

QUESTION 1

What Story Is the Bible Telling?

The first time I read the *Harry Potter* series, I did not know where the story was heading. And not until all seven books are read does the fullness of the epic become clear. If the reader knows only the first book, the grasp of the larger story is limited and ultimately deficient. But with each successive book, the reader's understanding grows, as well as his or her appreciation for previous adventures. If you want to enjoy the books even more, read them again. A secret for greater joy in reading is to reread great stories.

Slowly but Surely

Rereading great stories leads not to a duller experience but to a deeper one. The same is true for the Bible. The more time we spend in the pages of Scripture, the more we will see its treasures. But the Bible does not tell its story quickly. We must be patient readers, wrapping our minds around many books and expecting to miss all sorts of connections the first time—or tenth time—through its pages.

Slowly but surely, the message of Scripture unfolds from Genesis to Revelation. Have you considered how much time passes between these two books? After God tells Abraham that his descendants will enter the land of promise (Gen. 12:1–3), the Israelites do not inherit the land until at least five centuries later. After Jacob tells Judah that the scepter will not depart from Judah's tribe (Gen. 49:10), the first king from that tribe does not rule in the Promised Land until almost a millennium later. After Malachi indicts his listeners for their neglect and violations of the Mosaic law, four centuries of prophetic silence pass before John the Baptist comes on the scene.

The timeline is longer in the Old Testament than in the New. Even though the dates of events in Genesis 1–11 are uncertain, the stories from Genesis to Malachi unfold over thousands of years. Contrast this timespan with the New Testament: the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, as well as the preaching and writing of the apostles, took place within the first century AD.

Leaning Forward and Looking Ahead

Genesis

One reason for the timespan of the Old Testament era is its anticipatory purpose. The whole Old Testament is leaning forward. God's good and ordered world (Gen. 1–2) was disrupted by rebellion and sin (Gen. 3), and the rest of the story tells us what God is going to do about it. He intends to make his blessings flow as far as the curse is found. Adam and Eve, and everyone who comes after them, will no longer live in the sacred dwelling place of Eden, for sin brings exile and death. But God promises a serpent-crushing seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15), and from that point onward in the storyline, the reader is on the lookout for that son.

As humankind multiplies, so does sin. Cain kills Abel (Gen. 4), and eventually everyone's heart is only evil all the time (Gen. 6:5). God floods his creation, sparing only Noah's family out of all humankind (Gen. 6–8). But after surviving the flood, Noah sins and thus shows he is not the righteous deliverer who would reverse the curse (Gen. 9). The problem of sin persists from generation to generation. Noah's descendants unite to make a name for themselves and build a tower reaching the heavens (Gen. 11). The Lord confuses their speech and disperses the people. But as the people spread, so does sin.

At age seventy-five, a man named Abram encounters the true and living God. He and his family will be a blessing, somehow, to all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:2–3). This future blessing will overcome the curse of sin. God promises land and offspring to Abram (Gen. 12), and he puts these promises into a covenant (Gen. 15). God changes Abram's name to Abraham (Gen. 17:5), and at age one hundred, Abraham becomes the father of Isaac (Gen. 21). Isaac fathers Jacob (Gen. 25), and Jacob fathers twelve sons (Gen. 29–30). The line of Abraham is increasing, and the Bible continues to devote attention to selected stories about these figures. But the prophesied deliverer of Genesis 3:15 has not yet come.

Jacob is renamed Israel (Gen. 32:28), and his descendants become the Israelites. Jacob's sons conspire against Joseph and sell him into slavery (Gen. 37), but God superintends the tragedy of Joseph's downfall and raises him up in due course. A famine strikes the land of Canaan—which is the land promised to Abraham's offspring—and Jacob's children sojourn to Egypt for food. Eventually they learn that their brother Joseph is alive (Gen. 45). The brother they rejected becomes the brother whom God uses to sustain their families in Egypt (Gen. 46–47). Later, Joseph dies in hope that God will one day lead the Israelites out of Egypt (Gen. 50).

Exodus–Deuteronomy

The Israelites remain in Egypt for hundreds of years, at some point becoming slaves to a paranoid and harsh pharaoh (Exod. 1). Then Moses is born

(Exod. 2). When Moses is eighty years old, he encounters the true and living God in a blazing bush, and God declares that the time has come to free the Israelites from Egyptian captivity and bring them into the Promised Land (Exod. 3). Through a series of signs and wonders, God debilitates the land of Egypt, humiliates the pharaoh, and ensures the release of the Israelites (Exod. 7–12). When obstacles arise, God overcomes them and cares for his people. He leads the Israelites through the Red Sea on dry ground and then crashes the walls of water onto the pursuing Egyptian army (Exod. 14). He gives the Israelites water when they're thirsty (Exod. 15), food when they're hungry (Exod. 16), and victory over enemies when they're attacked (Exod. 17).

