

INTRODUCTION

This booklet is written for people who:

- **are Christians**
- **value reading the Bible**
- **have been reading it for maybe one or two years**
- **have perhaps been using ‘study notes’**
- **BUT—feel there must be more to the Bible than they are now getting out of it.**

It will not tell you everything there is to know about Bible study—that is a lifetime’s work. Nor does it set out to prove the truth of the Bible, or to answer all the questions you might have.

Its aim is to help you study the Bible more effectively for yourself. In the process, it will introduce you to some of the ideas and insights which are available to the experts (who are really just ‘experienced beginners’) but which are often contained in large and expensive books. This booklet is not a substitute for those other books—indeed it freely uses ideas taken out of them. (I have given the titles of some of these on pages 3 and 4.) My hope is that you will go on and read some of them for yourself, especially if you find this booklet too ‘condensed’. But my immediate aim is to save you time, trouble and expense, and to point you in the right direction for more fruitful Bible study.

I am assuming three things from the beginning:

- 1. That the Bible is God’s written Word.**
- 2. That the basic message of the Bible is clear to any Christian reader. (The older generations of Christians referred to this as the ‘perspicuity’ of Scripture—**

**meaning you could see through it clearly, like
'Perspex'!)**

**3. That the more we know about the Bible and how to
study it, the more effective our study will be.**

PART ONE

An overview of the Bible



What is the Bible?

I am assuming you have already read at least some of the Bible. You will have realised from this that the Bible—a word which just means ‘the Book’—is a collection of smaller books (sixty-six in all) in a variety of styles and on a variety of subjects.

The Bible translations we have today are mostly based on the Hebrew ‘Masoretic Text’ for the Old Testament and the best Greek texts now available for the New Testament. New Bible versions are NOT just updates of older versions. Producing a new Bible translation is not like playing ‘Chinese Whispers’! A lot of work goes into researching and understanding the best texts available, which is why new translations sometimes differ from the old.

The **order** of books in our **Old Testament** follows that of a very early (3rd century BC) translation made by Jewish scholars of the Hebrew Bible into Greek. This was called the Septuagint, from the Latin for seventy, since it was supposed to have had seventy translators. You will often see it referred to as the ‘LXX’. The layout of the Hebrew Bible and the LXX may be compared as follows:

HEBREW	LXX
Law Five ‘Books of Moses’.	Five ‘Books of Moses’.
Prophets “Former” (Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Samuel). “Latter” (3 ‘Major’, i.e. Longer and 12 ‘Minor’, i.e. shorter, prophets).	Mixture of history and ‘wisdom’ books from Joshua to Song of Solomon. ‘Major’ prophets & Lamentations.
Writings Everything else.	Daniel & 12 ‘Minor’ prophets.

As you can see, the structure of the Hebrew Bible is more theologically systematic than that of the LXX, and you can perhaps now understand why Jesus referred to the Scriptures as “the Law and the Prophets”.

Our division of the Bible into two parts—the Old and New Testaments—is not altogether helpful. You will often find a blank page between the two sections of the Bible. As one English scholar has said, the best thing you can do with this page is to tear it out!
The Bible is ONE book telling ONE story.

How does the Bible work?

This may seem a peculiar question, but it conveys what I am trying to get across in this booklet. The Bible, through the presence of the Holy Spirit in the believer, is a LIVING WORD which, when properly used, works to change us! But if it is to do this most effectively then, like a car, a painting or a computer, we must understand something about its design and purpose.

The Bible is the book of *salvation*. It tells us about *salvation* and brings us into *salvation*.

The name “Jesus” (which is the Greek version of “Joshua”) actually means “Saviour”. We could say that the purpose of the Bible is to tell us ABOUT Jesus and to bring us TO Jesus. The Old Testament points forward to Jesus, the New Testament points backwards to Jesus, but both have Him at the centre:

