

2 The Old Testament

Welcome back. If you missed last time, the podcasts and notes are here:

<https://allenbrowne.blog/exploring-the-bible>. We covered questions such as:

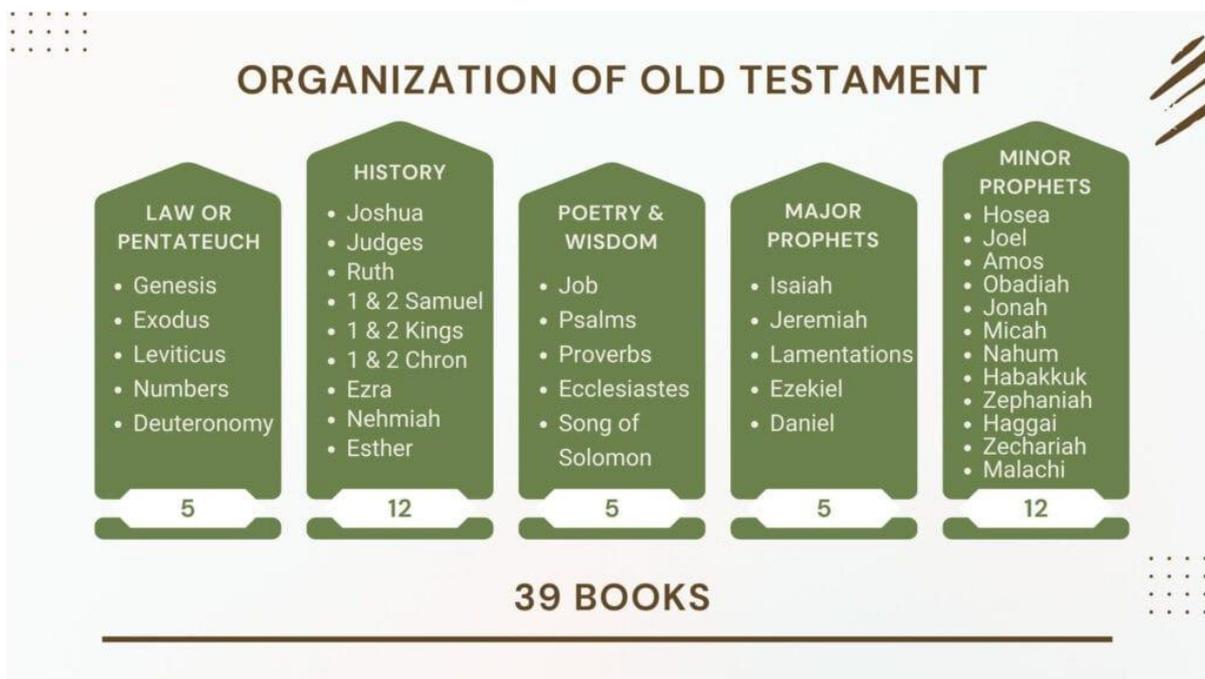
What is the Bible? Where did it come from? What is its message? Why are there different versions? Where do I start reading? How do I hear what it's saying?

Are there questions we need to address before we continue?

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Tonight we explore the Old Testament, the revelation God gave Israel before the time of Christ. The 39 books are the ones Judaism recognizes as Scripture, arranged in categories:

- **Torah:** Genesis – Deuteronomy (5 books). These foundational books explain how God established Israel as his nation with a mission to the other nations.
- **History:** Joshua – Esther (12 books). These books tell the story of Israel, how they struggled as a nation in relation to God and the other nations.
- **Wisdom:** Job – Song of Songs (5 books). These books highlight the wisdom God provided for his people in the Torah, and the songs Israel sang in response.
- **Prophets:** Isaiah – Malachi (5 major prophets and 12 minor prophets). These books contain messages from God for his people as the kingdom disintegrated.



These Jewish Scriptures are set in the framework of the Sinai covenant that established Israel as a nation led by the LORD. As we'll see next week, we live in a new covenant relationship with God, established in Christ for Israel and all the peoples of the earth. The Old Testament is a revelation of God, but we don't live under the laws of the old covenant. That's crucial to making sense of the Old Testament.

2.1 The story of the Old Testament

The first five books lay the foundation for the whole story. They're called the *Torah* (the Hebrew word for Law or Instruction), or sometimes the *Pentateuch* (Five Books).