On the way to the Promised Land, the Israelites follow God's guidance to Mount Sinai, where Moses receives the law of God (Exod. 19–23). The people agree to keep God's law and enter into a covenant with the Lord (Exod. 24). Following specific instructions, the people construct a portable dwelling place for the Lord—called the tabernacle—that they will carry with them through the wilderness and into the Promised Land (Exod. 25–40). This glory-filled tabernacle will be the place for the system of sacrifices (Lev. 1–7). Outside of Eden, God is making a way for sinners to relate to him, for he is holy and they are not. Sinners come to God through sacrifice.

After a little less than a year at Mount Sinai, the Israelites pick up camp and begin to move at the direction of the Lord (Num. 10). They're heading to the Promised Land! Spies enter the land ahead of the rest of the people, in order to scope out the inhabitants and any strongholds, but the spies return with a mixed report of excitement and fear (Num. 13). The Israelites rebel against Moses and the Lord, demonstrating evil hearts and unbelief, so God pronounces a judgment of forty years in the wilderness until the older generation of Israelites is dead (Num. 14).

In the last year of Moses's life, at age 120, he readies the second generation of Israelites to enter the Promised Land. He reminds the listeners of their history (Deut. 1–3). He calls them to obedience and to fear the Lord (Deut. 4–6). He preaches about laws, idolatry, feasts, foods, warfare, tithes, and worship (Deut. 13–26). If the Israelites will keep the law, there will be blessing, but curses will come if they refuse to keep the law (Deut. 28–30).

Joshua–2 Samuel

After Moses dies, Joshua becomes his successor (Josh. 1). Joshua leads the Israelites across the Jordan River (Josh. 3), and at last the people are in the land promised to their forefathers, the patriarchs. The conquest of the land begins with Jericho (Josh. 6), and the dominion of the Israelites spreads throughout the territories of Canaan (Josh. 7–12). Boundaries in the land are established, and the tribes of Israel are ready to receive their promised inheritance (Josh. 13–22). With the Israelites now in the land, they are poised to be a holy nation mediating the knowledge of Yahweh and living as a light to the

unholy nations. The Mosaic covenant is renewed, and the Israelites are eager to devote themselves to the service and will of the Lord (Josh. 23–24).

The deliverer of Genesis 3:15 still does not come. The Israelites may be in the Promised Land, but not all is well in this new sacred space. Sin abounds; the curse abides. The Israelites are unfaithful to the law, so God brings consequences that prompt the people's repentance, and in response to their repentance God raises up a military leader—called a judge—to save them (Judg. 1–2). Yet the cycle continues: sin, judgment, repentance, deliverance. Israel has no king, and in those days everyone was doing what seemed right in their own eyes (Judg. 21:25).

During the dark period of the judges, God prepares a king for the people. In the providential story of Ruth and Boaz, their marriage begins a family that leads to David (Ruth 4:18–22). And when David is thirty years old, he becomes king over the whole land of Israel (2 Sam. 5). The scepter is wielded from Judah's tribe, and the effects are substantial. David takes control of the city of Jerusalem and orders the ark of the covenant to be brought there (2 Sam. 5–6). God makes a covenant with David, promising to raise up an offspring from David's line, a son who would rule forever (2 Sam. 7:12–13). Since the Bible reader has been on the lookout for the victorious son foretold in Genesis 3:15, God's covenant with David not only confirms that earlier promise but also clarifies that the serpent-crushing seed of the woman will be a *son of David*.

1 Kings–2 Chronicles

The first son of David is Solomon, though he is not the one who will reign forever. Solomon receives surpassing wisdom and reigns for forty years over a golden age of Israel's history. During Solomon's reign, the temple is constructed and solidifies the importance of Jerusalem (1 Kings 5–8). The dwelling place of God is in Zion, the chosen city. Tragedy, however, is on the horizon. When Solomon's son Rehoboam becomes king, he provokes a rebellion from the people in approximately 930 BC (1 Kings 12). Some of them follow Rehoboam, and some follow a man named Jeroboam. The united land of Israel divides into northern and southern kingdoms.

The rest of 1–2 Kings and 1–2 Chronicles reports the dynasties resulting from the split. The northern kingdom (known as Israel) lasts until the Assyrians conquer it in 722 BC, and the southern kingdom (known as Judah) lasts until the Babylonians conquer it in 586 BC. Though these centuries involve unfaithfulness to the Mosaic covenant and a litany of unrighteous kings, God is not silent. He sends a host of prophets, some to the north and others to the south, to proclaim God's word to the people and to call for repentance.

But the people will not repent, and God will not relent. Judgment comes to the north and south by foreign armies. The destruction by Babylon is particularly horrific, because the Israelites are taken into exile, the walls around

Jerusalem are wrecked, the king from David's line is removed, homes—including the palace—are destroyed, and the temple is laid in ruins. Israel experiences national death. During this downfall, the longed-for deliverer does not arise. Where is the one from David's line who will overcome God's enemies and reverse the curse of sin and death?

The prophets who warn of God's judgment also prophesy the people's restoration. And in 539 BC, after decades of captivity, the Persians conquer Babylon and a year later allow exiles to return to Jerusalem. The returning exiles resume life in the Promised Land, planning to rebuild the temple and their homes. But not everything will return to the way it was. The Persian king is now king of the Promised Land too. There will be no son of David ruling on the throne in Jerusalem.