Old Testament → **Jesus** ← **New Testament**

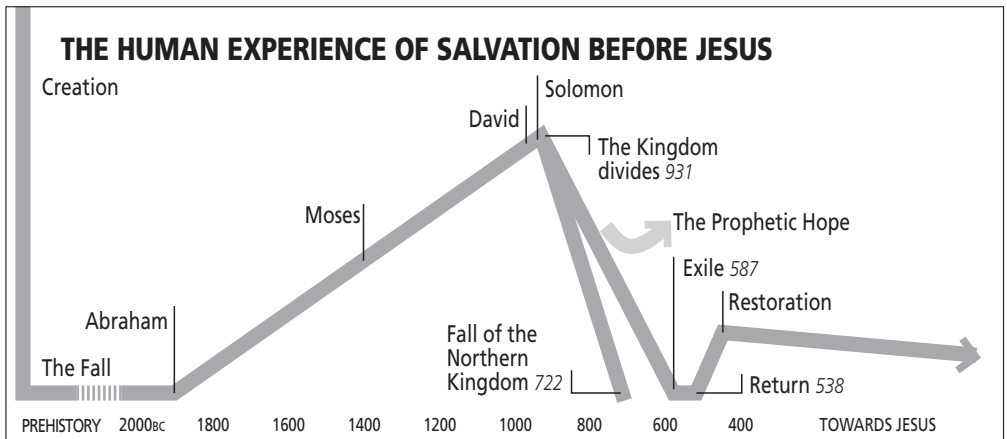
We can see this in Jesus’ own words: “This is what I told you while I was still with you; Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.” (Luke 24:44).

But for a lot of people this is a puzzle. How CAN we say that the Old and New Testaments are both about Jesus’? Some people find it hard to believe they talk about the same GOD, let alone the same Saviour! I must admit this used to puzzle me, too. I used to look on the Old Testament as something like “God’s Plan that Failed”, or even worse, “God’s Plan that Was Never Intended to Succeed in

the First Place"! I can now see this was nonsense. How could **God** have a plan that didn't work—especially one that took two thousand years for Him to realise this? To understand the Bible properly we must understand that it is about **ONE** plan that **SUCCEEDED**. And to do this, we must look at the Big Picture first—the way in which the whole Bible describes God's *salvation* plan. This involves bringing together **four elements**.

1. HUMAN HISTORY AND THE EXPERIENCE OF SALVATION

The quickest way to get an idea of how the Bible works is to look at the **human experience of salvation in history**. We can draw this out like a graph. In the period before Jesus was born it looks rather like a ski-jump:



In the beginning, the human race was created by God **in His image, to rule the world** and to do so in fellowship with Him and with one another. This 'image-bearing rule' is our **TRUE NATURE** and is part of the end-goal of God's plan. Yet, though it may sound peculiar to say so, the first great event in *salvation-history* was the Fall—the initial rebellion of the human race against God! It is because of the Fall that we need *salvation*. However, in the 'pre-historic' time between the Fall and the choosing of Abraham, there was little progress in the experience of *salvation* by the human race. What we see in this period

(covered by Genesis 1-11) is repeated examples of God acting both to *judge* and to *save* the human race.

With God's choice of Abraham, however, (Genesis 12, about 2,000 BC) we begin to see some progress. **For the next 2,000 years, from Abraham to Jesus, the human experience of *salvation* is linked almost exclusively to the physical history of Israel.**

From Abraham to David (2,000-1,000 BC, up to 1 & 2 Samuel), this history is largely one of blessing. The archetypal '*salvation* experience' in this period is the EXODUS, where the people are brought out of Egypt **not** into the 'Promised Land' but to Mount Sinai, where they receive **tokens** of God's blessing—the Tabernacle, the Commandments and the Sabbath.

It is of particular significance that Israel receives only the tokens of God's blessing at Sinai. This implies that there is a **greater fulfillment** still to come (since they are only tokens) and that this blessing is not tied to the Promised Land (since the tokens are given outside the Land). We can see this idea of a greater *fulfillment* developed later in the letter to the Hebrews. The **tabernacle** signifies God's dwelling with mankind as in Eden, yet God does not yet truly dwell on the earth (1 Kings 8:27, cf. Revelation 21:3). The **commandments** signify God's rule through deciding 'good and evil' as in Eden, yet the law is not yet written on the human heart (Ezekiel 36:26-27 cf. 2 Corinthians 3:7-8). The **Sabbath** signifies God's rest—the ultimate state of blessing—as in Eden, but rest is not experienced in this world (Psalm 95:11, cf. Hebrews 4:3).

The period after the entry into the Promised Land (Joshua, Judges) saw many times of affliction, but with the establishment of the *Kingdom* the general tendency of the '*salvation*' graph is upwards. The high point of Israel's national history as an experience of *salvation* is the reign of *King* Solomon. Yet it is also the 'watershed', since from the end of Solomon's reign onwards (931 to 586 BC, covered by 1 & 2 Kings, paralleled in 1 & 2 Chronicles) the 'graph' runs downwards. The depths are plumbed when the nation is finally conquered and many of the people are taken into EXILE in Babylon (587/6 BC—see Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel and Daniel).

