

## A Passion for God's Word

# 2

## An Anatomy of the Bible

The Bible is a single book, but it is also a composite, made up of many individual parts. It is important, in our study of the Bible to understand both its unity and its diversity. Like a multi-act play, each section of the Bible plays a role in the unfolding drama of God's plan and purpose for mankind. Our purpose in this lesson is to take a birds' eye view of the Bible in order to determine:

- The structure of the Bible
- How the individual parts of the Bible fit together

Familiarity with the Bible is a vital first step in studying the Bible. Once a general anatomy of the Bible is understood, it is much easier to come down to ground level and understand the finer details.

### Read 2 Timothy 3:15

From an early age, Timothy was “acquainted with the holy Scriptures” (KJV). In his letter to Timothy, Paul expresses confidence that this acquaintance with Scripture has provided Timothy with a firm foundation that would not be eroded by the severe testings facing him. For you, too, a thorough acquaintance with the Bible is vital, not just for daily growth as a Christian, but also as steel for your spiritual bones when rough times come.

An intimate knowledge of Scripture is the starting point for an intimate knowledge of God. We trust that over the next few months the Bible will gain for you a warm familiarity, as a natural outworking of an intimate relationship with its Author.

### **The Good, the Bad and the Ignorant**

Ignorance of God's Word is not bliss. Paul writes to the Corinthians and exclaims that “there are some who are ignorant of God – I say this to your shame” (1 Corinthians 15:34). Throughout Scripture, we find an imperative to know God and to know his Word. Time and time again, the writers of the New Testament ask, “Don't you know...?” (see [Romans 3:3](#); [1 Corinthians 3:16](#); [James 4:4](#)).

The sad fact is that many Christians display a dismal ignorance of Scripture. Polls conducted in America showed that the most quoted verse from the Bible is: "God helps those who help themselves."<sup>1</sup> Not only is this not found in the Bible; it is directly opposite to what the Bible actually teaches.

We talk today of people who are computer-illiterate. Yet many Christian believers are Bible-illiterate. What do you think will be the outcome of such a high rate of Bible-illiteracy?

### Read Hosea 4:6

This verse was an indictment against Israel by one of her prophets. Yet it could just as easily be leveled against a sizeable portion of Christians today. Ignorance is not a luxury that we as Christians can afford.

### Read 2 Corinthians 11:3

In the garden of Eden, Satan was able to leverage Eve's poor grasp of God's command to induce her to sin. And Paul says that he's afraid that the same thing is happening all over again in Christian lives. Peter, too, talks of an ignorance that causes people to distort Scripture.

### Read 2 Peter 3:16

No, ignorance is not bliss. Let it never be said of us, as Jesus said of the Sadducees, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God" (Matthew 22:29).

## The Apostles' Teaching

A familiarity with the Bible is the principal antidote to ignorance. As Theodore Roosevelt put it, "A thorough knowledge of the Bible is worth more than a college education."<sup>2</sup> So no matter where you feel you may be in your knowledge of the Scriptures, we now get back to basics. What we will cover in this lesson is not optional. It is the essential foundation for all sound biblical study.

### Read Acts 2:40-42

You will note in this passage that the response of the people to Peter's plea to "save yourselves from this corrupt generation" was that they "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching..." What exactly is the apostles' teaching?

The teaching that the apostles infused in those first century believers was made up of three parts:

- The Old Testament
- The Eyewitness Accounts of Jesus
- The New Testament Letters

Thus what we now know as the Bible – both Old Testament and New Testament (the latter comprising the gospel accounts and the apostles’ letters to the churches) – makes up what the book of Acts calls “the apostles’ teaching.” Let’s take a quick look at these two divisions of the Bible.

## The Canon of Scripture

The Old and the New Testaments form two natural sections to the Bible. In essence, the Old Testament describes God’s plan and purpose in his dealings with mankind up to arrival of Jesus on the scene, while the New Testament describes the coming of Jesus and the impact this had on the world.

What we now have as the Bible is the accepted canon of Scripture. What this means is that the Bible’s contents – with nothing added and nothing subtracted – make up what we call God’s written Word to us, accepted as the complete authority for doctrine and practice.