Torah (Genesis – Deuteronomy)

The earth and all its people belong to the God of heaven. But people turned from God and used violence to gain power over each other, trying to take over God's world. So, God called Abraham and Sarah, promising to create a nation to restore the blessing of his reign to the whole world through them.³ Jacob (their grandson) had twelve sons who grew into the twelve tribes of Isarel. That's **Genesis**.

Jacob's family had moved to Egypt. A later Pharaoh enslaved them. God sent Moses to challenge Pharaoh's claim over them: "*Let my people go!*"⁴ With ten mighty acts, God demonstrated his authority to reign, showing Pharaoh to be a mere human. As God led his people to freedom, Pharaoh's army tried to stop them, so God opened up a way for his people through the Red Sea. Moses led them to Mount Sinai where the LORD gave them his laws for their nation, including the Ten Commandments.⁵ They agreed to the covenant that established the LORD as their ruler. They built a tabernacle (tent) for God to live among them and lead them. That's **Exodus**.

As the first nation to recognize the LORD's leadership, Israel was called to reflect God's character: "*You shall be holy, for I the LORD am holy.*"⁶ His laws defined the foods they could eat, ritual cleansing, sexual relations, and being a society that cared for each other: "*Love your neighbour as yourself.*"⁷ And just as other nations gave gifts to honour their gods, Israel offered sacrificial gifts to their God through priests who came from the tribe of Levi. That's **Leviticus**.

Since the Sinai covenant established them as the LORD's people, Moses now enrolls them (recording the numbers of each tribe and clan) before leading them towards the land God promised Abraham. But when they realize there are people living in the land who are prepared to defend themselves, they refuse to go in.⁸ So what does God do? How does God lead if people won't follow? God waits. For forty years. Every day he provides for these people while he waits for them to die. At the end of the book, the next generation is enrolled. That's the book of **Numbers**.

The final book of the Torah is Deuteronomy (meaning second-law). Since each generation must make its own commitment to the covenant, Deuteronomy repeats the story of the LORD redeeming Israel from Egypt, calling them to follow his leadership:

³ Genesis 12:1-3

⁴ Exodus 5:1; 7:16; 8:1, 20-21; 9:1, 13; 10:3-4.

⁵ Exodus 20:1-17.

⁶ Leviticus 11:44-55; 19:2; 20:26.

⁷ Leviticus 19:18.

⁸ Numbers 14.

“Hear O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”⁹ We hear the terms of the covenant again, with sanctions for disobedience. That’s **Deuteronomy**.



Moses led Jacob’s descendants out of Egypt to Sinai where Israel was founded as a nation led by the LORD. Modern place names are imposed in red on this map of the exodus. Source: Paul Wright, *Rose Then and Now Bible Map Atlas with Biblical Background and Culture* (Torrance, CA: Rose Publishing, 2012), 29.

⁹ This command from Deuteronomy 6:4-5 is one of the Jewish foundational prayers, called the Shema.

The remaining Old Testament books keep calling Israel back to covenant faithfulness. They struggled to represent God to the nations, eventually falling to the big kingdoms that dominated the Middle East. Yet, the Jewish people did not die out. The Rabbis of Judaism guided their people in how to fulfil the requirements of the Torah: preparing kosher food, activities to avoid on Shabat (the Sabbath), and so on.

So, what is the relevance of the Torah for us today? We are not called to comply with its laws regarding purity and cleansing rituals, kosher food, Sabbaths and feast days, sacrifices and worship—commands given to Israel, not to the nations. But we still see God revealed in the Torah: his sovereign authority over heaven and earth, his patience and persistence in partnering with humans to restore heaven’s reign to the earth, the foundational story of the nation that ultimately gives birth to the Saviour of the world.

Before we continue with Israel’s story, what questions do you have about the Torah?

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History (Joshua – Esther)

The next twelve books of the Old Testament continue the story of Israel from the time they entered Canaan until the land was lost to foreign empires.

Their first task after Moses led them to the Promised Land was to capture it from the Canaanites. Joshua led those campaigns. Then Joshua divided up the land between the twelve tribes of Israel. This is the book of **Joshua**.

Israel was now a nation ruled directly by God. But with no human leader, they didn’t follow the LORD’S instruction, and they were regularly attacked and plundered their neighbours (Moabites, Philistines, etc). So in each generation, God raised up someone to rescue them: Deborah, Gideon, Samson, etc. These leaders were called judges: restoring what was right (just) for God’s people. This is the book of **Judges**.

