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A Beginner's Guide to Understanding **THE OLD TESTAMENT**

Whether you have been in church your whole life or are still unsure of what you believe regarding Jesus -- reading the Bible can be a daunting task. The Old Testament was written a long time ago, by people living in a very different time, who experienced very different circumstances from many of us. Over the years, I have read countless books, some scholarly and some practical, in an effort to have a better grasp of the "Big Picture" of the Old Testament story. In all of my study, I have found no single source to be more helpful or clear than *A Book You Will Actually Read* on the Old Testament by Mark Driscoll. In the following pages, you will find a condensed version of this work -- supplemented with research from my own study over the years. I would encourage you to read it, and other books like it as you seek to become a student of God's Word. In the meantime, I pray this will give you a deeper hunger and understanding of this wonderful section of sacred scripture.





OLD TESTAMENT OVERVIEW

In the following pages we will explore issues such as authorship, genre, major themes, and the distinctive features of the 39 Books that comprise the Old Testament.

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RAISING GOOD QUESTIONS

A few years ago, Sydney and I met a wonderful woman, just a year or two younger than us that had never so much as opened a Bible. Over the course of our friendship, she became increasingly interested in Jesus, the Bible, and the local church we were a part of at the time. As her curiosity grew, we bought her a Bible that she was eager to begin reading. A few weeks after receiving the Bible, she took Sydney out for coffee to ask her a few questions about what she had been reading.

To her surprise, the Bible was not like she thought it would be. The people she was reading about in Genesis seemed to be just as messed up as the friends she had. Abraham pimped out his old barren wife to save his skin, Lot's daughters got him drunk and so they could sleep with him, Jacob was a con man with mommy issues, and the list goes on and on. Our friend was confused. How does this Bible relate to the Jesus she had heard about? How long would she have to read before she encountered stories about Jesus? Does this really apply?

Her questions were great, and to be quite honest, were questions I had secretly wrestled with as well in my first years of following Christ. In the following pages, we will seek to explore together the way the Old Testament is organized, the major themes presented in each section, and the general content of each Book, for the purpose of giving you a foundation of understanding as you read this great section of Scripture. I pray God will give you a deep hunger, and a deeper understanding of His Word as you read this booklet, and study the Bible for yourself. I pray our time together will not simply inform us about the Word of God, but will instead transform our lives from the inside out.

GETTING STARTED

As we think about the Old Testament, it is important to understand that the Old Testament is really a collection of books, that make up a larger story. Each book was written by human authors under the

divine authority and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. We will save our discussion on how the Old and New Testaments were written and compiled for another work.

The Old Testament is essentially 39 Books from "God's Library" concerning his work in, through, and for humanity. The Old Testament is a story of promises God has made for his people concerning his work in the world, while the New Testament is the story of God fulfilling those promises.

Much of the Old Testament is not arranged chronologically, which can make reading the Old Testament a challenging adventure. The Old Testament is arranged by its literary style, which we will address below. If you would like to get a grasp of the Chronological story of scripture, there are great resources available, but I would recommend starting with a good Chronological Bible that you can purchase at any book store.

AN OVERVIEW

THE PENTATEUCH (GENESIS, EXODUS, LEVITICUS, NUMBERS, DEUTERONOMY)

The Pentateuch, meaning "one book in five parts," was written by Moses roughly fourteen hundred years before the birth of Jesus Christ. The Bible clearly states that Moses is the author of the Pentateuch: "When Moses had finished writing the words of this law in a book to the very end, Moses commanded the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, 'Take this Book of the Law and put it by the side of the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God. . . .'" In this insightful section at the end of the Pentateuch, not only do we learn that Moses wrote the first five books of the Old Testament, but that these books were compiled as a single book and immediately recognized as God-given, perfect, and Scripture-worthy, to be placed alongside the very presence of God in the ark of the covenant. On other occasions the Bible also refers to the Pentateuch as a single book.

Sadly, in the past few hundred years, critics have sought to convince people that Moses did not write the Pentateuch. However, Jesus taught that Moses did in fact write the Pentateuch. Jesus also repeatedly attributed sections of the Pentateuch to Mosaic authorship, including Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy.

