

GOD'S BIG PICTURE

Tracing the storyline
of the Bible

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Introduction

The Bible is one book

Ignorance of the Bible

A police inspector went to visit a primary school, where he was asked to take a Scripture class. He began by asking, 'Who knocked down the walls of Jericho?'

There was a long silence as the children shuffled nervously on their seats. Eventually, a little lad put up his hand and said, 'Please sir, my name is Bruce Jones. I don't know who did it but it wasn't me.'

The policeman thought that reply very cheeky, so he reported the incident to the headmaster. After a pause the headmaster replied, 'I know Bruce Jones; he's an honest chap. If he said he didn't do it, then he didn't.'

The inspector was exasperated. The headmaster was either rude or very ignorant. The inspector wrote to the Department of Education to complain, and received this response: 'Dear Sir, We are sorry to hear about the walls of Jericho and that nobody has admitted causing the damage. If you send us an estimate we will see what we can do about the cost.'

It is a silly story and it is probably not true, but it does make a point. A few decades ago everyone would have known about Joshua and the walls of Jericho. A large proportion of children went to Sunday school, and the rest still received a grounding in the main stories of the Bible in class. But those days are gone. I mentioned the prodigal son to an Oxford student recently. He looked blankly at me. The average non-Christian is almost completely ignorant of the contents of the Bible. It remains the world's best-selling book; one and a quarter million copies are sold in the UK alone every year. But although many have a copy on their shelves, very few ever read it.

The knowledge of Christians is often not much better. We all have our favourite passages, but much of Scripture remains uncharted territory, especially the Old Testament. If we are honest, we find it outdated and rather un-Christian at times. What have dietary laws, animal sacrifices and the temple got to do with Jesus Christ? And what about the exodus from Egypt, David and Goliath, and Daniel in the lion's den? They are great stories, but what relevance have they got for us today? I hope this book will answer those questions, or at least give you a framework that will enable you to answer them for yourself. Its aim is to help Christians to find their way around the Bible and to see how it all holds together and points us to Jesus.

A diverse collection of writings

The Bible is a diverse collection of different writings. It contains sixty-six books written by about forty human authors over nearly 2,000 years. It has two main sections (Old Testament and New Testament) written in two main languages (Hebrew and Greek respectively), and includes a mixture of types of literature.

History	Poetry	Prophecy
(Genesis to Esther)	(Job to Song of Songs)	(Isaiah to Malachi)

Figure 1. The Old Testament (English Bible)

In our English Bibles, the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament are arranged as in Figure 1. This order follows the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, made in the third century BC.

The original Hebrew Bible arranges the books in a different order, listed in Figure 2.

Law	Prophets	Writings
Genesis to Deuteronomy	<i>Former Prophets</i> (history books Joshua to 2 Kings) <i>Latter Prophets</i> (Isaiah to Malachi)	Psalms, wisdom literature, history of the exile and beyond

Figure 2. The Old Testament (Hebrew Bible)

The New Testament consists of twenty-seven books, all written in the first century AD. The Gospels are four accounts of the birth, life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus. Acts, written by Luke as a continuation of his Gospel, records the spread of the good news about Jesus after his ascension into heaven. The Epistles are letters written mainly by those chosen by Christ to be his apostles. The Holy Spirit revealed to them all the truth about Christ so they could teach the full significance of his salvation and its implications. Paul wrote most of the Epistles (Romans to

Philemon), but the New Testament also contains letters from Peter, John, James (the brother of Jesus) and Jude. No-one knows who wrote the letter to the Hebrews. That just leaves the last book of the Bible: Revelation. It describes a vision that John was given of spiritual realities normally hidden from view. (See Figure 3.)

Gospels	Matthew, Mark, Luke, John
Acts	Luke's history of the spread of the gospel in the first century
Epistles	Romans to Jude (letters written mostly by the apostle Paul)
Revelation	John's vision from God

Figure 3. The New Testament

One author

Although the Bible contains a great variety of material, written by many human authors over a long period of time, it holds together as a unity. Fundamentally, it is just one book written by one author with one main subject. As those truths underlie everything that is written in the rest of *God's Big Picture*, it is important that we understand them before we continue.

The apostle Paul wrote, 'All scripture is God-breathed' (2 Timothy 3:16). Most of the New Testament had not been written down at that time, so he was referring to what we know as the Old Testament. But the New Testament writers made a similar claim about what they wrote. They were convinced that their teaching was also the very Word of God (e.g. 1 Corinthians 14:37; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Peter 3:16).