This is followed by the RESTORATION (538 BC—see Ezra and Nehemiah, Haggai, Malachi and Zechariah), and for a while

things seem to be improving again. Yet these *hopes* are not *fulfilled*, and until the coming of Jesus the nation experiences a succession of further conquests, though some measure of political stability is achieved under the Romans.

2. THE PROMISE OF GOD AND THE KINGS WHO FAILED

The second element we must bring into the picture is the **promise of God** (which is included in the concept of ‘Covenant’—another word for ‘Testament’).

The first expression of this promise is in Genesis 3:15, in God’s words to the serpent who had tempted Eve into falling: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.” We should take special note of the singular “he” and “his” because the question then becomes: “To whom does this refer?” One of the main reasons behind the recording of genealogies (ancestral name-lists) in Genesis 1-11 is the search for this descendant. Cain and Abel prove to be ‘dead ends’—the one more literally than the other—but the descendants of Seth carry the *promise* on into the future.

Though there are other aspects to it in Genesis 1-11, the next stage of the promise we will consider is its renewal to Abram. His name meant ‘Exalted Father’, but he was unable to have children! God’s *promise* to him is, “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.” (Gen.12:2-3, repeated and reinforced at intervals later). We should especially note three elements of this promise:

- 1. Personal blessing: “I will bless you; I will make your name great”.**
- 2. National blessing: “I will make you into a great nation”.**
- 3. World blessing: “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”.**

The attention now focuses on the one who becomes **Abraham** (meaning 'Father of Many') and his descendants through Isaac (Gen.17:15-21) and Jacob.

The promise is re-established in Exodus 2:24: "God heard (the Israelites) groaning, and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with ... Jacob." To 'remember' means here 'to act on'. God chooses this point to act on his *promise* to the Patriarchs and the result is the commissioning of Moses and the deliverance from Egypt.

The covenant with the descendants of the Patriarchs is confirmed in blood at Sinai (Exodus 24:8). However, the focus of attention narrows in the succeeding years from the nation to the *King*, for with David there is a further development. David's personal ambition is to build a house (i.e. the Temple) for God.

However, God turns the tables by promising to build a 'house' (i.e. a Dynasty) for David: "Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men of the earth. And I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed [...]. 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." (2 Samuel 7:9b-14)

We can see the 'seed' motif from Eden repeated here in what is said about David's offspring. Notice also how elements of the *promise* to Abraham reappear. God now *promises* to make David's name great and he again promises blessing for his people. However, we are still looking forward since even David is not the final recipient of the *promise*.

In the reign of Solomon the high point of national blessing is reached and for a time it seems that the promised world-blessing will follow (cf. the visit of the Queen of Sheba, I Kings 10:1-13). But things go disastrously wrong.

Because of his worship of other gods, the *Kingdom* is taken away from Solomon: "Since ... you have not kept my covenant and my decrees ... I will most certainly tear the *kingdom* away from you" (I Kings 11:11). **Yet even at this stage, God does**

not go back on his promise and instead extends it to Solomon's son. He continues, "Yet I will not tear the whole *kingdom* from him, but will give him one tribe for the sake of David my servant." (1 Kings 11:13)

Thus the promise remains. But as successive *Kings* lead the nation further and further into sin, the nation experiences God's *judgement* and the *Kingdom* goes into a decline from which it never fully recovers. Even today, whilst the Jews are still a people and Israel is again a nation, they are NOT A KINGDOM. What, then, has been happened to the *promise*?

3. THE FUTURE KINGDOM AND THE PRESENT TENSION

As the experience of *salvation* in the history of Israel first reaches a peak and then declines, a new element of **Prophetic Hope** comes in. Its main feature is **an ideal future in tension with a disappointing present**. This *hope* is present already in the Psalms (e.g. Psalm 85). It is even more evident in the "Latter" prophets (those who primarily wrote their prophecies rather than delivering them orally). A number of themes emerge in these prophecies, including a new Exodus, a restored *Kingdom* and an era of peace and justice. However, other elements suggest a **radical renewal of Creation**: "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat ... the cow will feed with the bear ... and the lion will eat straw like the ox" (Isaiah 11:6). In fact, a **New Eden** is in view: "The LORD will surely comfort Zion ... he will make her deserts like Eden" (Is. 51:3). Other themes include:

- **the Day of the LORD (or, "that Day")**
- **Judgement**
- **Salvation of the Gentiles ("the nations"—see below)**
- **the Rule of God through his Anointed King:**

"Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having *salvation* ... He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth."