Facing constant struggles against their enemies, Israel rejected their uniqueness as a nation ruled directly by God: *“We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.”*¹⁰ So, Samuel the prophet anointed Saul as king, but the power corrupted Saul, so God fired him and anointed David instead. That’s **1 Samuel**.

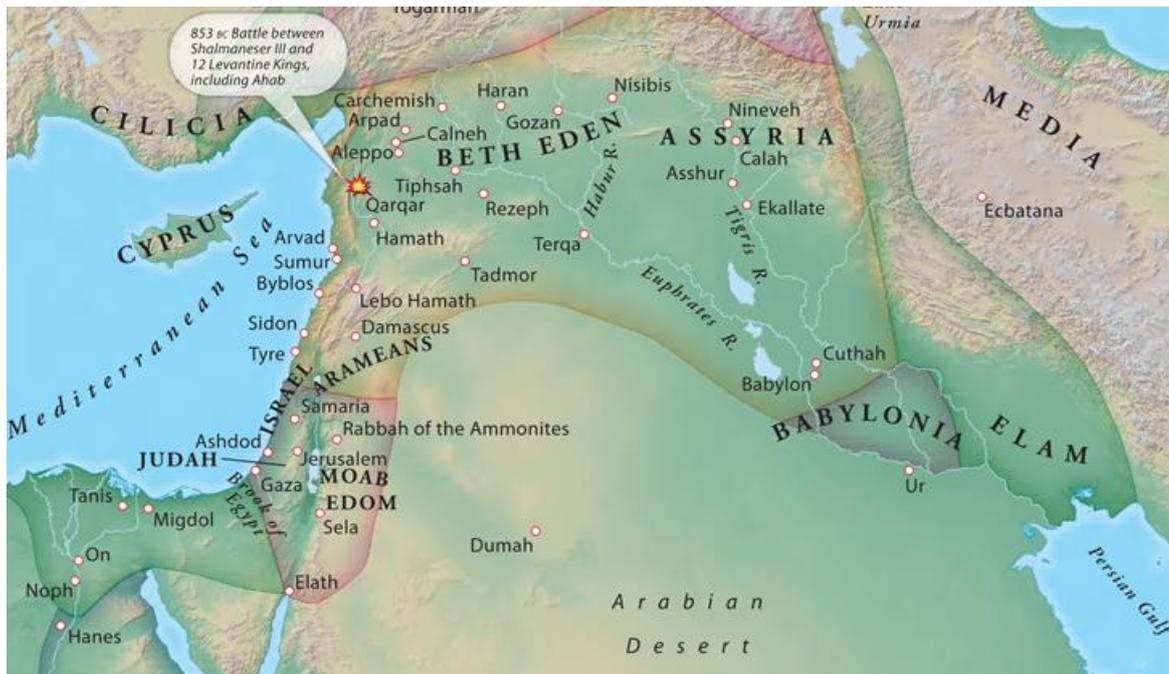
God promised the kingship would remain in David’s family forever.¹¹ David established Jerusalem as capital. He fought battles to defend his people. But David also struggled to handle power. In the end, he could barely manage his own family: adultery, incest, murder, and a son who tried to dethrone him. That’s **2 Samuel**.

¹⁰ 1 Samuel 8:19-20.

¹¹ 2 Samuel 7:1-17.

David's son Solomon built a temple in Jerusalem to recognize the LORD as Israel's ultimate king. It meant seven years of high taxes and forced labour. Then Solomon extended the burden, forcing them to build him a palace too. It was too much. When Solomon died, his son was king of Judah, but the rest of Israel broke away to form their own nation based in Samaria, worshipping golden calves in Bethel and Dan.¹²

God sent prophets (Elijah and Elisha) to call this northern nation back to himself, but in 722 BC Israel fell to Assyria, leaving only Judah. In 586 BC, Judah fell to Babylon. The story of life in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah is told in **1–2 Kings**.



The Assyrian kingdom in the eighth century BC.

Source: Carl G. Rasmussen, *Zondervan Atlas of the Bible*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 160.

When Babylon captured Jerusalem, they took anyone of significant to live in exile. When Persia captured Babylon, these exiles were encouraged to return and rebuild. Ezra led some back and taught them the Torah. Nehemiah led others back and rebuilt Jerusalem's defensive walls. But many did not return, like Esther who'd married a Persian king. These are the stories in **Ezra**, **Nehemiah**, and **Esther**.

