poor and cheating at business, etc. Many times, the prophets speak out to remind the people of the message in Deuteronomy chapter 30, that they will be blessed if they obey God, or cursed if they disobey.

Here are some keys to understanding the poetic passages: Many portions of the writings are highly emotional, crying out for help, rejoicing, crying out against enemies, etc. Try to catch the overall emotional tone, especially in the psalms. The psalms were songs that came out of real life experiences; How do they speak to your real-life experiences and the emotions you go through? A lot of poetry uses figurative language such as calling God a shepherd. Ask yourself what does this symbolism tell us about God. A common feature in Biblical poetry is called parallelism. Parallelism is when two lines of poetry in a row speak about the same thing. This is not just repetition, but is for emphasis. Sometimes they will say the same thing, just in a different way to show a bigger shade of meaning (e.g. Prov 20:1- "Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler"). Sometimes they will say one thing and expand on the meaning in the next line. Sometimes they will say one thing and strengthen in with an opposite example (e.g. Prov 10:1- "a wise son brings joy to his father, but a foolish son grief to his mother").

It is always a good idea to read the introductions to a book in a good Bible to give you an overview of understanding before reading a book. In all your reading you will benefit if you keep in mind and ask yourself the three following questions: What does this teach me about God? What does this teach me about mankind? What does this teach me about the relationship between God and man? After asking these questions, it is very important to ask and respond to this one: What should I do, based upon this Scripture and what it teaches? How should I act? How should I think? etc.

# Key Concepts of the Old Testament

In reading the Old Testament, keep the following concepts in mind because they run through the entire Bible.

## Relationship and Presence

The first idea to keep in mind is that God chooses certain people to be in a special relationship with Him. From the dawn of time God walked and talked with Adam and Eve until they sinned. Later He spoke with Abraham and his family. God's presence was demonstrated in the tabernacle and later in the temple (Ex 25:8- "...have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them."; 1 Kgs 8:13- "...I have indeed built a magnificent temple for you, a place for you to dwell forever."; Ex 29:44-45- "So I will consecrate the Tent of Meeting...then I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God."). This relationship is described in the often repeated phrase "I will be your God and you will be my people" (Jer 31:33 Ezek 14:11, 11:20, Zech 8:8, etc.). This relationship often involves the promise - "I will give you a new heart and a new Spirit".

## Covenant

The next concept is the concept of the covenant. The relationship of God to His people is described by covenants. A Covenant is an agreement, a solemn commitment to an interpersonal relationship initiated by God. A modern example of a covenant would be the covenant of marriage. An ancient example of a covenant would be a covenant between a king and the people whom he ruled. These both are partial but incomplete illustrations of the covenants God made with His people. There are several covenants specifically referred to in the Old Testament.

Each covenant was initiated by God alone. All of the covenants were promises of what God would do for His people. He was responsible to bring about certain benefits that He promised. In some cases, there would be a response required from humans to God's action. These responses were conditions for right relationship with God and the fulfillment of the covenant. Throughout the history of Israel, God reminds His people that the reason they were not fully experiencing the benefits of the covenant was that they had broken their part of the bargain. Not all covenants were conditional and some were promises of God to be fulfilled regardless.

The first covenant was made by God with Noah (Gen 9:8-17). God promised that He would never again destroy the world by flood. He gave the rainbow as a sign of the covenant. This covenant was unconditional.

The next covenant was made with Abraham (Gen 15:9-21, ch 17). God promised Abraham a family, posterity and the possession of the land he inhabited. He was promised a special relationship with God. These promises were unconditional, but Abraham was commanded to undergo circumcision as a sign of the covenant relationship.

The next covenant was made with the nation of Israel in the time of Moses (Ex chs 19-24). After He rescued them from Egypt, God entered into an agreement with His people and made stipulations how this agreement was to be carried out. These stipulations were set out in the Ten commandments and other stipulations of the Law. The people were promised many benefits if they carried out the law and many curses if they failed to carry out the Law.

Another covenant was made with David (2 Sam 7:5-16). In this covenant, God promised to bless David with an everlasting kingdom. God promised that one of his descendants would rule forever. This promise was unconditional and was fulfilled by David's descendant Jesus of Nazareth.

The last major covenant of the Old Testament is the New covenant (Jer 31:31-34). This is a promise that God will enter into an entirely new relationship with His people – writing the Law on their hearts and forgiving their sins. This was a promise made to people in exile and not yet fulfilled at the end of the Old Testament. But it was clearly fulfilled in the New Testament.

## Kingship

The next concept of the Old Testament is Kingship. God appointed rulers throughout the history of Israel. Whether prophets, priests, or kings, they all were under the direct authority of God Himself. There was never a question that God was the ruler of Israel, He appointed certain men at certain times to rule as His representative. Some ruled according to His will and were rewarded. Some were rebellious and were punished. In the history of the Jews, God proved time and time again that He was their true king and was always in charge.

## The conclusion of the Old Testament

The Old Testament by nature is an unfinished story. It ends looking forward to the realization of the New Covenant. There is much "unfinished business" in the Old Testament and it looks forward to a future hope of the work of God to complete his work in history. This fulfillment comes in what we know as the New Testament of the Bible ("testament" and "covenant" mean the same thing). The covenants and works of God find their fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus Christ. As New Testament Christians, we can look back and understand more clearly the Old Testament based on what we know of Christ. A word of caution, however, is that we cannot import meanings into the Old Testament that would have been foreign to the people of the time. Therefore, the Old Testament as a whole is the history of God's work in preparation for final salvation through Israel's Messiah – Jesus. All things were leading to and preparing for the life of Jesus, His death on the cross and resurrection to inaugurate His kingdom on earth, with His people in relation to Him through the realization of the New Covenant.