### *The Old Testament*

The Old Testament *was* the Bible in the early days of the Church. In the first two decades or so after Jesus’ ascension to heaven, there were no full written accounts

of Jesus’ life (although partial accounts had already begun to circulate), nor had the New Testament epistles yet been written. For a look at how the apostles used the Old Testament, read [Acts 8:27-35](#); [Acts 13:32-41](#); [Hebrews 1:4-14](#).

Back in Bible days, there was no such thing as the printing press or even the binding of paper into what we would recognize today as books. Everything had to be written by hand onto either papyrus (an ancient form of paper) or parchment (the skin of an animal). These were usually rolled up into a scroll, with handles at the top and at the bottom, so that at any one time only one portion of the scroll was showing. When a person read from a scroll, they would turn both the top handle and the bottom handle, “scrolling down” through the text until they found the section of Scripture they were looking for. This is where we get the computer term “to scroll down” from.

To see how scrolls were handled in Bible days, read the following passages:

### Languages of the Bible

Most of the Old Testament was written in the ancient Hebrew language and for the most part the New Testament was written in Greek, which was the most commonly spoken language of the Roman empire in that day. But there are a few scattered sections of the Old Testament (portions of Daniel and Ezra) which are written in a third language, Aramaic, which is closely related to Hebrew.

Since Aramaic was the mother tongue of Jesus, the disciples and even Paul, we find scattered use of Aramaic throughout the New Testament too (see [Mark 5:41](#); [Mark 7:34](#); [Matthew 27:46](#); [Galatians 4:6](#)).

There is also one more fact to note. The first century Church generally used a Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint, and all of the Old Testament quotations found in the New Testament come from the Septuagint.

**Read Jeremiah 36:14-23**

**Read Ezekiel 2:9**

**Read Luke 4:16-21**

Because there was no means of mass production of scrolls, each and every scroll had to be hand-copied. This meant that scrolls were not in the possession of most people, and thus were very valuable items.

**Read 2 Timothy 4:13**

Paul had left his collection of Old Testament scrolls at Troas and had to request that Timothy bring them with him. Those scrolls were almost irreplaceable and their value to Paul was immeasurable.

Now because these ancient scrolls and parchments were hand-copied, and because small errors tend to creep into copies over the centuries, the earlier the manuscript, the closer it is to the original text. So just how early are the manuscripts of the Old and New Testaments that have been preserved till today?

We have today a large number of extant manuscripts of Old Testament books. The Nash Papyrus (which dates from the second century BC) and the Cairo Genizah fragments (which date from the sixth to ninth centuries AD) both include portions of the Old Testament. The oldest complete manuscripts of the Old Testament, however, are the Masoretic manuscripts, so named because the scribes who copied these manuscripts were called Masoretes. Before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Masoretic manuscripts were also the oldest Hebrew manuscripts, and they continue to be the principal source for the English translation of the Old Testament that you find in your Bible.

The Dead Sea Scrolls include some of the oldest copies of the Hebrew Old Testament. These manuscripts, which are dated from around 250 years before Christ up to the time of the fall of Jerusalem (in AD 70), are mainly fragments of Scripture, together with various documents containing the rules and regulations of the Essene community at Qumran, but some scrolls have been found that contain whole sections of the Old Testament.

The value of having such a large number of different manuscript types cannot be overestimated. This is because of the issue of copy errors that easily creep into manuscripts over a period of many centuries. No matter how meticulous a copyist may be, small errors can be introduced into a copy. Words can be misspelt, dropped out, or sometimes even added in. Since there are no complete manuscripts of the Old Testament that are older than around AD 900, how can we be certain that the Old Testament that we have printed in our Bibles is a faithful rendition of the original writings of Moses, Isaiah and Daniel?

