

What's the Bible All About?

Understanding the Story of the Bible

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Who Wrote What?

Ian Paul had the original idea for the booklet, and wrote some parts of chapter 1, chapter 3 (which appears in a revised form in IVP's forthcoming *The Reader's Guide to the Bible*) and chapter 5, and then edited the whole. Philip Jenson wrote more of chapter 1 and all of chapters 2, 4 and 6. Mike Thompson contributed some careful proof-reading, for which we are grateful. But it has been a genuinely collaborative effort, and we hope that you find reading it as helpful as we found writing it.

It seems fitting that the 40th booklet in this series, which marks the first ten years of Grove Biblical booklets, should be one that offers an overview of the whole Bible.

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1

Telling the Story

*A key skill in Bible reading is to have an overview of the story as a whole, so you can see where the particular passage you are looking at fits into the 'big picture.'*¹

But most people's grasp of the Bible as a whole is not very strong. The Bible is a large book; sermons are generally on lectionary-sized bites; and few songs or prayers relate more than a fraction of the story. Moreover, postmodernity regards big stories like the Bible as hopelessly biased and dangerously authoritarian.

Yet whatever else it might be, the Bible does have a grand narrative, telling the big story of the universe from beginning to end, from creation to new creation. A large section of this story is to be found in Genesis to Kings, a story selectively repeated and extended in Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah. In the New Testament the gospels retell their story no fewer than four times, emphasizing that parts of the story have a weight as well as a duration. Luke continues the story of his gospel in the Book of Acts in telling of the birth of the church and up to the arrival of Paul in Rome. Revelation sums up the whole story yet again, albeit in image and symbol, and highlights the coming end of the story as we know it. Although the Bible contains many other kinds of literature (law, psalm, prophecy, canticle, parable, epistle), these are all framed and grounded by this larger story.

Now it is significant that we have been speaking about story rather than 'history.' The relation between the story and what we today would call history is often complex and uncertain. God speaks to people in terms that they can understand, and in the ancient world there were not the sharp distinctions between fact and interpretation that we assume today. For example, the purpose of the story of creation (Genesis 1) is first of all theological, not historical or scientific. It is as misleading to read this text as a news report as it is to attempt a biography of the Prodigal Son. The nearer we come to contemporary records, the firmer the historical foundation of the story, but it is still difficult, perhaps impossible, to know how much of the story is intended to be strict reporting. So this question (important as it is) is set aside for the rest of this booklet.

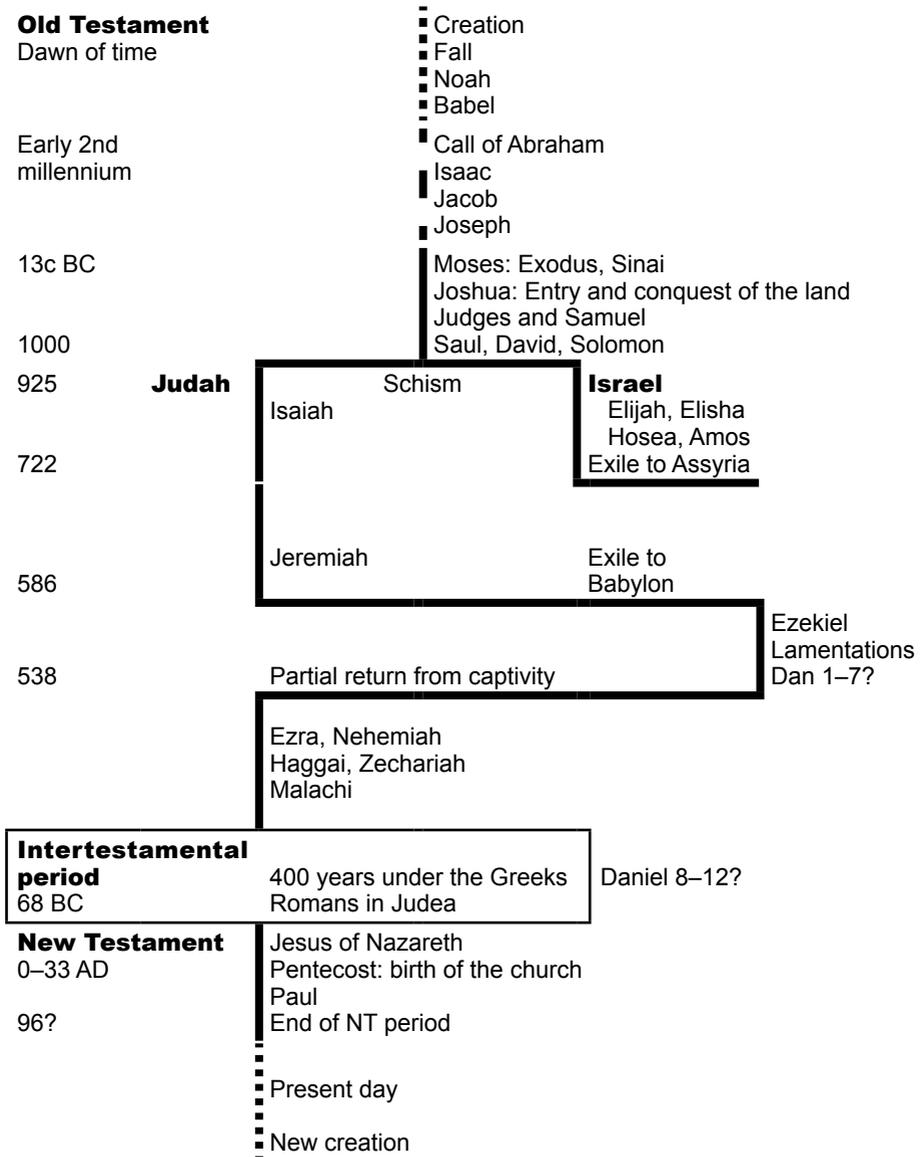
Tom Wright has helpfully compared the story of the Bible with a play that has several acts.² Throughout, God is the main character.

Act 1	Creation	God creates the world, and humanity as its climax.
Act 2	Fall	Humanity sins, rebelling against God and going its own way.
Act 3	Israel	God graciously bears with humankind, and begins the work of restoration through Abraham and his children, the people of God.
Act 4	Jesus	Ultimately God sends his own son, Jesus Christ, to deal with sin once for all through dying and rising again.
Act 5	Church	As a result of the giving of the Spirit a new humanity, a renewed people, is brought into being to continue God's work of restoration and renewal in the world.
Act 6	New creation	One day Christ will come again and there will be a new heavens and a new earth.

