



HOW TO READ THE BIBLE: EPISODE 2

The Story of the Bible

STUDY NOTES



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Reading the Bible as a Unified Story

The Bible is a really large book made up of the Old and New Testaments, which themselves are made up of many books. There's a lot of ancient history, poetry, and letters written across the span of fifteen hundred years. On top of that, there's a cast of hundreds of people over this period of time. Who can keep it all straight?

It can be easy to get lost, not only because it's an ancient text, but also because the book is large and complex.

Despite this variety and diversity, the Bible shows a remarkable unity. The most dominant type of literature in the Bible is narrative. It opens with, "In the beginning," and the second to last paragraph concludes with, "and they reigned forever and ever." Narrative composes five hundred and two chapters, or forty-three percent of the text. That's nearly half the Bible! On the other hand, poetry makes up thirty-three percent of the Bible (three hundred eighty-seven chapters).

Although the Bible is a diverse set of literature and may appear fragmented at first, it ultimately presents itself as a unified epic narrative that leads to Jesus. There is one main plotline weaving the different books and stories together.

Once you grasp this core storyline and how all the books fit together, you can pick the Bible up at any point, and you'll know right where you are and what's going on.



<p>Creation and the Royal Task Genesis 1 - 2</p>	<p>OLD TESTAMENT</p>
<p>Rebellion and the Fallout Genesis 3 - 11</p>	
<p>God's Covenant with Israel Genesis 12 - 50, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job, Psalm, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi</p>	
<p>Jesus and the Kingdom of God Matthew, Mark, Luke, John</p>	<p>NEW TESTAMENT</p>
<p>The Spreading of Kingdom People Acts, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2, & 3 John, Jude</p>	
<p>The Return of the King Revelation</p>	

How the Story Works

1 | Creation and the Royal task

God confronts chaos and out of it creates a wonderful, ordered world full of beauty and potential. He then appoints humans to oversee this world and multiply and create new communities. This opening story offers an ideal vision of the vocation of humans. Humans are to take this good world and develop all of its potential while living in harmony with God and each other.

2 | Rebellion and the Fallout

As the humans go about this task they've been given, they're faced with choices about what is good and evil. Will they trust God's wisdom, or will they seize autonomy and define good and evil for themselves?

Here a dark, mysterious character enters the story. It represents evil at its source, and it entices the humans to doubt God's generosity and rebel. This leads to disaster; humanity's relationship with God is fractured, and their relationships with themselves, their families, and the earth breakdown. This all leads to the rise of two cities (Enoch and Babylon) where pride and violence reign.

3 | God's Covenant with Israel

The tension between the just and generous creator God and the rebellious nations who have given into evil develops the plot conflict that drives the storyline of the entire Bible.

God's response sets in motion a plan to restore divine blessing to the whole world. He will do this through one family chosen from among the nations, the people of Abraham, who later become Israel.

The story of God and Israel is the first main subplot of the Biblical story. It has three main movements:

Movement One: God Chooses Israel to Bless the Nations

Genesis 12-
Deuteronomy God makes a covenant promise to Abraham's family to bring them into a land where they'll become a nation that brings God's blessing to the world. The family grows, but they become enslaved in Egypt. As a nation, Egypt embodies all that's gone wrong with humanity: idolatry, injustice, and giving into evil.

God raises up Moses and defeats Egypt's evil, rescuing his people and bringing them to Mount Sinai. There he enters into a covenant partnership with Israel. Furthermore, he will personally live among them. They are invited to obey the terms of the covenant which start with the ten commandments, followed by hundreds more. By being faithful to these commands, they will become God's priestly representatives to the nations.

Movement Two: Israel's Royal Failure

Joshua,
Judges,
1 & 2 Samuel,
1 & 2 Kings Israel enters the promised land, and they blow it—big time. They begin worshiping the gods of the nations around them, leading to corruption and injustice. Even their best kings, like David or Solomon, fail miserably. Eventually the leaders of Israel run the nation into the ground. Then the tribes of Israel are conquered by the superpower, Babylon. Most of the Israelites are then dragged into exile in Babylon. Now we see two big conflicts in the story. All of the nations have continued with their rebellion, ruining God's good world. Even God's own chosen people are doing the same!

Movement Three: Israel's Exile and the Prophetic Hope

Isaiah,
Jeremiah,
Ezekiel,
Hosea - Malachi Despite Israel's sin, all wasn't lost. Among Israel was a vocal minority called the prophets. They had previously warned of Israel's downfall, but they also made it clear that it wasn't the end of the story. God had promised to restore divine blessing to the

world through this family, and even Israel's rebellion wouldn't stop him.