In addition to undermining confidence in the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, critics have also sought to deny some of its most miraculous accounts. Nevertheless, Jesus clearly believed in and taught that even the most controversial portions of the Pentateuch are factual, such as Adam and Eve, Cain and the murder of Abel, Noah and the flood, Abraham, Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot, Isaac and Jacob, the manna, and healing by the wilderness serpent.

In summary, the Pentateuch is one book in five parts all penned by Moses with God's inspiration as taught by Jesus Christ. Having established this fact we will now briefly examine each of the five books.

GENESIS

Genesis, the book of beginnings, is the first book of the Pentateuch and focuses on the life of Abraham and the patriarchs Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Judah, who were Abraham's descendants. Genesis covers roughly two thousand years and accounts for about 25 percent of the content of the Pentateuch. The remaining four books of the Pentateuch, Exodus through Deuteronomy, focus on the life of Moses and account for about 75 percent of the content of the Pentateuch. The men are an interesting juxtaposition: Abraham did not have the law but obeyed it by faith, while Moses did have the law but was punished for not obeying it.

EXODUS

Exodus is the sequel to Genesis. In Genesis, God promised that through Abraham he would create a people who would live in a land and be blessed after four hundred years in slavery. The Exodus story opens in the midst of the Hebrew people's slavery under a tyrannical Pharaoh of Egypt. In a moment of ignorance and arrogance, Pharaoh asked the fateful question, "Who is the Lord?" It appears that God took this challenge seriously, and the entire Exodus story is his answer. Therefore, the primary theme of Exodus does not revolve around Moses or the Exodus event, but rather the revelation of God, that he might be known, feared, and worshiped by Egypt and Israel alike. Geographically, the Exodus story is easily divided into two

primary scenes. The first scene is the Hebrews' stay in Egypt, and the second scene is their journey in the wilderness.

LEVITICUS

Leviticus derives its name from the tribe of Levi and is a litany of divine laws calling God's people to holiness that will grant them access to him. Subsequently, the word "holiness" dominates the book, along with the concept of access to God. Laws for sacrifices and offerings, priestly duties, dietary restrictions, purity, feasts, and the like are prevalent in the book, which finds its explanation and fulfillment in the New Testament book of Hebrews.

NUMBERS

Numbers takes the reader through the forty years of wilderness wanderings by the people of God. The book painfully demonstrates how sin prevents blessing. The sin of an entire generation caused it to forfeit its blessing of inheriting the Promised Land and to instead wander in the wilderness for forty years on a journey that should have taken only two weeks. After that generation died, the next generation was raised up to inherit the Promised Land of God. Numbers shows that Israel was God's army raised up to take the Promised Land as an act of God's judgment on the godless Canaanites and proof of God's faithfulness to fulfill his promise to Abraham, even in spite of sin.

DEUTERONOMY

Deuteronomy concludes the five books of the Pentateuch. The book is comprised mainly of sermons preached by Moses at the end of his life on the obligations of the new generation of God's people in their covenant with God. The book ends with the death and burial of Moses, which then sets the stage for the next book, Joshua, and the final arrival of God's people into their promised land.

The Pentateuch is composed of three literary styles: narrative, poetry, and law. The laws (numbering 611 or 613 depending upon how you count them) account for 68.5 percent of the entire Pentateuch. Jesus taught that these laws were written by Moses. It is the function of these laws in the Christian life that has been a source of great theological debate. The proper use of the law is incredibly important, as 1 Timothy 1:8 says: "we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully. . . ." The New Testament is clear that that law exists to show us our sin, because sin is the breaking of the law. However, the law cannot save someone because everyone but Jesus is a lawbreaking sinner. Jesus alone perfectly fulfilled the law. When

he died, Jesus, who was without sin, was punished in the place of his people as a substitute for their sins and took their sins and gave them his righteous and perfect obedience to the law.