Between one act and another there are some things that remain the same (such as the character of God), but others that change (for example, from family to nation to church).³ Without an awareness of the different nature of these acts, it is possible to move either too quickly or too inflexibly from a text in one act to the context of hearers in the present day. We are happy to eat pork even though it is prohibited Leviticus 14. But it is less clear when it comes to some important ethical and theological questions, such as whether Christians should fight in armies or not, or whether women should be ordained to lead churches.

Of course, this six-act schema is a drastic simplification. A slightly fuller outline story is reflected in the following chart:⁴

Outline of the Biblical Narrative



What are the main themes of this story that run through each act?

It is About the Fulfilment of Promise

Beginning with Abraham the promises of God propel the story forward. Although they are fulfilled, it is always only in part, and through the Old Testament the promise is reshaped into a hope that one day God will act in a special way. This is the setting for the coming of Jesus. The early pages of the gospels are full of a sense of expectation, and at numerous points there is a sense of hope fulfilled, disappointed or understood in a new way. This finds no better expression than in John the Baptist's question (through his disciples) to Jesus: 'Are you the one who was to come?' (Matt 11.3). Jesus was indeed the promised one (1 Cor 1.20), but Christians still await the completion of God's plan and so continue to walk by faith and not by sight (2 Cor 5.7).

It is About the Kingdom of God

The sovereign God is majestically introduced in the opening story of creation. All things are created to do his will. Human beings made in the image of God are called to reflect the nature of this kingship, full of justice, compassion and mercy. The king of Israel is to rule as his agent and servant, and his subordinate status is emphasized by the prophets who call him to account for his actions. The lack of a true king leads to the expectation found in the New Testament concerns the coming of the just and perfect rule of God. This will take place through the person of the promised Messiah or Christ (both mean 'the anointed one'). He will enable the people of God, and thereby the wider world, to acknowledge the Lord as king. This kingdom does not come in the abstract; it breaks into a world full of competing kingdoms and would-be rulers, both political and personal, and inevitably comes into conflict with all of them in different ways. Nor is it a delegated kingdom. Jesus himself takes on the royal task of establishing justice and righteousness through dying on the cross. His resurrection demonstrates that this servant king is indeed Lord, fully worthy of the authority and devotion bestowed on him by his followers.

It is About a Personal Response to God

From the beginning God appears to people, to Adam in the garden, to Abraham on his journey, and ultimately in the person of Jesus. In turn they are invited to respond to him in praise and obedience, although the opposite result is tragically all too common. The law is firmly set within the context of God's personal rescue of his people from Egypt. Similarly the people respond first of all to the person of Jesus, even though this leads on to an intense interest in his words and teaching.

Even in the later parts of the New Testament, when converts will have not known Jesus in the flesh, the theme of response to his person is paramount. In the Book of Revelation, the challenge for the Christians of first century Asia Minor is to be faithful witnesses just as Jesus was a faithful witness—the first call is to be with him and to be like him

It is About the Particular and the Cosmic

The beginning (Genesis) and end (Revelation) of the story frame the largest possible setting: the entire cosmos. Yet the focus of the story from very early on is rooted in a particular time and place, first of all Eden, then the land of Canaan, then the wanderings of a mysterious prophet through Galilee and Judea, finishing (so it appeared) on a hill outside Jerusalem. Thus Jesus commands his followers to begin proclaiming the gospel from a particular place (Jerusalem), but to carry on to the ends of the earth (Acts 1.8). There are no limits, either to the geographical spread of the gospel, or to the scope of the transformation they are to work for. This is also true when readers of the Bible seek to hear God speaking to them. The events that happened then and there are always spilling over into the here and now—indeed, into every here and every now that has ever been, since the Bible claims that all these particular events have cosmic significance. The work of God through his people, and supremely through Jesus Christ, has implications for every person in every place in every age.

2

The Story of the Old Testament

Beginnings: Genesis 1–11 (The Primeval ‘History’)

The Bible begins with a bang, the creation of the entire universe. Genesis 1–11 is Israel’s version of the stories that all peoples tell of the beginning of the world and humanity and, as with any story, the opening sets the stage and introduces the key players for the rest of the story. In the first creation account, with the whole cosmos as its backdrop, the God of Israel’s Scriptures effortlessly speaks the world into being in a wonderful order. Both space and time are deliberately deployed so that all, both animate and inanimate, know their place. The seven-day pattern, culminating in the holy Sabbath, highlights the priority of time and worship over material things. In due course God will reveal to his special people the secret of this sevenfold pattern. The second creation story, told from an earthly rather than a cosmic perspective, complements the first. Human beings, male and female, are the goal and focus of the account, formed from the dust yet also made in God’s image. The kingdom of God is established and humanity invited to be sub-regents. The praise of the creator and sovereign God is the serious and joyful work of all creation.

Gen 1.1–2.3

Gen 2.1–3

Exod 16.22–30

Gen 2.4–25

Gen 2.9;

1.26–27

Ps 148

Alas, grace and gift all too soon turn into doubt and disobedience. God had given access to a tree of life and to all of his creation. But he had commanded the man not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil on pain of death. A mysterious serpent, however, successfully tempts Adam and Eve, the first man and woman, to eat the forbidden fruit. God is a righteous judge, and sin leads to a catastrophic disorder in people’s relationship with God, with each other, and with the world. Yet mercy tempers judgement, and hope is not extinguished. The punishment is exile rather than simple death, expulsion from a garden of blessing to a world of frustration and suffering. This foundational story sets up the problem that the rest of the Bible is devoted to solving: how can the holy God of life deal with sinful humanity on the path to death, and restore the world he made very good?