Their hope was that after the exile God would return to live among his people once again and a great leader would come and lead Israel in faithfulness to their God. Moreover, it would be through this very leader that God would rescue the world.

So the storyline of the Old Testament comes to a close, but with all of these tensions unresolved. We are left with a truly epic story waiting for the final ending.

4 | Jesus and the Kingdom of God

Enter Jesus of Nazareth who is sometimes called Immanuel, meaning God with us. The four Gospels in the New Testament present him as the resolution to all of the conflict of the Old Testament. They claimed he was the very love of God become human and the embodiment of divine mercy. They claimed Jesus was the kind of human we were all made to be, but perpetually fail to be. Furthermore, they claimed Jesus was the faithful Israelite who would fulfill God's promise to return divine blessing to all of the nations through Abraham.

Here's how he'd do it. Humanity and Israel's embrace of evil had created a world of violence and death, but Jesus was a man of compassionate power. He proclaimed that he was bringing God's kingdom back over the earth and he would confront the tragic effects of evil. But Jesus' plan to defeat humanity's evil and sin was to let it defeat him. After dying for the sins of the world, his resurrection from death sealed his victory over all of our evil and death. He now offers up his own righteous life as a gift to those who would follow him.



5 | The Spreading People of the Kingdom

After his resurrection, Jesus' followers experienced the power of the Holy Spirit indwelling them with his presence in Jerusalem. Jesus appeared in the flesh many more times, sending his followers out as witnesses to share the incredible news of what he had done for Israel and all humanity. This Jesus movement became a multi-ethnic international movement that flourished especially among the poor. It was made up of small communities of mutual love and generosity called "churches." People would gather to celebrate their new way of life as redeemed humans enjoying an intimate covenant with God. They would eat together and worship Jesus while challenging each other to abide by his teachings.

A large portion of the New Testament is made up of letters from Jesus' appointed leaders called "apostles." Written to all kinds of different churches, these letters showed the recipients what it meant to participate in Jesus' kingdom in the first century world. Moreover, the entire New Testament presents Jesus as the way forward for humanity itself. In Jesus, God's brand new world is inaugurated. His followers continue to look to the day when he will return to finish what he started: conquering evil completely while fully establishing his kingdom on earth with us forever.

6 | The Return of the King

All disciples of Jesus, the apostles, and Jesus himself have set their future hope in God's covenant promises to completely redeem our world and set all things right. This hope is focused on the return of Jesus to consummate the kingdom he inaugurated through his life, death, and resurrection. On that day, he will return to fully confront and deal with evil in all of its manifestations, removing it completely from his good world. He will make all things new, and people from all nations who submit to his love and justice will be invited into this new creation. It is here, and at an unfathomable degree, that the great human vocation of ruling as caretakers in the presence and goodness of God will be carried forward.



Discussion Questions

- 1 | From the Tower of Babel story through the rest of the Old Testament, what specific consequences manifested themselves from choices that individuals and whole groups of people made in defining good and evil on their own terms rather than on God's?
- 2 | Why is it so tempting to eat the "forbidden fruit" and define good and evil on our own terms?
- 3 | Review the context of Exodus 19:13b. Might God be calling all of Israel up the mountain into his presence here? If so, does Israel remain "distant" by choosing to make Moses an intermediary in Exodus 20:18-20? Correspond this thought experiment with Israel's desire to have a human king like their neighboring nations. Furthermore, how might this "distance" from God inform the apostle Paul's view of the law?
- 4 | Why do you suppose it took so many generations for Jesus, the promised messiah, to arrive?
- 5 | How does God/Jesus' definition of good, as serving others and practicing self-sacrificial love, ultimately triumph over the evil we often choose for ourselves? Where else can we see evidence of this triumph at work in the world?
- 6 | In the end, when all wrongs are made right, all evil is eradicated, heaven and earth unite, and humanity rules together with God, will it be because humanity finally chooses God's definition, or because God overwhelms us with so much goodness that we have little choice in the matter? What are some other possible scenarios?

FURTHER READING:

*The Drama of Scripture: Finding
Our Place in the Biblical Story*
Craig Bartholomew & Michael Goheen

A Walk through the Bible
Lesslie Newbigin

*Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical
Theology of the Hebrew Bible*
Stephen Dempster

*The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology
of the Old and New Testaments*
Thomas Schreiner