Consequently, salvation is given by faith in Jesus and grace from Jesus alone. Then, by the grace of Jesus and power of the Holy Spirit, a Christian can begin to fulfill the demands of the law. The primary means by which we fulfill the law is love. In the end, the objective of the law is less about what we do and more about who we love. That is why when asked about the law, Jesus taught that the whole law was about us loving God and loving other people.

In summary, Jesus is the God of the Pentateuch, its central theme, and who we are to love. Jesus taught this when he said, "If you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me." If we fail to connect the Pentateuch with Jesus, we stand with the teachers of the law in Jesus' day whom he rebuked for studying the Old Testament but failing to love him. Conversely, if we faithfully connect the Pentateuch to Jesus, we will be following in the example he gave us after his resurrection when he taught how Moses revealed him. The Pentateuch points to Jesus because he is the promised seed of Abraham, he fulfills the law of Moses, and he saves a multitude like Joseph.

HISTORY (JOSHUA, JUDGES, RUTH, 1 and 2 SAMUEL, 1 and 2 KINGS, 1 and 2 CHRONICLES, EZRA, NEHEMIAH, ESTHER)

The historical books were written over a period of roughly a thousand years from Joshua (written around 1400 BC) to Esther (written around 450 BC). Through these books we see how God worked faithfully in the lives of his people. They are an encouragement for us to continually live by faith in God.

JOSHUA

Joshua picks up where the Pentateuch ends. Joshua succeeds Moses as the leader of God's people and takes the new generation into the Promised Land.

JUDGES

Judges records the next painful season when God's people responded to HIS provision of their land by sinning against him so greatly that even the judges whom God appointed to oversee righteousness were tainted by the evil of the thankless people.

RUTH

Ruth records God's providential hand over a widowed Moabite woman whose faith in God and extraordinary character caused Boaz to fall in love with her and redeem her life so that Jesus the Redeemer could be born through them.

1 SAMUEL

1 Samuel continues to record the decline of Israel, including the capture of the sacred ark of God by the evil Philistines. God permitted this to occur as punishment of his people. He then established a monarchy to rule in his place, beginning with Saul.

2 SAMUEL

2 Samuel records the death of Saul and the rise of David as king. David rules from the capital of Jerusalem and expresses a desire to build God's temple.

1 KINGS

1 Kings records the rise of David's son, Solomon, who ruled during a season of un- precedented wealth and peace that included the construction of the temple. Solomon responded by falling into gross sin and idolatry, which led to the division of the kingdom into the two parts of Judah and Israel after his death. Judah and Israel both continued in unfaithfulness.

2 KINGS

2 Kings opens with Elijah being taken up into heaven and Elisha succeeding him in prophetic ministry. It then recounts a series of mainly sinful kings who ruled in Judah and Israel until the godly King Josiah led a revival. That revival ended after his death when evil kings once again ruled and Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and the temple.

1 and 2 CHRONICLES

1 and 2 Chronicles were originally one book in the Hebrew Bible. The first book records the lack of blessing among God's people because of their many sins (e.g., ignored the Sabbath, did not rebuild the temple, married pagans, oppressed the poor, did not tithe). The second book compels them to faithfulness through a history lesson that includes David, Solomon, and godly kings.

EZRA and NEHEMIAH

Ezra and Nehemiah were one book in the Hebrew Bible. They record the Jews' return to Judah after Babylonian captivity (which was

punishment for sin), the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls, and the institution of religious reforms.

ESTHER

Esther is the amazing story of how God's people were spared from extermination by the providential marriage of a young Jewish orphan to the king of Persia, thereby preserving the family line through which Jesus would be born.

WISDOM (JOB, PSALMS, PROVERBS, ECCLESIASTES, SONG OF SONGS)

The wisdom literature is intensely practical, experiential, reflective, personal, and honest. It predates the Greeks (e.g., Epimenides, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle) as the first and greatest philosophy, probing deep existential issues such as the meaning of life (Ecclesiastes), the problem of suffering (Job), the nature of wisdom (Proverbs), love and sexual pleasure (Song of Songs), and worship (Psalms).