Gen 2.16–17

Gen 3.1–7

Gen 3.16–19

Gen 3.22–24

The rest of Genesis 1–11 works out the pattern of sin, judgment and mercy in family, work and society. Cain kills his brother Abel, is cursed, but is given a mark that warns others against killing him. Human violence provokes a universal flood, but God spares *Gen 4* Noah and his family, who survive and emerge into a new world to establish a new (yet still flawed—note Noah’s drunkenness) humanity. Lastly, humanity’s pride and rebellion gives rise (literally) *Gen 6.5–9.17* to the tower of Babel. The judgment in the confusion of languages leads to misunderstanding, disunity, and enmity between the nations—another step from the goodness of God which can only be reversed by his grace of reconciliation. *Gen 9.20–27*

A New Beginning: Genesis 12–50 Abraham, Isaac, Jacob (The Patriarchal Narratives)

Genesis 12 marks a unique new beginning, when God calls childless Abram and barren Sarai to abandon their home country and go to an undisclosed future land. God gives them an unparalleled fourfold promise, concerning children (a great nation), place (a land he will show), a special relationship (blessing), and a role in mediating blessing (to all the families of the earth). Rather than relating directly to nations or the world in general, God now binds himself to one particular family as a channel of blessing for the world. The fulfilment of the promise concerning children is the theme of the rest of Genesis.

Gen 12.1–3 At every appearance of God to Abram a new dimension is added to the promise. God makes a covenant with him, promises that kings will come from his line, and changes his name to Abraham (‘father of a multitude’) and Sarai’s to Sarah (‘princess’). The sign of this covenant is circumcision. But as will persistently be the case, grace does not necessarily lead to abiding gratitude or obedient response. Almost immediately we find Abram going down to Egypt and through fear passing off Sarai as his sister, only to be rescued by God’s intervention. Again and again in the patriarchal narratives we find God struggling to keep this special family on track, free from disaster, folly, and the consequences of sin. At the same time there are highpoints of faith, such as when Abraham is ready to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice (often called binding of Isaac, or the Aqedah). *Gen 17.1–8*

Gen 17.9–14

Gen 12.12–20

Gen 22

Romans 4

Gen 25.29–34 Isaac’s son Jacob displays many of the paradoxical characteristics of God’s people, where sin and faith co-exist in unexpected ways.

Jacob cheats his brother Esau of his birthright and his father's blessing, and has to flee to their relative Laban in Haran. Yet on the way he has a mysterious dream of a ladder reaching to heaven, where God meets with him and renews his promises. In Haran he marries two daughters of Laban (Rachel and Leah), and has no fewer than twelve sons, both by them and by their two servants (Bilhah and Zilpah). Through a messy, all-too-human tale of deceit, trickery, and envy, God is fulfilling his promise. Returning to Canaan a wealthy man and about to risk his life in a meeting with Esau, he wrestles with 'a man' until daybreak. The man refuses to give his name but blesses Jacob and gives him a new name, Israel, understood to mean 'strives with God.' Jacob/Israel realizes that he 'has seen God face to face.'

Gen 27
Gen 28.10–22
John 1.51
Gen 29–30
Gen 32.22–32

Peace with Esau follows, but Jacob's family is by no means at peace. The brothers of Jacob's favourite son, Joseph, gang up and sell him into Egypt. Yet there, through patience and faith and a special gift of interpreting dreams, Joseph becomes second in Egypt and is God's instrument of salvation in a time of famine. Jacob and his family come down to Egypt and through Joseph are welcomed and set up camp in Goshen. But God's promise of land refers to Canaan, not Egypt, and so the scene is set for the next stage of the story.

Gen 33
Gen 37
Gen 39–45
Gen 46

The People of God: Exodus to Deuteronomy

The Book of Exodus opens 400 years after the end of Genesis, when the Pharaoh of the day plans to destroy Jacob's descendents, who have now become a people. We are quickly introduced to Moses, Israel's future deliverer. Pharaoh has ordered all male babies to be thrown into the Nile, but human cunning serves God's purposes, as Moses' mother makes sure he is put in a basket first. He attracts the attention of Pharaoh's daughter, who adopts him, so that Moses is saved and instructed in the wisdom of the Egyptians. Human sin cannot derail God's plan of deliverance; though exiled after killing two Egyptians, Moses becomes a shepherd and in the wilderness he meets the God of his ancestors in a burning bush. Here God reveals his distinctive name, which consists of the four Hebrew consonants YHWH (usually pronounced Yahweh, and in English Bibles represented as the LORD) Other nations have their own gods (for example, the Moabites worship Chemosh), but for Israel Yahweh alone is God.

Exod 1.1.1–14
Exod 1.22
Exod 2.1–10
Acts 7.22
Exod 2.11–15
Exod 3
1 Kings 11:33

In obedience to Yahweh's command, Moses returns and brings the people out of Egypt through ten terrible plagues and a miraculously

Exod 6–9
Exod 14.15–31

Exod 5.20–21; crossing through the Red Sea. All the military might of Pharaoh's
14.10–12; army is no match for the supreme God of life and death. In fact,
17.1–7 the greatest obstacle to the LORD's plan is the grumbling and lack
of faith of the Israelites.

Exod 19; 24 The first destination of the journey from Egypt is Mount Sinai,
Exod 20 where the LORD makes a covenant with the people. There he reveals
Exod 25–31 his law (especially the ten 'words' or commandments) and the ar-
Lev 1–7 rangements for Israel's worship (the Tabernacle, the priesthood,
Exod 32.1–6 and the sacrifices). At the highest moment of revelation God's
Ex 34 people sin in the most terrible way—they demand that Aaron,
Num 10.11–12 Moses' brother, make a golden calf. Nevertheless, God renews
Num 14 the covenant and Israel is able to continue its journey. When they
discover from spies both the fruitfulness of the land but also the
power of the inhabitants, they refuse to trust in God's help and are
condemned to journey in the wilderness for a further 40 years. Yet
Deut 29.2–8 God continues to travel with them, providing for all their needs.

The Five Books (or Pentateuch) end with the people standing on
the verge of the promised land. In Deuteronomy ('Second [telling
Deut 1–3 of the] Law') Moses retells the story of God's grace and sets out
Deut 12–26 a law adapted for life in the land. The law was never originally
intended to be a means of salvation, but to be a grateful response
by the people to what the Lord has done for them. At its heart is the
Deut 6.4–9 Shema, from the Hebrew 'hear / obey.' 'Hear, O Israel: The LORD is
our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all
your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.' Later
Mark 12.28–31 Jesus will link this with another commandment given at Sinai: 'You
Lev 19.18 shall love your neighbour as yourself.' But how sure are we that
Deut 30.6–10 Israel will do this, given her track record? In the end it will be up
to the Lord. The Pentateuch, also called Law or Torah, ends with
a reminder of sin and mortality; even Moses has to die, unable to
Deut 34 enter the land because of disobedience. Thus we find Israel full of
hope but not yet possessing the promise.