(Zechariah 9:9,10)

Isaiah declares that this requires a “new heavens and a new earth” (65:17). The old creation order is simply not up to it! Through Jeremiah, however, it is also declared that we are talking about a **New Covenant Relationship** (i.e. a ‘New Testament’—‘Testament’ and ‘Covenant’ being the same word) with God since the old human race is not up to it either:

“This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after that time,’ declares the LORD. ‘I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.’” (*Jeremiah 31:33*)

The original *promise* has now become a ‘*super-promise*’—a *prophetic hope* which seems to be increasingly ‘out of this world’. However, far from being *fulfilled* at the Restoration after the Exile, it is simply pushed further forward.

The Prophetic *hope* becomes further and further removed from, and in tension with, the present historical experience. It is essentially ‘other-worldly’. Its *fulfilment* increasingly rests not on an ‘improvement in’ but a ‘TRANSFORMATION OF’ the human condition.

Taken on its own, the Old Testament is thus a book with a direction and a *hope*, but no conclusion. But the Old Testament should not be taken on its own!

4. THE PROMISE FULFILLED

Matthew’s Gospel begins, “A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham: Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob ...” (Matthew 1:1 and so on for 17 verses.) It seems a strange way to begin the Gospel—the greatest piece of ‘good news’ in the world! But can you now see why Matthew does this? We are being told what has happened to the *promise*. Matthew spells it out for us (compare this with our ‘Ski-Jump’ outline): “Thus there were fourteen generations in all *from Abraham to David*, fourteen *from David to the exile to Babylon*, and fourteen *from the exile to the Christ*.” (1:17) This is Matthew’s view of history, leading to the *fulfilment* of the *promise*.

Time and again the New Testament books declare to us that **“no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ”** (2 Corinthians 1:20). In Christ the human experience of *salvation* reaches its climax: “The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised” (Matthew 11:5). In Christ the dwelling of God is on earth (John 1:14). In Christ we see the human race as it should be: able to rule the world, control the weather, walk on water and multiply bread and wine. In Christ we see a man able to live a life of perfect obedience to God. Most importantly, in Christ we see a man able to crush Satan under his feet. The New Testament tells us that Jesus is what the Old Testament was about: “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me,” (John 5:39), “What God *promised* our fathers he has *fulfilled* for us, their children, by raising up Jesus.” (Acts 13:32).

**The GOSPEL is that Jesus is the one in whom the promise of God finds its fulfilment:
“Paul ... called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—the gospel he *promised* beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David ... Jesus Christ our Lord.”**

(Romans 1:1-4)

With the coming of Christ, however, there is a significant change in the focus of God’s work for Jesus is finally rejected by Israel. From here on, *salvation* is experienced not in the socio-political *Kingdom* of Israel but in the multi-national **Kingdom of God**. The world-blessing *promised* through Abraham has now begun in earnest!

Even in the New Testament, however, there remains a tension between present experience and future *hope*. In Jesus we see things as they **will be** but in ourselves we see things as they **still are**. This tension will only finally be resolved at Christ’s return when he will establish the *Kingdom* of God on earth. The Epistles of the New Testament largely deal with the problems of this remaining tension, while the Book of Revelation points towards, and allows us a glimpse of, the final establishment of the *Kingdom*.

Putting it all together

Having seen these four elements, **1. Human History and the Experience of Salvation**, **2. The Promise of God and the Kings who Failed**, **3. The Future Kingdom and the Present Tension** and **4. The Promise Fulfilled**, what are we to make of them? There are a number of ways in which they will help us in our study of the Bible:

FIRST, we will see that the Bible is not a series of red-herrings and dead-ends out of which God pulls some kind of resolution, but ONE BOOK telling ONE STORY—of the plan and purpose of God to *save* mankind.

SECOND, we will understand each book of the Bible IN ITS OWN CONTEXT OF SALVATION-HISTORY. At some stage you should go back to the ‘ski-jump’ diagram and see how each book fits into its period.

THIRD, we will interpret each part of the Bible by remembering that the *promises* of God are only fully and finally revealed in Jesus. The experience of *salvation* will be related to the book’s position in relation to the coming of Jesus.

FOURTH, we will see that even for Christians there is a present tension between the *hope* and the *fulfilment* of the *promise*.

TWO ‘WORKED EXAMPLES’

To show what this means, we will look at two ‘worked examples’. The first concerns **Noah**. In what way are we to understand and learn from his story? He is often (like almost every good character in the Old Testament) presented basically as an example of ‘faith’—and Hebrews 11:7 shows that, at one level, this is right. But can we say more, or is the Old Testament just a compendium of ‘faithful saints’ for us to imitate?