To maintain the flow of the story, we skipped over Ruth and Chronicles. In the book of **Ruth**, love wins, so a foreigner is included in the regal line of King David.

1 and 2 Chronicles retells Israel's story from a later perspective. After listing those who returned from exile, Chronicles focuses on the reign of David and Solomon. They can't have a son of David as king since they're ruled by Persia. Then they're ruled by Greece when Alexander the Great captures Persia. As the centuries go by, retelling the story of David and his son keeps alive the hope that God would still regather his people and fulfill his promise that a son of David would reign over them forever.

¹² 2 Kings 12.

What questions do you have about these books and the story they tell?

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One of the difficulties we face in these books is the constant stream of violence. Did God authorize war in the book of Joshua? In Judges, the violence spirals downwards until Israel almost wipes out one of their own tribes. David is lauded as a great warrior who killed tens of thousands. Israel's kings do despicable things. Why is all this in the Bible? What does it say about God?

If we had only the Old Testament, we might conclude (as some forms of Judaism do) that violence is justified. But if we recognize Jesus as God's anointed leader, he did not fight as David did. Jesus insisted it was wrong to, '*love your neighbour and hate your enemy.*' Loving our enemies is the only way to reflect God's character.¹³

The world was already compromised before Israel's story began. Violence began with Cain murdering his brother and establishing a society based on violence (Genesis 4). Violence corrupts our humanness (Genesis 6:11). Nations use war to build kingdoms (Genesis 10:9-12). They want to take divine power into human hands (Genesis 11:4). But God did not walk away from the violent world. He called Abraham, establishing the people through whom he will restore the blessing of his reign to the nations (Genesis 12:1-3).

The nation of Israel was birthed in a world where nations use violence to gain power. God didn't introduce war; it came with the territory. To have a nation among all the warring nations of the earth, God accommodates himself to the fallen world.

Yes, it seems to compromise God's character. But what would you do if your children did evil? Would you walk away and reject them to protect your own integrity? Or would you stick with them and be regarded as guilty by association? God chooses faithfulness to his people even when they misrepresent them. That theme repeats over and over in the Old Testament (e.g. Genesis 12:11-20; 20:1-7).

There are clues that the violence of his people—even King David—was displeasing to the LORD. David explains why he was not permitted to build a temple for the LORD: "*This word of the LORD came to me: 'You have shed much blood and have fought many wars. You are not to build a house for my Name, because you have shed much blood on the earth in my sight.'*" (1 Chronicles 22:8)

What we read in the Old Testament must be interpreted in the context of their relationship with God. Our relationship with God in the new covenant is not the same as Israel's relationship with God as a nation among warring nations. Yet the story of Israel is a revelation of God's faithfulness to his people in a compromised world.

¹³ Matthew 5:43-46.

How does this sit with you? Thoughts?

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2.2 The Wisdom, the Psalms, and the Prophets

The Torah and History books fit together as an unfolding story (Genesis – 2 Chronicles). The remaining books do not follow chronologically. They're grouped by genre:

- **Wisdom:** 5 books of wisdom and song (Job – Song of Songs)
- **Prophets:** 5 major (Isaiah – Daniel), and 12 minor prophets (Hosea – Malachi).

Let's check out the books in these categories.

Wisdom

The book of **Job** is a drama about why bad things happen to good people. Job lived well, but all at once he lost his businesses, his children, and his health. He asks why God turned against him. Is God unjust, or is life meaningless?

Job's friends assure him God is not unjust. They call Job to admit he's the one at fault and repent. Their blame leaves Job feeling even more rejected and misunderstood.

Job wants to plead his case before God. Eventually he gets that opportunity. God explains that humans are incapable of understanding how God runs the world. Job agrees he doesn't understand, but the fact that God gave him an audience satisfies Job.

In the prologue, we were told something those living in the drama did not know: Job's sufferings were connected to something going on in a higher court. In the epilogue, God declares Job to be in the right, and those who condemned are in the wrong. Suffering does not prove sinfulness, but it can reveal faithfulness.

150 songs make up the **Psalms**, the largest book in the Bible. There are songs of praise, hymns about God's character, declarations of his sovereignty, calls so align with his wisdom, expressions of thanksgiving and trust. But the biggest category is lament: people calling on God to help them in their sufferings and struggles.