Partial Conquest of the Land: Joshua to Judges

Deut 31.14–15 Moses' servant, Joshua, is his successor, and the LORD tells him
Joshua 1.1–9 that faith and obedience to the Torah will grant him success. The
rest of the story shows the truth of this condition, though largely
in the negative. But through Joshua's leadership Israel experiences
mainly a story of success as the people seek to conquer the land of
Joshua 6 Canaan. This is seen most dramatically in the miraculous fall of
Jericho, whose walls fall following a ritual procession. As always,

success is qualified by sin and judgement. Achan takes things that should have been devoted to the LORD and this results in defeat for all the Israelites. Here as elsewhere there is an intimate link between the individual and the people: what one does affects the rest, for better or for worse.

The death of Joshua and the wilderness generation results in a very different picture in the book of Judges. This is the setting for the delightful book of Ruth, the woman from Israel's neighbouring country Moab, who marries Boaz, a man from Bethlehem, and becomes the ancestor of David. The God of Israel is also God of all the nations and all may find shelter under his wings. Judges, however, is largely a record of failure. There is a constant cycle of sin, judgement, crying out to the LORD, the raising up of a saviour (called a judge), peace for a while, and then the cycle starting again when the judge dies. There are six minor judges and six major judges, who include Deborah (a woman!), Gideon, Jephthah, and the notoriously strong and dissolute Samson. The descending spiral of sin, ends with a horrific appendix full of idolatry and savagery. Another new start is required, the hint of a possible solution coming in the final sentence: 'There was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.'

Joshua 7

Rom 5.12–21

Judges 1.1, 2.10

Ruth 1

Ruth 4.18–22

Ruth 1.16; 2.12

Judges 2.11–23

Judges 4–5;

6–8; 11–12;

13–16

Judges 17–21

Judges 21.25

Kings and Prophets: Samuel to Kings

1 Samuel starts with the birth and call of the last and greatest of the judges, Samuel. Various defeats lead to the people's demanding a king, at once a sign of the nation's sin (in wanting to be like the other nations) and the means of God deliverance. So Samuel anoints Saul, Israel's first king and figurehead for Israel's fight against their Philistine oppressors. After a promising start, the flaws in Saul's character lead him into disobedience to Samuel and the LORD. In his place comes David, who is anointed privately by Samuel and then defeats the Philistine champion, Goliath. Saul eventually turns against David and seeks to kill him, but is in his turn defeated and killed by the Philistines, evoking a great lament by David. David is crowned first king of Judah and then all Israel and brings the ark to Jerusalem, which he makes his capital. In response to David's request to build him a house that is a temple, the LORD through the prophet Nathan promises David to build him a house that is a dynasty. This special relationship is elsewhere called a covenant and is as permanent as the one with Israel.

1 Sam 1–2

1 Sam 8

1 Sam 10

1 Sam 13

1 Sam 16

1 Sam 17

1 Sam 19

1 Sam 31

2 Sam 1

2 Sam 7

Ps 89.3

Jer 33.21

2 Sam 11 But sin casts its long shadow over David's story. Adultery with
 2 Sam 12 Bathsheba and the murder of her husband earn rebuke from the
 prophet Nathan, who risks his life to hold the king and people
 accountable for their ethical and religious behaviour. But even
 David's repentance cannot turn back the clock. His family, born
 2 Sam 13–18 from many wives, is torn apart by strife. 1 Kings begins with David
 isolated, frail and weak. Yet he rouses himself to ensure Solomon,
 a son by Bathsheba, sits on the throne. Solomon makes a promis-
 ing start by asking the LORD for wisdom, and as a man of peace
 1 Kings 6–8 he is qualified to build the temple in Jerusalem. But his hundreds
 of wives and concubines turn him away from the LORD, and he
 1 Kings 11 ends as a ruthless and efficient oppressor of the majority of the
 people. From where will come a king who will not be corrupted
 by his power?

1 Kings 12 Certainly not Solomon's son Rehoboam. His promise of greater
 ruthlessness dramatically splits the kingdom. God's promises to
 David do not compromise his demands for righteousness and
 mercy. From now on the Northern ten tribes (also known as Israel
 or Ephraim) will generally be enemies of the Southern kingdom
 (mainly Judah). The hope of a reunited kingdom will never be lost,
 but it is always a future hope. The next three hundred years will be a
 sad story of a succession of kings who by and large fail as models of
 moral and social righteousness, and as leaders in the battle against
 idolatry (especially against the Canaanite storm god Baal).

This is the age when the great prophets call the two nations back to
 1 Kings 17 the LORD and to the standard of behaviour he requires. In the North
 –2 Kings 2 we have Elijah and Elisha, Hosea and Amos, while in the South
 2 Kgs 2–9; 13 there is Micah and Isaiah. There is a fierce battle for the hearts and
 minds of the Israelites, with the Canaanite god Baal on the one side
 1 Kings 18 and the LORD on the other. This is dramatically illustrated by the
 great contest between Elijah and the 400 prophets of Baal about
 who can ignite a sacrifice without fire. All this takes place within
 the cauldron of the regional power politics, particularly the ten-
 sion between Egypt in the South and Assyria in the East. The less
 2 Kings 17 stable Northern kingdom is the first to suffer God's judgement in
 being exiled by the Assyrians in 722 BC. However, the pious King
 2 Kings 18–21 Hezekiah, encouraged by the prophet Isaiah, stands firm and
 Isaiah 36–39 Jerusalem miraculously escapes the Assyrian armies. Later King
 Josiah institutes a radical reform and a scroll of the law (probably
 2 Kings 22 some form of Deuteronomy) is discovered during the repair of
 the temple.

Yet such exceptional examples cannot reverse the downward path of endemic religious and moral sinfulness. The great prophets Jeremiah (in Jerusalem) and Ezekiel (in exile) announce and interpret the coming catastrophe for all with ears to hear. By the hand of the Babylonians Jerusalem will be overthrown, the temple destroyed, the leading classes exiled, and the land lost. The story of the Pentateuch, from landlessness to landedness, is dramatically reversed by the end of Kings as the people go from landedness to exile—partial in 597 BC but completed 10 years later. Is this the end of all things?