Noah’s personal context is ‘pre-historical’, but he appears in the middle of a series of cataclysmic acts of *judgement* and *salvation* from the expulsion from Eden to the scattering at Babel. In his day he is seen as the ‘Great *hope*’: his name sounds like ‘Comfort’ and it is hoped that, “He will comfort us in the labour and painful toil of our hands caused by the ground the LORD has cursed.” (Genesis

ARE WE RIGHT ABOUT NOAH?

Some readers may question this interpretation which lays its stress on matters which would perhaps not have occurred to Noah or the writer of Genesis. In reply we would argue firstly that the interpretation works ENTIRELY WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE OLD TESTAMENT ITSELF. Secondly, it is supported and confirmed by the use made of the story in the New Testament. There, the story of Noah is used either TO WARN OF COMING JUDGEMENT, often with an accompanying call for repentance (Matthew 24:37-39; Luke 17:26-27; Hebrews 11:7; 2 Peter 2:5), or as a SYMBOL OF SALVATION (Hebrews 11:7). Peter, in particular, makes explicit the link between what Noah did and what Jesus did (1 Peter 3:20-21).

5:29, compare with 2:17). The question for his generation is therefore “Will Noah *fulfil* the *promise of salvation*?”

In one sense Noah performs even better than expected. As the world goes from bad to worse and comes under God’s *judgement* (6:5-7), so Noah “found favour in the eyes of the LORD” (6:8). Noah does indeed become the instrument of *salvation*, and the *promise* is renewed to him (9:1-17). But we soon see that he is not able to overcome sin and Satan, nor is he able to communicate his own righteousness to the new world! All too soon we read of his getting drunk and of his son Ham’s sexual mockery of him (9:20-23).

Ultimately, Noah teaches us more about God’s faithfulness than his own faith. He tells us more about human sinfulness than the victories we can achieve through faith. Above all, he shows us our need of a greater Saviour from an even greater *judgement* to come. Reading the Bible in the light of the lessons above allows us to see more in Noah than an example of faith and to detect in his story elements important to the preaching of the Gospel.

The second example, from a different era, is that of **Amos**. He is often held up as the preacher of social renewal: “let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” (5:24) In his writings he speaks of the coming “day of the LORD” (5:8) which will be a day of *judgement* on Israel (9:1-10). However, he also talks of Restoration and a new and permanent world-order (9:11-15). His words are often interpreted as a call for the Church to work for social justice on the grounds both that this is what God wants and that the blessings of a better world for all will follow.

However, this is to overlook the prophet’s context. He ministered in about 760 BC, on the ‘down’ side of the graph charting Israel’s experience of *salvation*. Although his pronouncements of *judgement* **include** the Gentile nations, he concentrates on the *Kingdom* of Israel (taking ‘Israel’ here to mean ‘the Covenant people of God’—Amos actually prophesied particularly to the Southern Kingdom of Judah.) Though he calls for justice, Amos prophesies *judgement* based on a lack of Covenant-faithfulness on the part of the people. The social injustice of the nation stems not from their attitude to ‘justice’ but from their attitude to God: “You have not returned to *me*” (repeated five times in 4:6-11 !)

Amos' call for Justice reflects not so much the potential for improvement as the inevitability of failure for a Godless society. God DEMANDS justice because this is right, but he inevitably WILL judge because people are evil.

Is there, then, any *hope* in Amos? Certainly! First, the interceding prophet brings through his prayers some immediate relief from *judgement* (7:1-6), thus pointing to the need for Another who “always lives to intercede” for us (Hebrews 7:25). Secondly, the judgement will not be inescapable: “‘Yet I will not totally destroy the house of Jacob,’ says the LORD” (9:8), thus pointing to another avenue of escape from a greater judgement to come (Acts 2:40). Thirdly, it will be by the action of God IN FAITHFULNESS TO HIS PROMISE TO DAVID that what He seeks from people will come about: “‘In that day **I will** restore David’s fallen tent. **I will** repair its broken places, restore its ruins, and build it as it used to be ...’ declares the LORD” (9:11), thus pointing to a greater act of God still to come.

Finally, the overall context of *salvation* history shows that this *fulfilment* did NOT take place at the Restoration of 538 BC—even though it was *hoped* for then. It therefore must refer to another *fulfilment* which lies in the future, which we now know is found in Jesus. However, this means that if we are to issue the call of Amos to our own society we must **first and foremost** call on the world to turn to God, to escape from the coming *judgement*, and to fix its *hopes* on Him for a renewal of creation.