To give an idea of just how accurate even the medieval Masoretic manuscripts are, scholars do comparisons between manuscripts. Firstly, there is a remarkable accord between different Masoretic manuscripts dating from different periods,

attesting to the high standards of copyist discipline. Secondly, a comparison between the Masoretic text and the text in the Dead Sea Scrolls shows just how little deviation exists in the copying process over a thousand years. Comparing the Masoretic text with one Qumran fragment of Isaiah chapters 38-66, scholars discovered that:

“The text is extremely close to our Masoretic text. A comparison of Isaiah 53 shows that only 17 letters differ from the Masoretic text. Ten of those are mere differences of spelling, like our ‘honor’ or ‘honour’ and produce no change in the meaning at all. Four more are very minor differences, such as the presence of the conjunction, which is often a matter of style. The other three letters are the Hebrew word for ‘light’ which is added after ‘they shall see’ in verse 11. Out of 166 words in this chapter, only this one word is really in question, and it does not at all change the sense of the passage. This is typical of the whole manuscript.”<sup>3</sup>

By and large, the text we now have has been transmitted down through the centuries with an extraordinary degree of accuracy. And because of the range of different manuscripts in Hebrew, together with many ancient translations into other languages, which can also be used as a basis for comparison, scholars are able to determine the original text with a high degree of confidence.

## ***The New Testament***

### **Read 2 Peter 1:16-18**

The apostles taught their converts from the Old Testament, but drew heavily upon the sayings of Jesus and the accounts of his life. Jesus was described as the “Word become flesh” (**John 1:14; 1 John 1:1-3**) and his words were counted from the beginning as equal in authority to Old Testament Scripture (**Matthew 5:21-22; Matthew 24:35**) and, even more importantly, as the fulfillment of Old Testament Scripture (**Matthew 5:17**).

Jesus himself didn’t write any book, although his teachings are recorded in the first four books of the New Testament, and are also scattered throughout the rest of the New Testament (see **Acts 20:35; 1 Corinthians 11:23-25**). Scholars believe, however, that some of the earliest Christian writings were compilations of Christ’s teachings, arranged by subject matter. Although none of these writings have been preserved, it is likely that much of their material was incorporated into the four gospel accounts (note **Luke 1:1-4; John 20:30-31; John 21:25**).

The New Testament, like the Old Testament, was originally written down on papyrus or parchments, which rolled up into scrolls. Later, a new form of book was invented called the codex. With a codex, a reader could flip the pages much as we do today when we read a book.

The New Testament, unlike the Old Testament, was not written in Hebrew, but in Greek, the lingua franca of the Roman Empire.

In the introduction to his outstanding rendition of the New Testament in contemporary English, Eugene Peterson writes:

“A striking feature in [the New Testament] is that it was done in the street language of the day, the idiom of the playground and the marketplace. In the Greek-speaking world of that day, there were two levels of language: formal and informal. Formal language was used to write philosophy and history, government decrees and epic poetry. If someone were to sit down and consciously write for posterity, it would of course be written in this formal language with its learned vocabulary and precise diction. But if the writing was routine – shopping lists, family letters, bills and receipts – it was written in the common, informal idiom of everyday speech, street language. And this is the language used throughout the New Testament.”

Rather than being stodgy and formal, New Testament Greek is common and down-to-earth, reflecting the nature of the Gospel message itself.

By the middle decades of the first century, it was obvious that the Church regarded both the gospel accounts and the writings of the apostles as having authority equal to the Old Testament Scriptures. In **1 Timothy 5:18** Paul quotes an Old Testament passage (**Deuteronomy 25:4**) and one of the sayings of Jesus (**Luke 10:7**) and refers to both as “Scripture.” In **2 Peter 3:15-16**, Peter equates the writings of Paul with “the rest of Scripture.”

## New Testament Manuscripts

There exist today close to 5000 portions or whole manuscripts of the New Testament in Greek. Some papyrus books (and fragments) date back to the 2nd century. The earliest complete copy of the New Testament dates back to the 4th century. Again, the principle of comparison between multiple manuscripts and their fragments provides scholars with a high degree of confidence in the accuracy of the text of the New Testament we now print in our Bibles.

By the latter half of the 2nd century, the Church was largely agreed on the content of the New Testament canon. There were some questions still raised, particularly about some of the epistles at the end of our New Testament, and a few arguments were put forward for other books to be included. By AD 367, Athanasius of Alexandria had compiled the list of 27 books that we now have in our New Testament. This list was not an imposition of his views, but a recognition of the canon already accepted at that time. When a church council finally did make a pronouncement on the issue of the New Testament canon in AD 393, it was in fact simply recording the consensus of the Church at that time.