The Psalter was assembled after the return from exile and grouped into five "books" (e.g. Psalms 1–41 = "Book 1"). The collators added titles to many psalms to help us make sense of them. For example, if the heading says, "Of David," it helps to know we're listening to the king's voice. When the king says, "The LORD is my shepherd," he's submitting to God's authority.

Together, the five "books" within Psalms tell Israel's story.

In Books 1 and 2, David struggles with his enemies. In Book 3, the kingdoms of Israel

The Five Books of the Psalter

Book 1: Psalms 1-41

Book 2: Psalms 42-72

Book 3: Psalms 73-89

Book 4: Psalms 90-106

Book 5: Psalms 107-150

and Judah fall to their enemies (Psalms 80 & 89). In Book 4, they've gone into exile, but they still proclaim, "The LORD reigns." In Book 5, while still under foreign rule, David's voice rises again as God's promise of the anointed ruler to come (Messiah).¹⁴

The book of **Proverbs** calls God's people to align with the wisdom of the Torah. "*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge*" (1:7). They tell the next generation, "*The commandment is a lamp, the Torah a light, and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life*" (6:23). We do not get ahead by doing wrong: "*There is a way that seems to be right to us, but in the end it leads to death*" (14:12; 16:25).

Ecclesiastes is a wisdom book that calls into question what we do with our lives. Is there meaning in life? What are you living for? Will you be satisfied with the choices you've made when you reach the end of your life? The choices you're making today are your answers to these questions.

Song of Songs is a love poem. The woman and the man want to be together, but they still maintain relationship with friends. In Hebrew, the pronouns (feminine, male, and plural) indicate when the woman, the man, and the friends are speaking. Since that's not obvious in English, translations like the NIV add headings to help us keep track. The language is erotic at times, combined with a warning not to arouse those feelings until the time is right to devote their lives to each other.

What questions or observations do you have about the wisdom books and the Psalms?

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Remember how we said the meaning is in the relationships rather than the words? Quoting a verse without reference to the relationships in context can be misleading.

For example, this is a popular Bible quotation:

Job 11:13-17 (NIV)

¹³ If you devote your heart to him [the LORD] and stretch out your hands to him, ¹⁴ if you put away the sin that is in your hand and allow no evil to dwell in your tent, ¹⁵ then, free of fault, you will lift up your face; you will stand firm and without fear. ¹⁶ You will surely forget your trouble, recalling it only as waters gone by. ¹⁷ Life will be brighter than noonday, and darkness will become like morning.

So what's the problem? First, these words reflect the Sinai Covenant values where people expected to receive blessing for obedience and trouble for disobedience. That doesn't apply directly to us who live as Christ's followers in the covenant of grace.

Second, these are Zophar's words (see Job 11:1). He's one of Job's friends, and we've already seen that God said he was wrong: "*I am angry with you and your two friends,*

¹⁴ For more on the structure of the Psalms, see <https://allenbrowne.blog/2024/07/17/formed-in-gods-story-psalms/>

because you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has” (Job 42:7).

We cannot promise what Zophar said, when God says his words are not true.

The meaning is in the relationships, so what are we to learn from Zophar?

Prophets

Prophets were people who heard what God was saying (*the word of the LORD*) or saw what God was doing (*a dream* or a *vision*), proclaiming this revelation to the people.

They called God’s people back to their covenant responsibilities under the Torah. They warned that straying from God led to disaster. They promised God would rescue them if they turned back to him—the twin themes of judgement and salvation.

There were former prophets who spoke for God in the time of the kingdom: Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, Elisha, and others in 1 Samuel — 2 Kings. Kings were also anointed with God’s Spirit (1 Samuel 10:10-11; 16:10; 2 Samuel 23:1), but when they used their power wrongly God sent prophets to confront them.

The books from at the end of our Old Testament (Isaiah — Malachi) are what we call the Latter Prophets. God sent them as the kingdom was falling apart, and after they went into exile.

The book of **Isaiah** begins with Isaiah speaking to the kings of Judah and declaring God’s sovereignty over all nations. After Jerusalem was captured by Babylon, Isaiah 40–66 addresses the returning exiles, promising God will restore them and the whole earth under his sovereignty.¹⁵

Jeremiah also warned God’s people that Jerusalem would fall to Babylon. Then he promised that God would restore them, establishing a new covenant with them. He called God’s people to leave Babylon and return, declaring that Babylon would fall.