Muslims are taught that Muhammad had no creative role in the production of their holy book. He acted simply as a secretary who wrote down what was dictated to him by Allah via the angel Gabriel. They would be outraged by the suggestion that the Qur'an was in any way a human book. But Christians should have no qualms about accepting that the Bible was written by people. Its books were written by a variety of authors at different times in history and bear the marks of the personalities and eras that produced them. But God ensured by his Spirit that everything they wrote was exactly what he wanted them to write. Just as the Lord Jesus was both fully human and fully divine, so the Bible is both a human and a divine book. It is God's Word: he is the ultimate author.

One subject

The Bible obviously covers a great deal of ground. But there is one supreme subject that binds it all together: Jesus Christ and the salvation God offers through him. That is true not just of the New Testament but of the Old as well. Jesus, speaking of the Old Testament, said, 'These are the Scriptures that testify about me' (John 5:39). After he had risen from the dead he met two believers on the road to Emmaus and led them in a Bible study. What a privilege for them! 'Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself' (Luke 24:27). A short time later he met with his disciples and said, 'This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms' (Luke 24:44). He refers there to the three main divisions of the Hebrew Bible (the Writings were sometimes called 'the Psalms' because the Psalms made up the largest part of them). The apostle

Paul also believed that the Old Testament points to Jesus. He spoke of 'the holy Scriptures [the Old Testament] which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus' (2 Timothy 3:15).

Many Christians have an idea that God decided to send Jesus to earth only after his first plan had failed; his original idea (Plan A) was to give people an opportunity to become his people by obeying his law. But they failed, so he scratched his head and came up with another idea (Plan B): to save people by grace through the death of Jesus. Nothing could be further from the truth. God had always planned to send Jesus. The whole Bible points to him from beginning to end. In the Old Testament God points forward to him and promises his coming in the future. In the New Testament God proclaims him to be the one who fulfils all those promises (Figure 4).

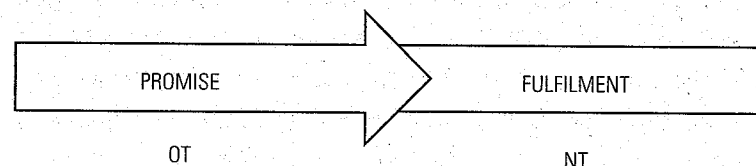


Figure 4. God's plan

Not a book of quotations

The fact that the Bible is one book should have big implications for the way we read it. The way you read a book depends on the kind of book you think it is. So, for example, we do not read a Shakespeare play in the same way as a telephone directory, or a novel in the same way as a book of quotations. I have just opened a book of political quotations at random and read Winston Churchill's comment on Field Marshall Montgomery: 'In defeat unbeatable;

in victory unbearable.' The compiler of that book does not expect me to read those words in context. I do not have to read the quotations that appear immediately before and after it. Each saying in the book stands alone.

A novel works very differently. Each sentence is meant to be understood in the light of the whole. Turning to a random page in Agatha Christie's *The Body in the Library* I read, 'Risk everything – that's my motto! Yes, it's a lucky thing for me that somebody strangled that poor kid.' I am left confused. Who is speaking? And who has been strangled? If I am to understand the story, I need to know what happened before and learn what happens afterwards.

It is the same with the Bible. With the exception of some of the Proverbs, the Bible does not contain isolated sayings. I should be wary about dipping into it at random and extracting individual verses without any regard for their context. I am almost bound to misunderstand the Bible if I read it in that way. Each verse needs to be understood in the context of the chapter in which it appears, and each chapter in the light of the book as a whole. And there is a wider context we must consider as well: the whole Bible.

Not a collection of books

I own a collection of Hermann Hesse novels. Each is an individual book that can be read and understood in isolation from the others; they just happen to be bound in the same cover. Many people read the Bible as if it were like that: a collection of independent books that can each be read without reference to the others. That was how I was taught the Bible at university. We looked for the message of Ezekiel, Jonah or John without considering how those biblical books contribute to and fit in with the message of the Bible as a whole. And there was a great division between

the Old and New Testaments. I was criticized when I mentioned Jesus in an answer to the question, 'Who is the servant in Isaiah's prophecy?' We were discouraged from reading the Bible as the Bible itself demands to be read: as one book that presents the unfolding story of God's plan to save the world through his Son Jesus. If we want to understand any part of the Bible properly, we must consider where it fits in that great plan and how it contributes to it.