In the total context of *salvation-history*, to speak as Amos spoke is to PREACH THE GOSPEL.

Fulfilment and 'type'

You will begin to recognise by now that one of the keys to understanding the Bible is the idea of *fulfilment*. Sometimes there is a very graphic ‘prefiguring’ of *salvation* in the Old Testament fulfilled in the New by Jesus. This has been given the technical name of ‘Typology’, based on the Greek word for a “pattern” or “impression”. For example, in Romans 5:14 we are told that Adam was literally “a **type** of the one to come”, meaning Jesus. In

ARE WE RIGHT ABOUT AMOS?

Once again, people may question whether we are right about Amos. Are we not evading the Bible’s call for social justice and slipping back into privatised Evangelical pietism? We would again answer firstly by stating that the interpretation works ENTIRELY WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE OLD TESTAMENT ITSELF. Secondly, again, we should see how the New Testament uses this passage. Here we have a clear confirmation, since the promise of Restoration in Amos 9 11-12 is used to refer to the BRINGING OF THE GOSPEL TO THE GENTILES (Acts 15:16-17). The New Testament writers are in no doubt that God is calling for a new world order. They also believe, however, that God Himself will bring this about in good time, and that our task is to make sure, **through evangelism now**, that people belong to that new world when it comes.

his time, Adam was like Jesus in that the fate of the human race rested on him and his decisions. Again in Hebrews 9:24 we are told, “Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only an **antitype** of the true one; he entered heaven itself.” The man-made sanctuary of the Tent where God figuratively ‘dwelt’ (Exodus 25:8) represented the heavenly reality where God truly dwells.

Many other Old Testament people (Melchizedek, Joseph, David, etc.) and events (the Flood, the Exodus, the conquest of Canaan, etc.) may be seen as ‘typological’ pre-figurings of the *salvation* found in Jesus. Sometimes this is made explicit, sometimes not. However, we are not talking about ALLEGORIES, which would mean seeing Jesus represented in things which were originally nothing to do with him. Typology refers to situations where God graciously did through a **lesser and temporary medium** (such as “the blood of bulls and goats”) what he would later do fully and permanently in Jesus.

This is the reason why we are not Jews! You may have wondered why the New Testament does not urge us to circumcise our males, avoid eating pork or keep the Friday-to-Saturday Sabbath. The answer is that given in Colossians 2:17, “**These are only a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however is found in Christ.**”

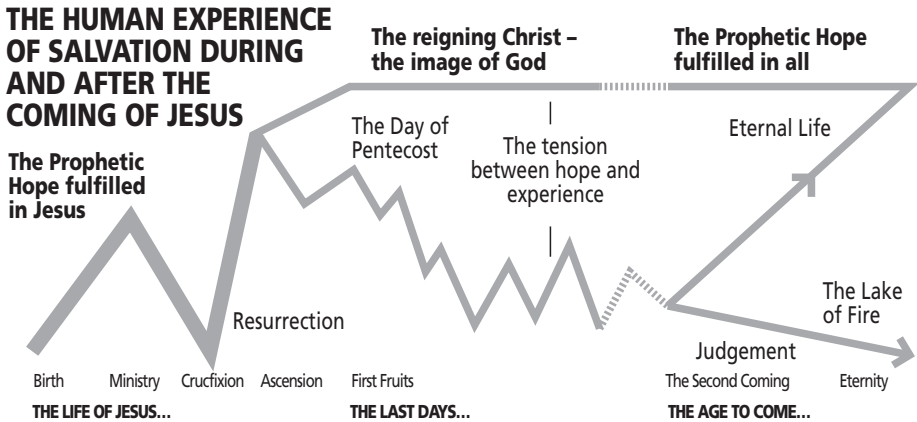
What of the Old Testament food regulations, for example? These appear to be essential to God’s Law, yet in Acts 10 we learn both of their significance and of their redundancy. Peter’s vision where he is told to kill and eat unclean animals is accompanied by the voice of God saying “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” He is then immediately directed by the Holy Spirit to evangelize a Gentile household without needing to require their circumcision. We thus discover what the food laws represented - the separation of God’s holy people from unbelievers, **pre-figured in the Old Testament by food regulations which separated Jews from Gentiles**. In the New Testament the **principle** of separation remains, but the **substance** of that separation is now holy living: “Live such good lives among the pagans (i.e. the Gentiles) that ... they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.” (1 Peter 2:12).