Next to story, poetry is the most common type of literature in the Bible and is quite common throughout the wisdom literature. Some wisdom literature books are entirely poetic, such as Psalms, Song of Songs, and Proverbs. Other wisdom literature books are almost entirely poetic, such as Job and Ecclesiastes. Most of the wisdom literature was written by David (Psalms) and his son Solomon (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs). Both men are curiously well known for both their great wisdom and their foolish sexual sin.

The wisdom literature directly relates to Jesus because he alone is admittedly wiser than Solomon. In fact, there can be no pursuit of wisdom apart from Jesus because he is our Wisdom.

JOB

Job may be the first book of the Bible that was written (perhaps 1800–1500 BC), and it addresses the great philosophical questions surrounding the suffering of the righteous.

PSALMS

Psalms is a collection of 150 songs compiled over a lengthy period of Old Testament history by various authors, including David, whom God inspired to pen the worship songs of God's people. These include hymns of praise, laments of grief, declarations of thanksgiving, and songs of confidence in God, remembrance of God, and living by wisdom in God, who is often referred to as the King.

PROVERBS

Proverbs includes a vast number of truisms about practical life issues—such as friendship, work, wealth, marriage, and sex—and how we can live wisely if we obey God out of redeemed hearts that fear him.

ECCLESIASTES

Ecclesiastes answers the great philosophical question about the meaning of life and reveals that good things and the ability to enjoy them are two different things, like a box of chocolates and a mouth. Therefore, unless we obey God, life will be continually frustrating no matter how much power, wisdom, food, drink, sex, and riches we acquire.

SONG OF SONGS

The Song of Songs is a great series of poetic love songs exchanged between Solomon and his bride. Without descending into crudeness, the Song of Songs frankly discusses everything from oral sex to a wife who enjoys stripping for her husband and making love outdoors.

PROPHETS and PROPHECY

Roughly 25 percent of the Bible was prophetic at the time it was written, meaning that it foretold future events or spoke truth into current events. Therefore, it is very important to understand both prophets and prophecy if we want to understand a large portion of the Old Testament. I have chosen to spend considerable time explaining both prophets and prophecy for two reasons. First, there is much confusion among Christians, particularly new Christians, regarding what constitutes true and false prophets and prophecy. Second, it is not uncommon for the bookstores in our spiritual age to be filled with non-biblical authors who claim to be acting in a prophetic manner by revealing the future, speaking on behalf of God, and writing sacred texts. With this brief explanation of prophets and prophecy, I hope to help you both understand the Bible and distinguish it from impostors. Much of the information in this section is taken from the book *Toward Rediscovering the Old Testament*, one of many outstanding books written by the great Old Testament scholar, Walter Kaiser.

In Israel, it was the ministry of the prophets to intercede for God before the people, to offer his Word as a light to expose the darkness of their sins, and to point them to the promises of the

coming Messiah, Jesus. Sadly, the prophets have often been misrepresented as mere futuristic prognosticators who could foretell the future like some cheap circus sideshow fortune teller. Indeed, the prophets often did foretell the future, though this was not the majority of their ministry. Instead, the bulk of their ministry was spent proclaiming God's Word, by the power of God's Spirit, from the deep pain of God's heart over sin. God used the shouts of the prophets to awaken his slumbering people and provoke their imaginations to the life that he intended for them but that they had frequently neglected in favor of sin.

The prophetic calling was the combination of two ministries. First, the prophets received specific revelation directly from God. Second, they spoke or wrote that revealed Word to God's people. The prophets were painfully aware of the weightiness of their call because they consciously knew that they were the very mouth of Almighty God and spoke for him. This is clearly seen with Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and Zechariah.

The prophets preached because they were compelled to. God burned his Word so deeply into their hearts and minds that they could do nothing but speak. As Amos said, "The lion has roared; who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken; who can but prophesy?" Perhaps Jeremiah articulated this compulsion best, saying, "If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,' there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot."

The prophets preached the very words of God. According to the Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad, the phrase "the word of Yahweh" appears 241 times in the Old Testament, 221 of which are in relation to a prophet.