## Two Halves of One Whole

The Old Testament and the New Testament are two essential and complementary halves of one organic whole. There is a saying worth remembering that describes the relationship between these two halves of the Bible:

- The New Testament is in the Old Testament concealed.
- The Old Testament is in the New Testament revealed.

In the Old Testament we find New Testament truths “concealed” in picture language, while in the New Testament we find Old Testament truths brought to their fulfillment. It has been said that the best commentary on the Old Testament is the New Testament and the best commentary on the New Testament is the Old Testament.

The Dictionary of the Bible puts it this way:

“The two Testaments are so organically interwoven that the authority of the one carries with it the authority of the other. If the [Old Testament] records the divine promise, the New records its fulfillment; if the [Old Testament] tells how preparation was made over many centuries for the coming of Christ, the New tells how he came and what his coming brought about. If even the [Old Testament] writings are able to make the readers ‘wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus’ and equip them thoroughly for the service of God (2 Timothy 3:15-17), how much more is this true of the [New Testament] writings!”<sup>4</sup>

The names “Old Testament” and “New Testament” actually only date back to the close of the second century. Tertullian, one of the Church Fathers, was first to coin the term “Novum Testamentum,” the Latin origin of our term “New Testament.” This word “testament” has the meaning today of “a will” or “a legal settlement,” but when Tertullian first used the term, the meaning he had in mind (based on the Latin, Greek and Hebrew definitions) is actually “covenant,” which means “a binding contract between two people or groups of people.”

In many ways, the terms “Old Covenant” and “New Covenant” are more accurate descriptions than “Old Testament” and “New Testament,” for the two portions of the Bible are in fact two distinct covenants, one flowing from the other.

## The Covenantal Divide

### Read 2 Corinthians 3:6,14

Paul here describes clearly the two covenants. One he calls “old” and the other he calls “new.” The provisions of the Old Covenant were simple:

**Old Covenant:** In order to have right-standing with God, you must abide by the stipulations of his covenant, as described in the Law of Moses. If you do so, you will be blessed. If you do not, you will be cursed.

In the New Covenant, the whole dynamic of our relationship with God has changed.

**New Covenant:** In order to have right-standing with God, you must believe in and confess the Lord Jesus Christ, who acted as your substitute and continues to represent you before God. In him, you have life.

The pivot point, where the old turned into the new, is the coming of Jesus, which culminated in his death, resurrection and ascension.

### Read 1 Corinthians 11:25

The Cross of Christ is the dividing line between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. This has an amazing impact on the way we now approach God.

It is important to understand the relationship between these two covenants and, in particular, where one ends and the other begins. The Cross of Christ is a dividing line, a covenantal barrier, a filter through which some things pass and others do not. For example, we know that the sacrifice of lambs as prescribed in the Law does not pass through the barrier of the Cross, but what about the rest of the Law?

We will be taking this issue up as we continue this course in Biblical Studies. But for now, it is essential to understand that while the Old Testament is still the Word of God and an essential foundation to our understanding of the New Testament, the covenantal provisions detailed in the Old Testament no longer apply to us. They have been superceded by a whole new set of covenantal provisions, as described in the New Testament.

### Read Hebrews 8:13

The book of Hebrews was written before the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. The “old covenant” described by the writer has now, in fact, disappeared, just as he predicted it would. It did so when the temple system of sacrifice, so essential to the Old Covenant, was destroyed. Even religious Jews today cannot totally fulfil the obligations of the Old Covenant because of the absence of a sacrificial system.

But note what the writer to the Hebrews is emphasizing: “What is obsolete will soon pass away.” By this he meant that the abolition of the sacrificial system was a natural outworking of the fact that it had been made obsolete. And what made it obsolete was the Cross of Christ.

### Read Hebrews 10:1-3

### Read Hebrews 9:13-14

This does not mean that the Old Testament itself is flawed, but that the Old Covenant was incomplete. It was a “shadow of the good things” unveiled in the New Covenant. The Old Covenant depended on and anticipated the Cross of Christ, which would fulfil it and complete it (see [Matthew 5:17](#)).