Ezra–Esther

Thousands of exiles return to the land, but not everyone does. Chronologically, the events in Esther occur before those of Ezra and Nehemiah, and Esther's story takes place from 483 to 473 BC outside the Promised Land and during the reign of the Persian Empire. In God's providence, Esther becomes the wife of Ahasuerus (Esther 2) and thwarts a plot to destroy the Jewish people (Esther 4–5).

In 458 BC, Ezra comes to Jerusalem and teaches the people (Ezra 7). Back in the land for eighty years now, the people need more than rebuilt homes and a rebuilt temple. The people themselves need to be rebuilt! They need edification and instruction, and the Lord uses Ezra to provide it. A decade later, Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem and leads in the rebuilding of the walls around Jerusalem, which the people complete in 444 BC after fifty-two days (Neh. 6:15). The people need reformation, and the books of Ezra and Nehemiah report responses of confession and repentance.

Job–Malachi

The books of Genesis through Esther unfold the storyline of the Old Testament in chronological order. The books of Job through Malachi were written during this time period. The books of Job through Song of Solomon are typically considered wisdom literature, consisting of instruction, lessons, and truths for people who seek to flourish in a fallen world. The books of Isaiah through Malachi are typically considered prophetic literature, consisting of those prophets whom God set apart to enforce the law of Moses and the covenant thereof.

All these books sustain and advance the hope that God will send a redeemer to deliver sinners and establish justice. But when the Old Testament period closes with the prophetic voice of Malachi, the promised Messiah has not yet come. After many centuries of waiting, the readers are still leaning forward and looking ahead.

Promise and Fulfillment

Matthew–John

Four centuries of prophetic silence are broken by the coming of the Messiah and his forerunner John the Baptist. Matthew opens his Gospel by telling us, in verse 1, that this is the story of the Son of David (Matt. 1:1). The Old Testament left readers with great expectations, and those expectations will be met in the person and work of Jesus. In concert together, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John report the extraordinary conception, humble birth, sinless life, authoritative teaching, miraculous power, atoning death, victorious resurrection, and triumphant ascension of Jesus the Christ. He is the seed of the woman who crushes the serpent and brings blessing to a world under the curse of sin and death.

Acts

The good news about Jesus is a global gospel, so the book of Acts tells how the early church eventually spread from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). They proclaim the gospel of Christ to Jews and Gentiles, calling for faith and repentance. The apostles suffer for this news, enduring persecution, imprisonment, and ostracism. But God pours out his Spirit upon all flesh and empowers his witnesses by this same Spirit. In their speeches, the apostles herald God's appointed purpose and the fulfillment of Old Testament promises through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

Romans–Jude

Twenty-one of the New Testament books are letters. Most are written by Paul, and the others are from James, Peter, John, Jude, and whoever wrote Hebrews. Some letters have a wide audience in multiple locations, other letters are to specific individuals, and still others are to particular churches. These six letter-writers address their audience(s) in the authority of Christ and by the inspiration of the Spirit. All the New Testament letters are penned after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, so they are dispatched in the era of the new covenant. They explain the gospel, interpret the Old Testament, exhort the saints, expose false teachings, promise the return of Christ, warn of future judgment, and hope for the resurrection of the dead.

Revelation

While John is on the isle of Patmos, God grants him a vision of Christ (Rev. 1). John records Christ's words for the churches of Asia (Rev. 2–3). The remainder of the Apocalypse involves heavenly scenes of glory as well as depictions of earthly judgments. The idols of the age will win the allegiance of unbelievers, but believers will worship the Lord Jesus Christ and endure to the end. The wicked will face the just wrath of God, and the saints will be

vindicated. All God's elect will be kept and raised. Death and the evil one will be overthrown and condemned (Rev. 20). The victory over the serpent will be eternal in duration and cosmic in scope. Better than the garden of Eden, the glorious city of God will be a new heaven and earth where the old order of things has passed away and all things have become new (Rev. 21). The beginning of Genesis is aiming at the end of Revelation.

Summary

The Bible is the story about Jesus Christ. The Old Testament is a long story that predicts and prepares for his coming, and the New Testament is the explosive announcement of his arrival and what that means for the world. If the Old Testament is about the promise, the New Testament heralds the fulfillment. We need the whole Bible to tell the story about Jesus. The opening chapters of Genesis tell us about God's good world, what went wrong, and what God planned to do about it. As the epic of Scripture unfolds, God sets apart the family of Abraham, which leads eventually to the nation of Israel. And through that family and nation, God blesses the families of the earth with the seed of Abraham and son of David—the Lord Jesus Christ. O come let us adore him!

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How often do you read the Bible? Are there parts of the Bible you've never read thoughtfully?
2. Have you studied the storyline of Scripture? Are there big pieces of the story that remain puzzling to you?
3. What parts of Old Testament history should you study more carefully, so that your understanding of the storyline will increase?
4. How is God's promise of a deliverer in Genesis 3:15 fulfilled in the rest of Scripture?
5. If someone asked you to summarize the storyline of Scripture in five minutes, which people and events would you include?