Unlike priests who were selected by their family origins, prophets had only the call of God to legitimize their ministry. Their call was not predicated on prior ministry testing or ability. A number of basic elements describe the prophetic call. They did not seek their office. They did not always like the message they were called to speak. They did not always understand their own message. They often endured extreme hardship, such as Hosea marrying a prostitute to illustrate a point. They often struggled deeply with their call, like Jeremiah who at times viewed his call as an unfair hardship. They were also persecuted, as when Jeremiah's neighbors spoke evil about him and plotted to kill him, and when Daniel was thrown into

a lions' den. The prophetic call also included supernatural occurrences, such as the calling of their name, God speaking, the touch of God, being seized by God, and the Spirit of God coming upon them.

Jesus, Paul, and John all promised that false prophets would come just as they had in the days of the Old Testament. The presence of false prophets in every age suggests that the people of God must always distinguish the true from the false prophets. This task is difficult since the false prophets claim many of the same qualifications as the true prophets. Like true prophets, false prophets claim to speak for God. Also, Satan can perform false miracles, like when Pharaoh's sorcerers and magicians turned their staffs into snakes like Aaron had. Therefore, simply because a prophet can perform miracles does not necessarily prove that he acts by the power of God.

While no one single test for the authentication of a prophet is appropriate, a few criteria help distinguish between true and false prophets. A true prophet had outstanding moral character, while false prophets did not. The prophecy of a true prophet came true every time, while false prophets were hit and miss. False prophets were for hire and preached what they were paid to preach, such as always prophesying peace and prosperity. The message of a false prophet conflicted with God's prior revelation, led to the worship of false gods, and was punishable by death. For further insights on the differences between true and false prophets, a careful reading of Deuteronomy 18:14-22 and Jeremiah 23:9-40 is very helpful.

Today, Christians can discern between true and false prophets by the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit. Since both a believing hearer and a true prophet are filled with the Spirit, it is sensible to assume that the Spirit in a Christian would confirm that the message was true.

Now that we have established a proper understanding of prophets and prophecy, we will continue by examining the prophetic books of the Old Testament. We will begin with the major prophets, whose works are generally older and longer than those of the minor prophets.

MAJOR PROPHETS (ISAIAH, JEREMIAH, LAMENTATIONS, EZEKIEL, DANIEL)

ISAIAH

Isaiah is widely considered the prince of the Old Testament prophets. His ministry lasted roughly sixty years and is alluded to some four hundred times in the New Testament. The lengthy book bearing his name can be divided into two sections: humiliating punishment for sin (Isaiah 1–39) and redeeming salvation for individuals, communities, and nations through Jesus the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 40–66).

Because so many college students routinely ask if Isaiah actually wrote the book of Isaiah, I will briefly explain this issue. Some “scholars” have postulated that two authors wrote Isaiah and they divide the book into two works of chapters 1–39 and chapters 40–66. Others have postulated that there were three authors, and they divide the book into three works of chapters 1–39, 40–55, and 56–66.

However, the Gospels quote directly from Isaiah on eight occasions and attribute those writings to Isaiah himself. These quotes include two references from Jesus himself stating that Isaiah wrote Isaiah (Matt. 13:14–15 and 15:7–9). Half of the eight quotes are taken from Isaiah 1–39 and half are taken from Isaiah 40–66. Concerning chapters 56–66, Jesus actually reads from Isaiah 61:1–2 in Luke 4:17–19, and Luke attributes that section of Scripture to the authorship of Isaiah. Therefore, if Isaiah did not write Isaiah, then Jesus is a bad Bible teacher and not up to the standards of the grad student teaching the “Bible as Literature” class to freshmen at the local community college.

JEREMIAH

Jeremiah is the weeping prophet whose heart is broken by the sin of his day. His book is not arranged chronologically nor topically and is, therefore, very difficult to outline, but generally falls into three groupings: the charges of sin against God’s people (Jer. 1:1–25:13), consolation from the new covenant (Jeremiah 30–31), and prophecies against the nations (Jeremiah 46–51). Biographical interludes occur in chapters 26–29 and chapters 32–45.

