

from creation to
new creation



Making sense of the whole Bible story

Tim Chester

From Creation to New Creation
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The book is dedicated to my daughters, Katie and Hannah, with the prayer that they will grow to love this story as much as I do.

Introduction

I was visiting some Jewish friends. The wife teaches in the sabbath school at the local synagogue. I picked up a commentary on the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) and started flicking through it. She enthused about the commentary and asked what I thought. I said: “It’s a bit like hearing a joke without the punchline. It’s missing the point of the Torah, which is Jesus Christ.” My friends know that Christians believe Jesus is the promised Messiah. But they were surprised by my response. “What?” they said. “You believe *all* the Bible points to Jesus?”

John 5 v 39-40

“You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.”

The Scriptures, says Jesus, are about Him.

Luke 24 v 25-27, 44-47

He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?”

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

Figure 1: The Hebrew Bible and the English Bible

The English Bible

History		Wisdom	Prophecy
Law	History		
Genesis to Deuteronomy	Joshua to Esther	Job to Song of Solomon	Isaiah to Malachi

The Hebrew Bible

The Law	The Prophets		The Writings
	Former	Latter	
Genesis to Deuteronomy	Joshua to 1 and 2 Kings (minus Ruth)	Isaiah to Malachi (minus Lam and Dan)	Ps, Job, Prov, Ruth, Song, Ecc. Lam, Esther, Dan, Ezra, Neh, 1 and 2 Chron.

He said to them, “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.”

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.”

The Hebrew Bible is arranged differently from the Old Testament in our English bibles (see Figure 1). So when Jesus says: “Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24 v 44), He is talking about the Old Testament (“the Psalms”

was often used as a shorthand for all the books in the section called the Writings).

Jesus explains how “all the Scriptures” are about Him. What is written in the Scriptures is this: “The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24 v 46-47). On the first Easter Day the risen Christ expounds the Scriptures. He shows that all the Old Testament points to Him: His death, His resurrection and His proclamation to the nations. It is not just that there are a few messianic prophecies dotted around. The whole Bible is about Jesus, from beginning to end.

Most people read detective novels from beginning to end, pitting their wits against the author, trying to pick up the clues and work out who did it. But some people like to read the last chapter first. They want to know from the beginning how it will end. Then, as they read the rest of the book, it makes sense straight away. As Christians we should read the Bible—and especially the Old Testament—in this second way. We should read it at all times through Jesus Christ, so that we can make sense of it as we go along.

There are two implications of this:

We need Christ to understand the Bible

Christ is the key that unlocks the meaning of the Scriptures. The Bible makes sense as we see it focused on Him. This especially needs to be said of the Old Testament. We can only understand the Old Testament when we see how it points to Jesus. Jesus gives the Bible meaning. Thinking about how Jesus fulfils the promises and story of the Old Testament enables us to read the Old Testament as Christians.

We need the Old Testament to understand Christ

The New Testament writers understood Jesus in Old Testament categories. They wrote of Christ as the fulfiller of the Old Testament. We can only fully understand who Jesus is and what He has done as we understand the Old Testament background that the New Testament writers drew upon to explain Him.

Biblical theology is the term used for this approach to the Bible. The term can be used in a wide sense to mean theology that is based on, and true to, the Bible. But it is also used in a narrower sense to mean looking at how the Bible fits together. It enables us to see how the parts relate to the whole. Without a sense of the whole—of the overall plan of salvation—we will find it hard to understand the parts. And by understanding the whole we grow in our understanding of who God is, what He has done and what He will do. We grow in our understanding of our place within those purposes. Biblical theology gives us a biblical worldview. Maybe sometimes we wish the Bible was written in the form of an encyclopaedia of theology and ethics in which we could look up God under “g” and prayer under “p”. But it is not: it is a story. Understanding the story is the only way to understand the Bible and its theology. It is the way the New Testament writers used the Old Testament.

Biblical theology also safeguards us from two common ways of *misreading* the Bible, especially the Old Testament—allegorising and moralising.

Allegorising

Allegorising, or spiritualising, is reading a meaning into a passage from outside. Characters or events are said to represent “spiritual” truths. Allegorising bypasses the plain meaning of the words and looks instead for hidden

meanings. An example is seeing David's defeat of Goliath as a model for Christians, who fight against their "giants" with the "stones" of prayer, faith and so on. The meaning we give to the "stones" in this instance is ultimately arbitrary. The problem with this is that the Bible can be made to mean anything at the whim of the reader. But God has not **hidden** truth in the Bible, but **revealed** it in a way that is open to all.

Moralising

Moralising sees the stories of the Old Testament as moral tales written to instruct us. The problem with this is that they are often immoral tales with morally complex characters. It is often unclear whether the actions of a character are a good or bad example to us. Jephthah, for example, vows to sacrifice the first thing he sees on his return from victory, but the first thing he sees is his daughter (Judges 11). Is Jephthah a warning against rash promises or an example of devotion of God? In order to decide we employ, at best, principles from elsewhere in Scripture and, at worst, our own prejudice. In reality, the story of the Old Testament is first and foremost God's story. Moralising bypasses Christ, reducing the message of the Bible to a message of moral rectitude rather than a message of salvation and grace. It is not the case that salvation is gained by obeying the law in the Old Testament and by faith in Christ in the New Testament. The message of the Bible from start to finish is that salvation is by grace.