Typological interpretation of the Bible, based on an understanding of the *salvation-historical* context,

prevents us from misapplying Old Testament events or practices in our own situation.

The life of the world to come—Amen!

We have seen that the Old Testament prophets from the time of Solomon onwards looked forward to a TOTAL TRANSFORMATION of creation in general and mankind in particular. We have also seen that this prophecy was *fulfilled* in Jesus. However, we must be careful to remember that the *fulfilment* of the *promise* in Jesus is itself NOT YET COMPLETED: “For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The **last enemy** to be destroyed is death.” (1 Corinthians 15:25-26). Death has not yet been destroyed (we still die!), therefore the *promise* is not yet totally *fulfilled*. The experience of *salvation* since the coming of Christ may itself be represented with a diagram:



The coming of Jesus into the world was the FIRST STAGE of the *fulfilment* of the *promise*. Jesus himself said, “**Today** this scripture (Isaiah 61:1-2) is *fulfilled* in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). However, the *hopes* which he raised in his followers seemed to be dashed by his crucifixion. As some of his disciples said before they knew of the resurrection, “The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had

hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:20-21). The realisation of His resurrection immediately caused these *hopes* to soar again: “Lord, are you *at this time* going to restore the *kingdom* to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). But the Ascension RE-INTRODUCED THE TENSION BETWEEN HOPE AND EXPERIENCE: “It is not for you to know the times or dates” (Acts 1:7).

The tension was to some extent resolved by the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. This formed the SECOND STAGE of the *fulfillment* of the *promise*, ushering in the “Last Days” foretold in the Old Testament: “These men are not drunk, as you suppose [...] No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel, ‘In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people ...’” (Peter’s speech, in Acts 2:16-17). In a crucial passage in Galatians 3:14 Paul actually IDENTIFIES the world-blessing *promised* to Abraham with the giving of the Spirit through Christ. (This suggests, contrary to traditional Charismatic teaching, that the Spirit is given ONCE to ALL Christians at conversion. We do not receive the *promise* and THEN the Spirit at a later date.)

However, the New Testament writers emphasise that the Spirit is received by us only as the FIRST FRUITS (Romans 8:23) of the *promise*, the GUARANTEE (2 Corinthians 1:22) of the Inheritance God has in store for his people. In Ephesians 1:13-14 Paul writes, “Having believed (in Christ), you were marked in him with a seal, the *promised* Holy Spirit, who is **a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance.**” Here we see clearly the relationship of the Spirit to the *promise*. We have received the Spirit in *fulfillment* of the *promise* and the Spirit guarantees our Inheritance, but WE HAVE NOT YET RECEIVED THE INHERITANCE ITSELF. This will only happen in the THIRD STAGE of the *fulfillment* **when Christ returns**. This will also, however, be the point of God’s final *judgement* on the wicked. At death or Christ’s return, whichever comes sooner, our relationship with Him is fixed.

The inheritance which Christians are yet to receive is often referred to in the New Testament as our ‘*hope*’. The *hope* of the New Testament relates directly to the *hope* of the Old. However, the very fact that it is a *hope* once again emphasises the tension between this and our present experience: “We ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, GROAN INWARDLY as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For

in this *hope* we were *saved*. But *hope* that is seen is no *hope* at all. Who *hopes* for what he already has?" (Romans 8:23-24). Until *hope* gives way to sight (or *fulfilment*) we DO NOT HAVE WHAT WE HOPE FOR—such as an immediate relationship with God, freedom from sickness or death, an end to temptation and sin, and so on.

In fact, our Christian experience is very similar to that of the people of the Old Testament who lived in the tension between their own *hope* and experience. An understanding that Jesus is the *fulfilment* of the *promise* is crucial to our interpretation of the Old Testament. In the same way, an understanding that the Holy Spirit has been given as THE FIRSTFRUITS BUT NOT THE FULLNESS of our *salvation* is crucial to our interpretation of the New:

We live in the period of tension between Jesus' First and Second Comings. Having the firstfruits of the Spirit, we live with both the HOPE OF GLORY and the EXPERIENCE OF SIN AND SUFFERING.