One book

Andy's children are avid readers. He has just bought the latest whodunnit for Matt. Lizzie announces that she wants to read it too. The bookshop is out of stock and Lizzie will accept no substitute, nor will she wait for her brother to finish it. In desperation, Andy takes the book and tears it in half and gives his children half each. Both are soon very frustrated. Matt discovers that Colonel Bufton-Tufton has been killed with a candlestick in the billiard room, but his part of the book ends before he can find out who committed the crime. Lizzy reads that 'the butler did it', but she has no idea what he did.

No-one would really be so foolish as to divide a whodunnit like that. Both parts must be read together; they do not make sense otherwise. The same is true of the Bible. The Old Testament on its own is an unfinished story; a promise without a fulfilment. We must read on to the New Testament if we want to know what it really means. And the New Testament constantly looks back to the promise it fulfils. We shall not make much sense of it if we are not aware of what has come before. What does it mean that Jesus is the Christ, the Passover lamb, the Son of Abraham and Son of David, the true vine or the good shepherd?¹ The answers are all found in the Old Testament. The Bible must be

understood and read as one book with one ultimate author, God, and one ultimate subject, God's plan of salvation through his Son Jesus.

I am told that when SAS soldiers parachute into unknown territory they are trained to pause before moving. They must first get their bearings and only then set out for their destination. That is wise advice for us too as we read the Bible. My aim in this book is to give you an overview of the main storyline of the Bible. It will not make you an expert in all the details of Scripture, but I hope that it will enable you to get your bearings when you land in any part of it. By the end of this book you should have the outline of the Bible's story in your mind so that, whichever part you are reading, you should know where you have come from and where you are heading. That will also help you to discover how each part points to Jesus Christ and the salvation he accomplished.

The kingdom of God

Scholars have debated for years whether or not it is possible to point to a unifying theme that binds the whole Bible together. Many have argued that the search for such a theme is fruitless: it is better just to accept that Scripture contains a number of different threads and then look at them individually without trying to unite them. They warn of the danger of squeezing all parts of the Bible into a mould rather than letting them speak individually in their rich variety. That is an important warning that must be heard. Any unifying theme that is used to help us to see how the Bible fits together must arise out of Scripture itself, rather than being imposed upon it; and it must be broad enough to allow each part to make its own distinct contribution. The theme of the kingdom of God satisfies both requirements.

God's kingdom was the dominant theme in Jesus' teaching. He began his public ministry by proclaiming, 'The time has come . . . The kingdom of God is near' (Mark 1:15). He taught that his mission was to introduce the kingdom in fulfilment of the prophecies of the Old Testament. Although the expression 'kingdom of God' does not appear in the Old Testament, the concept certainly does. Graeme Goldsworthy, in his book *Gospel and Kingdom*, helpfully presents the kingdom as the binding theme of the whole Bible. I am following his lead in this book. This 'kingdom approach' is not the only way of looking at the contents of the Bible. Others, for example, prefer a 'covenantal approach' and take God's covenant to be the centre around which all the elements of Scripture circle. I hope it will become clear that these two approaches are not contradictory. God's covenant promises are kingdom promises.

The kingdom of God:
God's people in God's place under God's rule and blessing

Figure 5. The kingdom of God

Goldsworthy defines the kingdom as 'God's people in God's place under God's rule' (Figure 5).² That may sound like an overly simplistic definition for such a significant theme in Scripture, but the simple words contain great depth. God longs for human beings to enjoy an intimate relationship with him in his presence. As he is a perfect, holy God, that is possible only as we submit to his loving rule and do not sin. That is life at its best; life as it was designed to be lived.

To live under God's rule means to enjoy God's blessing; the two go together. That is what we see at the creation in

the garden of Eden until the fall. But then human beings disobey God and forgo his blessing. The consequences are devastating not just for humanity but for the whole creation; everything is spoilt. But in his great love God promises to put things right again and re-establish his kingdom on earth. The rest of the Bible tells the story of the fulfilment of that promise: partially in Israel's history in the Old Testament period, and then perfectly through Jesus Christ. So the Bible is about God's plan of salvation: his promise to restore his kingdom, and then the fulfilment of that promise through his Son Jesus.

A Bible overview

When I studied English literature at school I found it a great help to buy a study guide to whichever book I was reading. It would always give a synopsis of the main sections, which summarized a long book in just a page or two. (See Figure 6.) I have divided the Bible into eight sections, which are the main epochs in God's unfolding plan to restore his kingdom. The names I have given these sections provide the chapter

The Old Testament

1. The pattern of the kingdom
2. The perished kingdom
3. The promised kingdom
4. The partial kingdom
5. The prophesied kingdom

The New Testament

6. The present kingdom
7. The proclaimed kingdom
8. The perfected kingdom

Figure 6. An overview of the Bible

headings for the rest of this book. Forgive the alliteration, which has resulted in one or two rather weak headings. I have stuck with it to make it easier for you to remember them.