Both allegorising and moralising involve reading into the text of Scripture something from outside. As a result we do not hear the word of God, but some other voice. Even at its best—when it is New Testament truth read into the

Old Testament—it does not allow us to hear the authentic voice of the Old Testament as it witnesses to Christ. As a result our understanding and appreciation of Christ are impoverished.

The story of a promise

The Bible is the story of God's salvation. Genesis 1 – 3 describes how God made the world good and made humanity to enjoy His world. He placed us under His good rule—a rule that brought life and freedom. But humanity rejected God's rule and incurred God's wrath. The rest of the Bible is the story of how God sets about restoring what was lost and fulfilling His purposes in creation. At the heart of that is a promise.

Genesis 12 v 1-7

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.

"I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

Abram travelled through the land as far as the site of the

great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

There are three core elements to this promise:

1. A people who know God

“I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing” (Genesis 12 v 2).

2. A land of blessing

“The LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land”” (Genesis 12 v 7).

3. Blessing to the nations

“I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12 v 3).

Some people see the promise to Abraham as a people, a land and blessing. While we can view the patterns of biblical theology differently, it seems to me that the emphasis falls on the nations as the third element of the promise. “Blessing” in the context of Genesis has specific content. It is blessing in the face of the curse God has declared on creation. The fall led to a curse and now God promises a blessing. He promises, in other words, to reverse the judgment brought about by humanity’s disobedience. The promise of blessing is a promise to rescue us from sin and judgment. The promise of a people is part of that rescue: a

people alienated from God and one another will become a new humanity who are God's people. The promise of a land is also part of that promise: we will return to a place of blessing in a restored Eden. The promise of blessing is not additional to the promise of a people and a land, for the blessing consists in being the people who know God in the place blessed by God. The additional element, therefore, is that this blessing will extend to all peoples.

There is one further element to add.

4. A King and a kingdom

This promise of a King and a kingdom runs throughout the Bible. It is anticipated in the promise to Abraham. In Genesis 12 God promises Abraham not simply a people but "a nation"—a word that describes a political entity. God says to Abraham: "I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you" (Genesis 17 v 6). But this element of the promise of salvation comes in a new and distinctive way to David.

2 Samuel 7 v 11-16

"The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men. But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your house and your kingdom shall endure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever."

The promises—or different dimensions to the one promise of salvation—drive the Bible story. The promises are affirmed in covenants with Abraham, with Moses, with David and in the new covenant that Christ makes. A covenant is a formally agreed promise—a “contract”, we might say today. There are different covenants, but underlying them is one promise.

Galatians 3 v 8

The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: “All nations will be blessed through you.”

Paul says that the promise to Abraham is the gospel announced in advance. The promise that was made to Abraham is the same promise that comes to us in the gospel.

The Bible is the story of how God fulfils this promise to Abraham. The Old Testament is the story of how God partially fulfils the promise in the life of Israel. But each partial fulfilment points to its ultimate fulfilment through Jesus. And along the way the promise gets bigger because God’s ultimate purposes are for a new humanity in a new creation. The promise is fulfilled *through* Jesus and *in* the new creation.

In the rest of this book we are going to trace each of these elements of the promise of salvation through the Bible.

This book can be read in two ways. You can read about each element of the promise in turn, tracing it through the Bible (reading vertically down Figure 2). Alternatively you can read about each stage in the Bible story, exploring what is happening to the promise of salvation at that point in the story (reading horizontally across Figure 2). To help you do

Figure 2: Summary

	A people who know God	A place of blessing	A king and a kingdom	Blessing to the nations
Creation (Gen. 1 – 2)	Humanity with God	At home in Eden	God rules through His word	Commanded to fill the earth
Fall (Gen. 3 – 11)	Humanity alienated	Expelled from Eden	God's rule rejected	The nations against God
Abraham (Gen. 12 – 50)	A people promised	A land promised	God rules through His covenant promise	Promised blessings to all nations
Israel (Ex. – Kings)	A people set free	A land given with Jerusalem and temple	God rules through His king	Called to draw the nations to God's rule
Decline into exile (2 Kings)	A people in captivity	A land lost, Jerusalem and temple destroyed	God rules through the prophetic word	Drawn to the ways of the nations
Prophecy	A remnant people	A land to be restored with a new Jerusalem	God will rule through a coming king	Judgment and salvation will come to the nations
Jesus	JESUS			
The church	A new people	Blessing in Christ and God's living temple	King Jesus rules through the gospel	The gospel to all nations
New creation	A new humanity	A new creation	God's everlasting rule of freedom	People from every nation

this each chapter uses the same headings (the headings in first column of Figure 2).

The aim of this book is to give you a sense of how the different elements of God's promise of salvation unfold. This in turn will enable you to begin to read the Bible as a

whole and see how it applies to us as Christians today. As you read a passage of the Bible ask yourself the following questions:

- What is happening to each element of the promise at this point in the story?
- What does this story tell us about God and His rule?
- How does this section contrast with, point to or illuminate the work of Christ?
- How does this section give us confidence in the word of promise that comes to us in the gospel?
- What does this section tell us about how people are to respond to the word of promise?

At the end of each chapter I have tried to sketch out how this might be done, using the book of Nehemiah as a case study to illustrate the principles involved.

But before we begin to explore how the promise of salvation unfolds, we must get an overview of the Bible story. If you are already familiar with the story of the Bible, you might want to skip the next chapter and go on to Chapter Two.