Lamentations consists of five poetic laments. It’s not prophecy, but it’s been placed with Jeremiah because “*Jeremiah composed laments*” (2 Chronicles 35:25).

Ezekiel saw visions while in exile. The temple was so defiled that God was moving out, effectively placing a sword in Babylon’s hand to conquer Jerusalem. Israel and Judah looked like a valley of dry bones, but the LORD would bring them back to life and install his David as king over them. Jerusalem would again be the place where God lived and reigned through his people, the city where the LORD was known.

Daniel and his friends wrestled with how to serve foreign rulers in Babylon. They encouraged the rulers to recognize the LORD’S reign over all the peoples of the earth.

¹⁵ For podcasts and note on Isaiah, see <https://allenbrowne.blog/2025/10/08/isaiah-introducing-the-good-news/>

But in Chapter 7, Daniel sees that the kingdoms will never stop fighting for power. The Ancient of Days will restore his authority through someone who is like what God intended when he gave humans authority in the beginning (*one like a son of man*). After visionary depictions of domineering rulers (Alexander the Great, Antiochus Epiphanies IV etc), Daniel sees that God would restore his people by raising the dead. The twelve **Minor Prophets** all fitted on one scroll. They're called *The Book of the Twelve* in the Hebrew Bible. All we can do here is provide some context:

<i>Book</i>	<i>Addressing</i>	<i>Historic setting</i>	<i>Chaps</i>
Hosea	Israel (North)	Divided kingdom, just before the fall of Israel	14
Joel	Judah	Uncertain	3
Amos	Israel (North)	Divided kingdom, before the fall of Israel	9
Obadiah	Edom	Shortly after Jerusalem fell to Babylon	1
Jonah	Assyria (Nineveh)	Divided kingdom, well before the fall of Israel	4
Micah	Judah	Overlaps with Isaiah	7
Nahum	Assyria (Nineveh)	Divided kingdom, before the fall of Israel	3
Habakkuk	Judah	Shortly before the exile	3
Zephaniah	Judah	King Josiah's time (before the exile)	3
Haggai	Jews	After the return from exile	2
Zechariah	Jews	After the return from exile	14
Malachi	Jews	After the return from exile	4

Do you have questions about the prophets?

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2.3 Conclusion

The Law and the Prophets is traditional Jewish term for what we call *the Old Testament*:

- God revealed himself first in the **Law** (Torah), the Sinai covenant that established Israel as God’s nation. But even that first generation refused to follow the LORD when they reached the Promised Land.
- When the kingdom broke apart and Israel worshipped golden calves, God sent Elijah to call them back to “*the LORD, the God of Israel*” (1 Kings 17:1, 14). This prophetic ministry continued through other **prophets**.

So, *the Law* (the covenant established through Moses) and *the Prophets* (the ministry established in Elijah) is shorthand for Jewish Scriptures (the Old Testament).¹⁶

How does this story end? On a knife-edge! These are the closing verses:

Malachi 4:4-6 (NIV)

⁴ “Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel. ⁵ “See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. ⁶ He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.”

The *Law* told them to expect blessing when they followed the LORD, and disaster when they did not (Deuteronomy 28). But even when they were unfaithful, God’s faithful love kept pursuing them through the *prophets*.

So, who wins in the end?

- *The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness* (Exodus 34:6)? Or
- *The people who quickly turned from the ways of their ancestors* (Judges 2:17)?

What a cliff-hanger! Come back next week to hear how the faithful God does right by his people, rescuing them—and all the peoples of the earth—in the Messiah. That’s the story of the New Testament.

What questions do you have?

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¹⁶ See Matthew 5:17; 7:12; 11:13; 22:40; 23:29; Luke 16:16; 24:44; John 1:45; Acts 13:15; 24:14; 28:23; Romans 3:21.

Resources

For one book that provides background for each book of the Old and New Testaments, see:

Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book* (Zondervan, 2014).

For an overview of the Old Testament, see:

Paul House & Eric Mitchell. *Old Testament Survey* (B&H, 2007).

For free videos on the books of the Bible:

<https://bibleproject.com/>

For commentaries on individual books of the Old Testament, see:

The Bible Speaks Today series (Inver-Varsity Press)

For Everyone Bible Guides (Westminster John Knox)