We use the term **Eschatology** (pronounced 'es-kat-ology') to refer to the 'Last Things' concerned with the Second Coming of Jesus. **'Realised Eschatology'** refers to the foretaste of *salvation* we experience NOW—our new relationship with God, our sense of assurance, our new desire to pray and read the Bible, our mourning over sin and so on. However, a great danger for the Christian community has always been an **'Over-realised Eschatology'**—thinking that we have received everything now: **"Already** you have all you want! **Already** you have become rich! **You have become kings**—and that without us!" (1 Corinthians 4:8). The desire to raise the dead through prayer, for example, may reflect a compassionate care for the bereaved or a desire to bring glory to God. Often, however, it springs from a wrong belief that we must have everything NOW in THIS WORLD.

The Bible and the life of tension

How, then, should we regard our situation? The Christian perspective is established by the great '*Salvation Act*' of God revealed in the cross. However, we need to recognise that the

human assessment of the cross and the Divine assessment are very different:

The Crucifixion, which appeared in human eyes to be a defeat, was in God's eyes the great point of VICTORY. It was the means by which sin was defeated, our forgiveness was obtained and by which we are RECONCILED WITH GOD. Thus it is the Crucifixion, rather than the Resurrection, which is the focus of the New Testament. PROPERLY SPEAKING, WE ARE A 'GOOD FRIDAY' PEOPLE EVEN MORE THAN WE ARE AN 'EASTER' PEOPLE!

This was what Paul meant when he wrote, "Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." (1 Corinthians 1:22-24). When we trace the line of the human **experience** of *salvation* we must remember that the experience sometimes includes our **IGNORANCE OF THE REALITIES**: "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?" (Luke 24:25). The 'message' of experience may sometimes appear to contradict the truth of God's love and power to care for us.

The Christian perspective must be governed by what the Bible reveals about God's plans, and not by our own ideas or experiences. This means we must look first to the **PAST** and the **FUTURE** rather than to our own **PRESENT**. 1 Peter 1:3-6 puts this clearly:

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living *hope* through the **RESURRECTION** of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an **INHERITANCE** that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in **HEAVEN** for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power **UNTIL** the coming of the *salvation* that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though **NOW** for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials."

We see here that the Christian perspective consists of:

- **LOOKING BACK**—to Jesus, crucified and risen from the dead so that we can be born anew.
- **LOOKING UP**—to our Inheritance which is safe in heaven, as we are kept safe on earth by God’s power.
- **LOOKING FORWARD**—to the Second Coming of Jesus when our *salvation* will be revealed.
- **LOOKING AROUND**—but only when we have looked back, up and forward because the situation we live in NOW is one of suffering “all kinds of trials”. Peter says this is for “a little while”—but it will only seem like this when we see our sufferings in the context of *salvation* on the one hand and eternity on the other.

This also means that life lived now in the Spirit is not necessarily an endless round of miracles and direct experiences of God. Rather there is a tension between the way things are and the way we would like them to be—especially as regards our own behaviour (cf. Galatians 5:17). We still live in the time when we “*hope* for what we do not yet have” (Romans 8:25), so it will be perfectly normal for our experience sometimes to be encouraging, sometimes disappointing. The time when everything will be perfect still lies in the future.

Reading the New Testament

The same perspective derived from Peter’s letter helps us read the New Testament as it addresses the issues of the Christian life:

- **LOOKING BACK**—it points to Jesus, draws out the *fulfilment* of the Old Testament *promise* in Him (particularly his crucifixion) and gives us a proper understanding of the consequences.
- **LOOKING UP**—it emphasises our Heavenly citizenship and the call for Holy living, appropriate to those who now belong to the *Kingdom* of God.
- **LOOKING FORWARD**—it stresses the urgency of spreading the GOSPEL and believing in Jesus in the light of the coming *judgement*.

• **LOOKING AROUND**—it urges the Christian community to exercise PATIENCE AND PERSEVERANCE in the light of the coming *salvation*.

Read in this perspective, the New Testament is both our key to the Old Testament and our guide to the present life. We will not go into extremes of enthusiasm based on a desire for ‘too much, too soon’, nor will we be depressed by the disappointments of life based on wrong expectations. In short, we will not be “tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching” (Ephesians 4:14).

Conclusion to Part One

Hopefully, you now have a clearer idea of how the different parts of the Bible relate to one another. This should help you to a better understanding of each part as you read it. Rather than reading the Bible ‘one dimensionally’, ignoring the overall context of a book or passage, you will begin to develop a ‘three dimensional’ view of the Bible, seeing not only the words in the passage, but the passage in its setting within the Bible and within *salvation-history* as a whole. This should help you to read the Old Testament in a truly Christian manner and to understand your Christian experience in the present.

In Part Two we go on to look at practical approaches to Bible study—both good and bad.