Jer 1–28
Ezek 1–24

2 Kgs 24.8–17
2 Kgs 25.1–12

Exile and Return: Ezra and Nehemiah

Some evidently thought so, but 2 Kings ends on the ambiguous note of a sign of favour to the exiled King Jehoiachin. The prophets have fiercely condemned the people and their leaders, but beyond punishment they hold out a promise of restoration. God will listen to the voice of lament and will remain faithful to his promises to Abraham. Jeremiah prophesies that the people will return and the LORD will make a new covenant with them. Ezekiel prophesies that the LORD will give them a new spirit so that they will finally be able to keep God’s law. Jeremiah also highlights the restoration of a Davidic king, while Ezekiel enthusiastically portrays a rebuilt temple. Return from exile is also the theme for Isaiah 40–55, which portrays a servant, who will be filled by the Spirit, teach the people, and restore them by his obedience and suffering. Is this a job description awaiting someone who can fulfil the ideal of prophet, priest and king?

2 Kgs 25.27–30

Lamentations
Jer 31.31–34
Ezek 36.26

Jer 23
Ezek 40–48

Isa 42.1–9;
49.1–7; 50.4–9;
52.13–53.12

The return from exile is ordered by the Persian king Cyrus, whose empire replaces the Babylonians. In typically prophetic fashion his human action is seen as divinely ordained. But the return comes in fits and starts, amidst opposition from those who remained in the land. The people have to be cajoled to rebuild the temple by prophets such as Haggai. This still left the walls to be rebuilt, which was the achievement of the energetic cupbearer of King Artaxerxes, Nehemiah. The move towards a written rather than an oral Torah is reflected in the significance attached to Ezra’s reading of the law. Nevertheless, the results of this return are at best partial and feed a growing hope that the LORD will one day act in a far more decisive and final way.

Isa 45.1
Ezra 1.1

Ezra 5–6

Hag 1
Neh 1–6

Ezra 8

Mal 4

There are very few references to later events in the Old Testament, with one significant exception. The second part of the book

Dan 11 of Daniel includes a prophecy that refers to events down to the second century. Of particular importance is the conflict between the Jews and the pagan ruler Antiochus. This story is told in more detail in the books of Maccabees (found in the Apocrypha, printed in some Bibles).

1 and 2 Macc

Other Writings

Many of the Old Testament writings are linked to this storyline, but there are others whose date and authorship is largely uncertain. They often address timeless issues that face every generation. With unmatched power, the book of Job probes the problem of innocent suffering and a silent, sovereign God. The book of Proverbs, associated with Solomon, offers a collection of recipes and insights for successful living in every season. The author of Ecclesiastes adopts the persona of Solomon for the first two chapters, but this is one of the latest books in the Old Testament and reflects a broad-ranging scepticism. The Song of Songs is a collection of love poems without any clear historical indication. These are all books associated with wisdom literature, which generally has to do with God as creator of the world and all humankind, rather than the specific history of Israel and its key figures. Yet the frequent use of the name of Israel's God, the LORD, emphasizes that universal wisdom and Israel's story (the cosmic and the particular) are complementary, not contradictory perspectives.

Job

Prov 1.1; 10.1

Eccl 1.1

Job 1.6; 38.1;
Prov 1.7; 31.30;

The Psalms are closely associated with David, though the title 'to/of David' might refer to an author, a collector or even a musical style. Some Psalms focus on God as creator; others refer to historical events in Israel's life. All tell of a complex yet consistent LORD who is faithful to past, present and future generations. It is his apparent inactivity that is the source of the agony and yearning of the laments, which desire God to act again as he has done so in the past. The Psalms of praise affirm that ideally and ultimately the story of creation and salvation will evoke from human beings a response of praise. As elsewhere in the narrative of the Old Testament, it is clear that God's promises are not yet fulfilled, and the story is unfinished.

Ps 8; 104

Ps 74; 106; 137

Ps 106

Ps 136

Ps 2; 72; 89;
110 A particularly important kind of future-oriented Psalms are the Royal Psalms. Perhaps originally applying to the kings of Israel and Judah, who did not match up to the poetic vision, they were quickly interpreted as pointing to a future king/messiah, and subsequently seen as fulfilled in Jesus.

Lk 20.42;
Acts 4.25

3

The Story of the New Testament

The gap between the Old Testament and the New is sometimes called the ‘silent years’—but they were far from inactive. Expectation of God’s intervention in the history of his people focused around a number of issues, more or less important to different groups. God’s people would have the land of Israel restored to them, free from oppressive rulers. The temple would be restored, and pure worship, free from the compromise or corruption, would be re-established. There would be a renewal of covenant relationship with God, and this would be marked by the presence of God with his people through the end-times gift of the Spirit of God. As a result, the law would be kept, and the people would have no king over them but God. These diverse ideas, all rooted in Old Testament promise, were held together in the idea of ‘this age’ in which God’s face is hidden and his people suffer oppression, and the ‘age to come,’ brought about by God’s anointed one (‘messiah’ in Hebrew), in which God’s presence is clear and his people liberated.

Ez 37.18–28

Luke 1.74

Ez 40–48

Jer 31.31–34

Joel 2.28–29

Mark 10.30

Luke 18.30

Eph 1.21

Quiet Beginnings

Into this seething cauldron of expectation, the story of the New Testament starts quietly enough, though even in these quiet beginnings there are hints of what is to come. In a troublesome corner of the great Roman Empire, a young woman is visited by a messenger from God who brings a startling message: she will conceive miraculously and the child who is born will be the one to fulfil all these hopes. The account of Jesus’ birth, towards the end of the reign of Herod the Great (probably some time before 4 BC), is given mostly from the men’s perspective in Matthew 1 and 2 and mostly from the women’s perspective in Luke 1 and 2. Zechariah’s song spells out how this Jesus will be the hope of Israel. But the threat of another king sets the paranoid and insecure Herod on a murderous frenzy as he orders the killing of boys aged two and under in the Bethlehem area. And yet the wider significance of the coming king is already there, as the wise ‘Magi’ from nations to the east

Luke 1.26

Luke 1.32–33

Matt 1–2

Luke 1–2

Lk 1.68–79

Matt 2.16

Matt 2.1

come and pay homage in response to the cosmic sign of the star.
Mt 1.22, 2.17, 2.23, 4.14 All this ‘fulfils’ the prophets; it paints in, in vivid detail, the hope sketched in outline in the former Scriptures.