The Old Testament

1. *The pattern of the kingdom.* In the garden of Eden we see the world as God designed it to be. God's people, Adam and Eve, live in God's place, the garden, under his rule as they submit to his word. And to be under God's rule in the Bible is always to enjoy his blessing; it is the best way to live. God's original creation shows us a model of his kingdom as it was meant to be.

2. *The perished kingdom.* Sadly, Adam and Eve think life would be better if they lived independently of God. The results are disastrous. They are no longer God's people. They turn away from him and he responds by turning away from them. They are no longer in God's place; he banishes them from the garden. And they are not under God's rule, so they do not enjoy his blessing. Instead, they face his curse and are under his judgment. The situation is very gloomy. But God, in his great love, is determined to restore his kingdom.

3. *The promised kingdom.* God calls Abraham and makes some unconditional promises to him: through Abraham's descendants he will re-establish his kingdom. They will be his people, living in his land and enjoying his blessing, and through them all peoples on earth will be blessed. That promise is the gospel. It is partially fulfilled in the history of Israel, but is only finally fulfilled through Jesus Christ.

4. *The partial kingdom.* The Bible records how God's promises to Abraham are partially fulfilled in the history of Israel. Through the exodus from Egypt, God makes Abraham's descendants his very own people. At Mount Sinai he gives them his law so that they might live under his rule and enjoy

his blessing, as Adam and Eve had done before they sinned. The blessing is marked chiefly by God's presence with his people in the tabernacle. Under Joshua they enter the land and, by the time of Kings David and Solomon, they enjoy peace and prosperity there. That was the high point of the history of Israel. They were God's people in God's place, the land of Canaan, under God's rule and therefore enjoying his blessing. But the promises to Abraham had still not been completely fulfilled. The problem was sin, the continual disobedience of the people of Israel. That was soon to lead to the dismantling of the partial kingdom as Israel fell apart.

5. *The prophesied kingdom.* After the death of King Solomon civil war broke out and the kingdom of Israel split into two parts: Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Neither was strong. After 200 years of separate existence, the northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians. The southern kingdom struggled on for another century, but then it too was conquered and its inhabitants were taken into exile in Babylon. During this depressing period in their history God spoke to the people of Israel and Judah through some prophets. He explained that they were being punished for their sin but still offered hope for the future. The prophets pointed forward to a time when God would act decisively through his King, the Messiah, to fulfil all his promises. The people of Judah must have thought that that time had come when they were allowed to return from exile, but God made it clear that the great time of salvation was still in the future. That is where the Old Testament ends: waiting for God's King to appear to introduce his kingdom.

The New Testament

6. *The present kingdom.* Four hundred years passed after the completion of the Old Testament before Jesus began his public

ministry with the words, 'The time has come . . . The kingdom of God is near' (Mark 1:15). The waiting was over; God's king had come to establish God's kingdom. His life, teaching and miracles all proved that he was who he said he was: God himself in human form. He had the power to put everything right again, and he chose a very surprising way of doing it: by dying in weakness on a cross. It was by his death that Jesus dealt with the problem of sin and made it possible for human beings to come back into relationship with his Father. The resurrection proved the success of Jesus' rescue mission on the cross and announced that there is hope for our world. Those who trust in Christ can look forward to eternal life with him.

7. *The proclaimed kingdom.* By his death and resurrection Jesus did all that was necessary to put everything right again and completely restore God's kingdom. But he did not finish the job when he was first on earth. He ascended into heaven and made it clear that there would be a delay before he returned. The delay is to enable more people to hear about the good news of Christ so they can put their trust in him and be ready for him when he comes. We live during this period, which the Bible calls 'the last days'. It began on the Day of Pentecost when God sent the Spirit to equip his church to tell the whole world about Christ.

8. *The perfected kingdom.* One day Christ will return. There will be a great division. His enemies will be separated from his presence in hell, but his people will join him in a perfect new creation. Then at last the gospel promises will be completely fulfilled. The book of Revelation describes a fully restored kingdom: God's people, Christians from all nations, in God's place, the new creation (heaven), under God's rule and therefore enjoying his blessing. And nothing can spoil this happy ending. It is no fairy story; they really will all live happily ever after.