LAMENTATIONS

Lamentations is also written by Jeremiah and is a collection of some of the most painfully honest poetry ever penned by a man who

loved God, hated sin, and was emotionally devastated to stand with God in looking upon the evil among God’s people in his day.

EZEKIEL

Ezekiel was both a priest and a prophet who prophesied for some twenty years during a time of captivity in Babylon. He wrote to proclaim that God’s people no longer experienced God’s glory because of sin (chapters 1–24), to announce God’s judgment on nations surrounding Judah in preparation for the return of God’s glory (chapters 25–32), and to describe the return of God’s glory and the restoration of Israel (chapters 33–48).

DANIEL

Daniel prophesied for approximately sixty-nine years (the longest of any prophet) during Babylonian captivity. He was a contemporary of both Ezekiel and Jeremiah. The book records his interpretation of dreams (chapters 1–6) and visions from God about Jesus coming as the King to establish his kingdom and crush all godless kingdoms (chapters 7–12).

MINOR PROPHETS (HOSEA, JOEL, AMOS, OBADIAH, JONAH, MICAH, NAHUM, HABBAKUK, ZEPHANIAH, HAGGAI, ZECHARIAH, MALACHI)

The Minor Prophets are referred to as Minor, not because of their importance but because of the brevity of their writings and length of ministry.

HOSEA

Hosea is nearly all poetry and records the shocking event of God’s prophet Hosea marrying the prostitute Gomer. Their relationship illustrates Israel’s unfaithfulness to God and God’s continued devotion to his people—a bride that he faithfully loves.

JOEL

Joel records the plague of locusts that God sent as punishment for sin in Joel’s day, as well as future events related to the “day of the Lord” when God will bring history to an end by punishing sin and ushering in his kingdom.

AMOS

Amos is a call to repentance among God’s people who had fallen into a heartless and empty ritualism and who had become financially rich but spiritually poor. It ends, though, with a note of hope for the day when Jesus rules from David’s throne.

OBADIAH

Obadiah is one chapter of poetic prophecy detailing God's displeasure and subsequent judgment upon the nation of Edom for warring against God's people.

JONAH

Jonah is the account of the greatest mass conversion in the Bible in the godless Assyrian capital of Nineveh through the preaching of the racist and rebellious prophet Jonah, who eventually came to repentance before writing the book.

MICAH

Micah preached to both the kingdoms of Israel and Judah during a time of great sin and apathy, and his book breaks into three sermons (Mic. 1:2; 3:1; 6:1), each beginning with a call to "hear," that threatens judgment to sinners and offers mercy to those who repent.

NAHUM

Nahum is a short promise of judgment against the Assyrian capital of Nineveh for repeatedly persecuting and harming God's people without remorse.

HABAKKUK

Habakkuk records a series of conversations between a godly man and the Lord during a dark time of national sin. It focuses on the need to trust God in faith, which becomes a great theme quoted in the New Testament.

ZEPHANIAH

Zephaniah is a short promise of universal judgment for sin on the "day of the Lord" to warn those who falsely believed that God would not act to redeem his people and judge unrepentant sinners.

HAGGAI

Haggai is a series of four sermons (Hag. 1:1; 2:1; 2:10; 2:20) commanding the few people who returned to Judah after Babylonian captivity to rebuild the temple in preparation for Jesus' coming.

ZECHARIAH

Zechariah began preaching as a young man. His book records a series of visions intended to motivate the rebuilding of the temple and repentant hearts among the Jews. Zechariah offers a glimpse

into the end of time and the coming of the King Jesus who would destroy evil, which explains why he is referenced some thirty-one times in the New Testament book of Revelation.

MALACHI

Malachi is the final Old Testament book. It closes with the promise that John the Baptizer would come to prepare the way for Jesus. Malachi also prophecies that the expected Messiah would go to the temple. Jesus fulfilled this prophecy a matter of years before the temple was destroyed, thereby proving that he alone could be the promised Messiah.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is my sincere hope that this booklet has helped introduce you to the Old Testament and has inspired you to read it for yourself. As you do, I pray God will reveal himself to you and that you will love Jesus and follow him faithfully as he teaches you to love God and love people.