Dramatic Developments

The story moves on, jumping perhaps twenty-five or thirty years to the dramatic arrival on the public scene of John the Baptist. Here all four gospels join the story, each bringing its own distinctive emphasis. Jesus, John’s cousin, joins the thronging crowds in this ‘repentance’ movement that has drawn large crowds (‘the whole Judean countryside, all the people of Jerusalem’ and ‘the whole region of the Jordan’). Already, there is recognition that Jesus is someone special, as John hesitates to baptize him. But special though Jesus is, his ministry cannot begin without the anointing of the Holy Spirit, signified by the descent of a dove from an open heaven, the word of affirmation as the beloved Son, and the discipline of temptations in the desert.

Mark 1.5 *Matt 3.5* *Matt 3.15* *Mark 1.12* *Luke 3.10–14* *Mark 1.15*

The drama of John’s ministry is matched by the drama of the beginning of Jesus.’ He strides across Galilee, proclaiming in word and deed the coming of the long-awaited kingdom of God, calling people to follow him as they turn from old ways of thinking and acting to think again (the meaning of the term translated ‘repentance’) and trust in God.

The Eye-Witness View

Mark depicts Jesus’ ministry in particularly dramatic fashion. A typical day sees Jesus driving out demons, healing the untouchable, clashing with the religious authorities, forgiving sins and calling those on the fringes to belong to his new community. All this is accompanied by radical new teaching that redefines traditional understandings of Sabbath and of family, of law and of spiritual reality. This teaching comes not from the authority of others, but from the authority of Jesus himself, and is authenticated by the spiritual power of his actions. And the result is crowds pressing in from every direction, straining to hear his words, longing to feel his healing touch.

Mark 1.21–34 *Mark 2.21–22* *Mark 2.27* *Mark 1.27* *Mark 1.33, 2.2, 3.9*

Matthew too has this double emphasis on Jesus’ action and his teaching, organizing his account into five blocks of teaching interspersed with stories of Jesus’ healing. Here we have a new Moses, bring a new law from the mountainside though this time with

blessings as much as commands. And yet this new teaching is not so much new set against the old but a new understanding of what has always been true.

Matt 5.17

For Luke, this combination of teaching and healing spring from Jesus' understanding of his mission—to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour prophesied by Isaiah, a time which would bring wholeness of understanding as well as wholeness of life. Luke sees in Jesus' ministry a distinctive concern for those without power—women in a world belonging to men, the poor in a world controlled by the wealthy, the diseased in a world acclaiming the unblemished.

Luke 4.18–19

*Luke 10.42,
16.19–31,
14.1–6*

John's perspective is rather different. Less concerned with chronology, he appears to be writing for those already familiar with the other gospels, perhaps especially the gospel of Mark. The truth about Jesus is seen in seven of his miracles, depicted as seven 'signs'—not proofs, but glimpses into the reality of who he is—starting with the changing of water into wine at Cana and ending with the raising of Lazarus. But the truth is also seen in Jesus' claims, in this case his seven declarations that 'I am,' related to the seven signs and connecting his identity with the God of Israel. He is the bread of life, the light of the world, the door for the sheep and the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life, the way, truth and life and the true vine. John does not record the language of the kingdom of God on Jesus' lips as do the other gospels. Instead he records Jesus' kingdom ministry as opening the way to 'eternal life,' literally, 'life of the age [to come]' of Jewish expectation.

John 3.24

*John 2.1–11
John 11.1–44*

*John 6.35; 8.12;
10.7; 10.11;
11.25; 14.6;
15.1*

The Turning Point

As Jesus' ministry grows in its impact, it becomes a shared ministry; Jesus commissions and sends first the twelve and then seventy-two to spread the good news of the kingdom, teaching, healing and driving out demons as he has done. But a crucial moment comes when Jesus hears of the execution of John the Baptist by Herod the Great's son, Herod Antipas. Jesus sees clearly the personal cost of the clash between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of men. The turning point comes at the most northerly point of this Galilean phase of his ministry. In response to Jesus' question, Peter declares Jesus' true identity as Messiah, and yet the disciples still have much to learn about what true messiahship entails. From then on, Jesus 'sets his face to Jerusalem' to meet his destiny and take the conflict with the powers that be to the heart of the nation's

*Matt 10.9–14,
Mk 6.7–13, Lk
9.1–5; 10.1–12*

Matt 14, Mk 6

*Mt 16.16, Mk
8.29, Lk 9.20
Lk 9.51*

worship, the temple. From now on, his work and teaching are done 'on the way' to the cross. Glory and agony are set alongside one another as the path that Jesus must follow—and along with him, any who want to be his follower. Even at this turning point, the overflow of Jesus' ministry to the lost sheep of the house of Israel is a blessing to those beyond God's historic people, giving a foretaste of what is to come.

Mk 7.24–30
Mt 15.21–28

The Finale...

Like other 'lives' of important people in the ancient world, the gospels focus most of their attention on the time which showed above everything else the importance of and the truth about their subject. If the subject was a great general, then the focus would be on an important battle; for a politician, perhaps an important speech. For Jesus, the telling moments were the days leading up to his crucifixion and resurrection, and in particular that final week.

Mt 21, Mk 11, Lk 19, John 12 Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey, as a king coming to his people in peace, just as it has been foretold. But he finds few who welcome his reign; his cleansing of the temple and his challenge to the religious authorities upsets too many vested interests. Whilst many of the people are still entranced by his teaching, the pressure amongst the leaders mounts, until they find in Judas a way to take hold of Jesus and bring him to trial. Knowing what is at hand, Jesus shares a last Passover meal with his disciples. Here he makes clear the purpose of his coming: the deliverance of God comes only at a great price. He is to be a new Passover lamb, following the pattern of the Old Testament, but this time setting God's people—and not just them, but 'many' others too—free from the root of all bondage, from sin that enslaves all humanity. And at this moment of greatest sacrifice, even the disciples cannot face the cost of faithfulness, and one by one they betray him at his hour of greatest need.