As Arthur Pink observed:

“The Old Testament Scriptures are fundamentally a stage on which is shown forth in vivid symbolism and ritualism the whole plan of redemption. The events recorded in the Old Testament were actual occurrences, yet they were

also typical prefigurations. Throughout the Old Testament dispensations God caused to be shadowed forth...the whole work of redemption by means of a constant and vivid appeal to the senses. This was in full accord with a fundamental law in the economy of God. Nothing is brought to maturity at once. As it is in the natural world, so it is in the spiritual: there is first the blade, then the ear, and then the full corn in the ear.”<sup>5</sup>

Everything in the Old Testament is building up to the coming of Christ. Thus, without the context of the New Testament, the Old Testament has no purpose. And without the context of the Old Testament, the New Testament has no roots.

**Read Hebrews 1:1-3**

## **Unfolding of the Mystery**

**Read Romans 16:25-26**

The New Testament describes God’s plan of salvation through Christ a “mystery.” According to the Dictionary of the Bible, Paul’s use of the Greek word for mystery “meant not something obscure or incomprehensible, but a secret imparted only to the initiated, what is unknown until it is revealed.”<sup>6</sup>

All the hints of God’s coming salvation can be clearly seen in the pages of the Old Testament, now that we have the benefit of hindsight (see **Romans 1:2; Galatians 3:8**). But to the people of God in Old Testament times, God’s plan was veiled. There was a sense of it being hidden, and many godly people had the desire to probe this mystery, to find out the hidden secret of what God had planned.

**Read 1 Peter 1:10-11**

The wonder of the gospel is that we, as believers in Christ, have had revealed to us what so many in the Old Testament longed for (**Luke 10:23-24**). And what is this mystery that so many longed to understand?

**Read 1 Timothy 3:16**

The New Testament tells us that the mystery is Christ himself. In Ephesians 3:4 the mystery is called “mystery of Christ” (**Ephesians 3:4**), and is described in verse 8-9 as “the unsearchable riches of Christ.”

**Read Colossians 2:2-3**

Who would have thought that God would wrap up his entire plan of salvation into one person, his Son! This is the core of the mystery of God’s plan of salvation, as hinted at in the Old Testament and fully revealed in the New. In several of his letters, Paul describes how this mystery of salvation in Christ works for us. He says that the mystery is...

- That Christ in you is the hope of glory (**Colossians 1:26-27**)

- That Jew and Gentile have become one new man in Christ (**Ephesians 3:2-6**)
- That the Church has become united with Christ (**Ephesians 5:31-32**)
- That God will bring all things under one head, Christ (**Ephesians 1:9-10; Romans 11:25-32**)

### Read 2 Corinthians 3:13-16

When we come to Christ, the veil is taken off our hearts so that we can finally see what has been there all along. The Holy Spirit anoints your heart, reveals the mystery of salvation contained within it, and makes the Bible into a united whole for you. Think of it! We now have what the prophets of old longed for!

### Read 1 Corinthians 2:7-16

Note that Paul here quotes from an Old Testament passage – **Isaiah 64:4**. This statement was true in Isaiah's time, but Paul declares that it is no longer true for the Christian! We now *do* know what God has prepared for those who love him, because the Spirit of God has revealed it to us through his Word!

This is what lies ahead for you in the Biblical Studies Course. Step by step, lesson by lesson, we will be probing the wonder of God's salvation and the mystery of what he has planned for you. What treasures lie hidden just below the surface of God's Word, ready to be exposed to the heart that is hungry for God!

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<sup>1</sup> George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998), p.22.

<sup>2</sup> *Draper's Quotations for the Christian World*, excerpted from Compton's Interactive Bible NIV.

<sup>3</sup> R. Laird Harris, "How Reliable is the Old Testament Text?" in Gordon Clark, *Can I Trust My Bible?* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1963), p.124.

<sup>4</sup> *The Dictionary of the Bible*, excerpted from Compton's Interactive Bible NIV.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *The Divine Inspiration of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1976), p. 49.

<sup>6</sup> *The Dictionary of the Bible*, excerpted from Compton's Interactive Bible NIV.