Mt 26, Mk 14, Lk 22, John 13

Mk 10.45, 14.24

Lk 23.34

Jn 12.23, 28

Jn 19.30

John 19.34

But as in his temptations, as through all the demands and testing of his ministry, Jesus stays true to the end, even asking for forgiveness for those torturing him. John depicts this moment of greatest humiliation and apparent defeat as in fact being the moment of Jesus' crowning as king, the moment of greatest glory which ends with a cry of triumph: 'It is finished!' Everything has been accomplished; Jesus' mission is complete. The promised water of life flows from his broken body for the sake of a thirsty world. And in this moment of victory-in-defeat, the truth of it, missed by the religious leaders, is understood by foreigners. The truth of

Jesus' kingship is written in all the major languages and a Roman centurion recognizes Jesus' identity in death.

John 19.19–20
Mark 15.39

...or Perhaps Only the Beginning

But this is not, of course, the end of the story. Even the tomb of a rich man, with a stone rolled across the entrance, could not contain this king. On the first day of the week, symbolizing the beginning of the new Age, the age to come, the stone is rolled away and the tomb is empty. Seeing the grave clothes still laid out, as if the body had passed through them, rather than being unwound and piled up together, the disciples begin to grasp the truth of what has happened. As before his death, so after his resurrection, Jesus turns the conventions of his day upside down and appears first to women, even though their testimony has no status in law. One by one, he restores his disciples, forgiving their failure and nurturing their understanding. He is the one who fulfils all the Scriptures—not so much in satisfying isolated predictions, but in following the pattern of God's dealings with his people. The moments of supreme rejection by his people God turns into redemption, leading ultimately to restoration for those who would receive it.

Matt 28.2

John 20.7

Luke 24.10

John 20.27,
21.15

Luke 24.27

A New Chapter

Mark's gospel leaves us with an incomplete ending, and perhaps in that an invitation to write ourselves into the story. Luke takes up the challenge, and starts by showing how Jesus continued to do all the things he had begun in his earthly ministry. Having dealt with sin and broken the power of the ruler of this age in his death and resurrection, Jesus now ascends to be with his heavenly Father so that he might release the gift of the Spirit on his followers. Just as Jesus brought the kingdom of God into people's lives by the power of the Spirit, so the same Spirit would empower Jesus' disciples for similar kingdom ministry.

Mark 16

Acts 1.1

Acts 1.9

John 16.7

Mt 12.28

The feast of Passover, which celebrated the exodus from Egypt, was followed fifty days later by the feast of Pentecost which celebrated the giving of the law on Mount Sinai, showing God's people how they were now to live, free from the tyranny of slavery. As Jesus' death on the cross was a new Passover, so a new Pentecost came in the gift of the Spirit, the new way God would shape his people for a life of freedom and witness. As Peter explains the meaning of the new thing God has done, how it is the climax of his dealings

Acts 2

Acts 2.14–39 with his people, so many people come to recognize Jesus as God’s
Acts 2.41 anointed one and put their faith in him and the kingdom advances
Matt 11.12 forcefully. But as for Jesus, so for his followers; kingdom ministry
Acts 5.12; 5.40 leads to persecution. The apostles perform ‘signs and wonders’
amongst the people, who are at once fearful and amazed, but they
Acts 6, 7 are then arrested and flogged. Practical pressures lead to the ap-
pointment of seven men to manage the care of the growing group
of followers of ‘the Way,’ but one of them, Stephen, is eventually
Acts 8.4 stoned to death for blasphemy. This leads to wider persecution and
many believers are scattered to other cities. But hardship leads to
fruitfulness, and the scattered believers share the message about
Jesus wherever they go.

A New Mission

Acts 11.19–21 The desire of the scattered believers to share the message about
Jesus leads them, almost inadvertently, to talk to non-Jews who
also believe. At the same time, Peter is given a vision from God
explaining that no-one should be considered unfit to hear the mes-
Acts 10 sage. As a result, Peter tells a God-fearer, a gentile centurion called
Cornelius, and his household the story of what Jesus has done. He
knows that the message applies to them when he sees that the Holy
Acts 10.44 Spirit come upon Cornelius and the others listening!

Acts 9 One of the leading persecutors of the followers of Jesus, a Pharisee
named Saul, encounters the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus as
he is heading there to arrest the believers. He immediately starts
sharing the news about Jesus as well, first to his fellow Jews, but
then also to Gentiles. Eventually he becomes one of the leaders of
Acts 13 the church in Antioch, and is sent by them on three successive mis-
sionary journeys, establishing communities of believers throughout
the area now known as Turkey and into Europe as far as Greece.

Acts 15 Because of the numbers of Gentiles coming to faith, there is a
dispute about how far Gentile believers have to follow Jewish pat-
terns of life to be followers of Jesus, and this is largely resolved at
a council in Jerusalem. Other issues arise in the fledgling churches,
and in response to some of these issues Paul writes letter to the dif-
ferent communities. Some of his letters are circulating more widely
and collected, eventually being added to accounts of the life and
words of Jesus as part of the apostolic teaching.

Paul's letters address questions such as:

- How can Gentile believers be sure that they do not need to become Jews to be followers of Jesus? *Galatians*
- Will Jesus return soon, and what will happen to those who have already died? *1 Thessalonians*
- What is life like when led by the Spirit? *Romans 5–8*
- What is the appropriate discipline for those who refuse the call to live out a life of holiness? *1 Corinthians 5*
- How should we conduct ourselves when we meet together? *1 Cor 11–14*
- What has Jesus' death achieved for us? *Romans 3*
- What pattern of living follows on from understanding what God has done for us in Jesus? *Romans 12*

Some other leaders also wrote letters answering other questions:

- How can we live with integrity whilst suffering for our faith? *James*
- What does it mean to follow Jesus' example? *1 Peter*
- What are the marks of a believing community and how does this reflect the nature of God? *1, 2 and 3 John*
- How can we understand what Jesus has done from the perspective of Jewish hope? *Hebrews*

A New Future

The story finishes with a vision, in the Book of Revelation, in which the widening circle of mission eventually reaches every corner of the earth. It is a vision of the risen Jesus, walking amongst and protecting his people, in this case in the western end of what we now call Turkey. Despite dissent from within and pressure from without, despite natural disasters and imperial oppression, Jesus the faithful witness will keep faith with his redeemed people from every nation, and invites them to keep faith in response. Their particular situation, like all the generations to follow, is caught up in the grand vision of the renewal of the whole created order, where God will meet his people face to face when Jesus comes again. In that moment all God's promises will reach their fulfilment, the kingdom will be made manifest, the work of Jesus will have achieved its full effect, and Jesus himself will be at the centre of it all. *Rev 1*
Rev 2, 3
Rev 6, 13
Rev 7
Rev 12
Rev 21
Rev 22

4

The Story for Today

The practical implications of the biblical story are many and varied.

In Preaching and Teaching

Isa 5.1–7; Ezek 20 The prophets often ground their appeals to the people in a creative retelling of what God did for them in the past. Some of the
Acts 7.1–53; Heb 11 New Testament sermons and homilies largely comprise pointed summaries of the story. Preachers and Bible study leaders might wish to provide a ‘big picture’ summary of some or all of the story in the space of a sermon or an evening or a day. Or home groups might like to come up with a summary of the story in 750 words. More and more we need to define the great theological words of the Christian faith, and the best way of doing this may well be relating them to the story.
See samples at www.grovebooks.co.uk

In Worship

Ex 13.3–10 The Passover ritual provides a dramatic and tasty way of retelling the crucial events of the Exodus and bringing them to life for the next generation. A review of the sad story of Israel’s sin can be a prominent feature in the confession of sin. Many Psalms encourage the people to praise the Lord because of what he has done in the past. From the earliest times the Lord’s Supper included a memorial of the story of Jesus’ passion and resurrection. In modern communion liturgies there is often an opportunity to reflect creatively on the significance of Jesus in the context of the larger story (‘the preface’).
Neh 9
Ps 105; 106
1 Cor 11.23–2

In Spirituality

1 Cor 10.6 Entering imaginatively into the story is an increasingly important way to perceive the truth and significance of the faith for individuals. Deuteronomy constantly emphasizes the importance of remembering, which is not merely an intellectual activity but includes a personal and active response. This is what faithful

Jewish and Christian readers of the Bible have always done, not just through words but also through art and iconography. It is a particular emphasis of the Ignatian approach to the Bible. Godly Play makes use of symbols and other means in order to help children (and adults) to bring the story to life.

In Evangelism

We live in an age where there is a profound ignorance of the Christian God. Giving people some kind of understanding of the story is vital if they are to understand the distinctive character of this God and why Jesus had to be born. This is what Paul attempted to do in Athens. The mystery plays presented the story from creation to last things in a dramatic and culturally appropriate way. Missionaries and evangelists may need to find ways to do the same kind of thing for our generation. *Acts 17.22–31*

Recovering the excitement, the truth, and the relevance of the story may be the most important challenge for Christians today. For they live in a world that has (literally) lost the plot, and so lost sight of the true and living God. He alone can help us tell and live a new kind of story, full of life and hope and joy, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

5

Questions for Reflection

Thinking about the story of the Bible raises a number of questions. You might like to work through these, either on your own or with a small group of other people.

The Shape of the Story

What has been your understanding of the overall story of the Bible before reading this booklet?

How has reading this changed your perception—which parts have struck you as significant?

Are there parts of the story which you think are important that are not emphasised here?

What have you gained from having a better appreciation of the 'big picture' of the Bible?

The Story in Christian Teaching

What has been your experience of hearing about the story of the Bible in teaching you have received? Have you been able to put together some sense of the big picture?

What difference does it make to have a better grasp of the big picture? How will this affect your understanding of teaching you receive in future?

The Story in Sharing Faith

What do those around you think about the Bible? What understanding do you think they have of the story of the Bible?

What difference does it make to sharing your faith, knowing that those you live and work with might have little understanding of the story of the Bible?

What could you do in your own context to make the story of the Bible better known, possibly as a way into faith? What might be the equivalent of the mediaeval mystery plays?

6

Some Helpful Books

- C G Bartholomew and M W Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2004)—a good survey of the whole biblical story, emphasizing king and kingdom.
- T Chester, *From Creation to New Creation: Understanding the Bible Story* ([Exeter]: Paternoster, 2003)—a simplified look at how the biblical story and biblical theology can be related.
- D J A Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (2nd ed; JSOTSSup 10; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1997)—valuable look at the plot of the Pentateuch.
- J Goldingay, *Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2003)—an extensive reflection on aspects of Israel's story.
- J Goldingay, *An Ignatian Approach to Reading the Old Testament* (Grove Biblical booklet, B 24).
- V P Long, *The Art of Biblical History* (Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation 5; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994)—helpful discussion of the relation between history and story.
- J G McConville, *Grace in the End: A Study in Deuteronomistic Theology* (Studies in Old Testament Biblical Theology; Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1993)—a sophisticated look at the relation between theology and narrative in Deuteronomy to Kings.
- C J H Wright, *Truth with a Mission: Reading Scripture Missiologically* (Grove Biblical booklet, B 38)—an overview with mission as the key theme.
- A Walker, *Telling the Story: Gospel, Mission and Culture* (Gospel and Culture; London: SPCK, 1996)—a wide-ranging work on the importance of the story for the church and its mission.
- Walter Wangerin, *The Book of God and Paul: A Novel* (Oxford: Lion, 1996 and 2000)—experiments in turning the biblical text into the format of a novel.

Notes

- 1 Reading the Bible involves engaging with the *general* as well as the *particular*. Having an overview of the Bible as a whole gives the *general* context of any passage; understanding the *particular* importance the passage in question might involve such skills as recognising its genre and being aware of its particular historical context. Being a *skilled* reader and being an *obedient* reader do not necessarily go hand in hand—but they are certainly not inimical to one another and at best one will illuminate and shape the other.
- 2 N T Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God 1* (Christian Origins and the Question of God; London: SPCK, 1992). Wright speaks of five acts, but a six-act schema recognizes that the end is a crucial stage in the story.
- 3 Note that this theological way of understand the story is very different from the approach of *dispensationalism*, which divides the story into seven historical eras (or ‘dispensations’) in which the theological themes are quite different from one another.
- 4 Adapted from G Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2000).

The story of the Bible has shaped Western thinking—indeed, much of world history. And yet many today have little grasp of what is perceived as a large and complex book, perhaps even one that is dangerously authoritarian.

This booklet offers a refreshing overview of the Bible's story—not a simplification but a careful summary—which will enable the reader to see how the different parts relate to the central themes of this life-changing, world-changing story.

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