

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. The objective of this session is to give a broad summary of the Old Testament (OT) and its structure. We will do this by first addressing an increasing problem regarding the OT in Western Christianity. Then, we will look at the structure and message of the OT based upon the Jewish and Protestant ordering of the individual books.
- B. To begin, it is first important to address a systematic problem in Western Christian culture concerning the OT. To make our point, it will be helpful to think of the OT with the analogy of a language. This is because language is how we communicate and make sense of the world, something the OT does likewise—it creates a worldview, perceives the world, and defines reality. Like a language, if it is not passed down through the generations, then it will inevitably succumb to that which is the central, driving dialect of secular society.
- C. The result of OT fluency being lost is the pidginization (the contraction of a language vs. its expansion [i.e., simplicity over complexity]) and then creolization (a new language) of the OT in the body of Christ.¹ Whether the OT is jeopardized by the new atheists (those who say the violent OT passages are indicative of the whole nature—e.g., Richard Dawkins),² “happiologists” (those who manipulate the text to fit their theological agenda—i.e., the prosperity gospel),³ or Marcionites (those who ignore or reject large portions of the OT),⁴ we must persist to articulate the importance and centrality of the OT to the overarching narrative of God’s plan—i.e., to liberate all of created order from the cosmic problem of sin and death (e.g., we are not a NT church but a biblical church). This is done by first speaking the language!⁵
- D. Although this session will be an overview of the OT’s structure, it is first important to see its place in the overarching narrative of God’s plan. If we understand the shape of the Bible, we will then be able to better articulate the Divine Story to humanity. Consequently, a summary of the biblical narrative will be helpful for us here. In Gen 1–2 God creates humanity and establishes the ways they are to relate to him, themselves, others, and the earth. In Gen 3 the fall changed all of that, but Gen 3:15 also presents a hope for future deliverance from the strongholds of sin and death. *“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.” Genesis 3:15*
- E. Henceforth, from Gen 4 to Mal 4 we see God unfolding His plan to bring fulfillment to this hope. He does this by ratifying a covenant with Abraham—from whom the Jewish people would arise. God would give them a unique place before Him and the people of the earth as a kingdom of priests (Exod. 19:6). Yet, their journey was one of disobedience and rebellion toward God’s covenant and thus jeopardized their place before God and man.

- F. It is helpful to know that there was a period between the time of Malachi and the days of the NT that is undocumented in the Bible; it is entitled the Intertestamental Period. It was during this time that much of the Apocrypha was written⁶—pointing to a renewed commitment to follow God’s laws and a hope for a future redemptive act of God. This results in the emergence of the differing philosophies and sects that vary in their interpretation of this commitment and hope (e.g., the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots).
- G. This hope is then realized in the NT with the coming of Jesus. As the King, the kingdom of God had drawn near to them and it is through Jesus’s kingdom mission that He breaks religious philosophical molds, redefines the meaning of the OT, reveals the heart of God, and empowers His disciples with the Spirit to preach the good news of salvation in Him.⁷

II. THE OT AND ITS STRUCTURE

- A. The OT consists of a total of 39 books – making up about 80% of the Bible. This is one of the main reasons why it is so important to understand and know the OT. It is the message of the Old that helps us to understand the message of the New. The NT did not replace the OT and the Old is not somehow an inferior revelation when compared to the New. We must see that Jesus is the interpretive key and the glue that binds the First and the Second Testaments together. The Bible is one narrative with two volumes. They are separate, yet undivided; two voices yet a similar sound. It contains an Old World pointing to a New, yet the New is only known in the Old.⁸
- B. Depending on when you date Creation, the amount of time that is covered can be between c. four thousand years or sixty billion years. It begins with the creation of all things and ends with the prophetic words of Malachi in c. 400 BC.
- C. The order of our Bible is from the early Christian perspective but consists of all the Hebrew books.⁹ The Catholic Church does not view the seven Apocryphal books as additional but rather the Protestant Bible is missing books.
- D. Nonetheless, there is a fascinating progression in the Hebrew structure that is worth highlighting. Seeing this can help us understand how and why the biblical narrative unfolds the way it does and the purpose of each its individual books.

HEBREW ARRANGEMENT ¹⁰		PROTESTANT ARRANGEMENT	
Torah:		Law (Pentateuch):	
Genesis	<i>Narrative</i>	Genesis	
Exodus		Exodus	
Leviticus		Leviticus	
Numbers		Numbers	
Deuteronomy		Deuteronomy	
Nevi'im (Prophets):		History:	
Former Prophets		Joshua	
Joshua		Judges	
Judges		Ruth	
Samuel (1st and 2nd)		Samuel (1st and 2nd)	
Kings (1st and 2nd)		Kings (1st and 2nd)	
		Chronicles (1st and 2nd)	
Latter Prophets		Ezra-Nehemiah	
Isaiah	<i>Commentary</i>	Esther	
Jeremiah			
Ezekiel			
The Twelve (Minor Prophets)			
Ketuvim (Writings):		Poetry:	
Psalms		Job	
Proverbs		Psalms	
Job		Proverbs	
Song of Songs		Ecclesiastes	
Ruth		Song of Songs	
Lamentations			
Ecclesiastes		Major & Minor Prophets:	
Esther		Isaiah	
Daniel	<i>Narrative</i>	Jeremiah	
Ezra-Nehemiah			Lamentations
Chronicles (1st and 2nd)			Ezekiel
			Daniel
			Minor Prophets (Hos.–Mal.)

- The Torah** and/or **Pentateuch** (Genesis to Deuteronomy) and the Former Prophets (Joshua to 2 Kings) tell the story from creation to exile in narrative form.
 - The Latter Prophets** (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve/Minor Prophets) and **the first part of the Writings** (Isaiah, Malachi to Job, and Song of Songs) then provide prophetic commentary on the narrative events, helping the reader understand God's purpose in the story.
 - The final books of the Writings** (Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles) continue the narrative through their return from the exile yet leave the OT expecting something more to come.
- E. While there are many edifying observations in seeing the OT Scriptures in this way, there are two that are helpful for our purposes as we study the OT.
- Each section of the Hebrew Bible (called the Tanakh¹¹) ends with the expectation of a coming deliverer.

- Deuteronomy, the final book of the Torah, ends with the expectation of a future prophet like Moses (Deut. 34:10–12; cf. 18:15).

Since that time no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face... Deuteronomy 34:10

- Malachi, the final book of the Prophets, ends with the expectation of a coming Elijah, who himself was portrayed as a prophet like Moses.
- Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. Malachi 4:5*
- Chronicles, the final book of the Writings, ends with an expectation of a coming temple-building messiah.

Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying, ²³“Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah. Who is among you of all His people? May the Lord his God be with him, and let him go up. 2 Chronicles 36:22–23

- The narrative bookends of the Hebrew Bible—Genesis and Chronicles—share some striking similarities.¹²
 - Both are concerned with genealogy. Genealogical lists fill the pages of Genesis and Chronicles more than any other book (Gen. 4:17–26; 5:1–32; 10:1–32; 11:10–32; 22:20–24; 25:1–18, 29–30, 35:1–29; 36:1–43; 46:8–27; 1 Chron. 1:1–9:44;). They both begin with Adam and quickly progress to key covenantal individuals. Genesis quickly focuses upon Abraham, while Chronicles upon David. In Chronicles, David was understood as the focal point of the promises given to Abraham in Genesis—i.e., he was the key descendant of Abraham.
 - Both are concerned with geography centered on the presence of God, either dwelling with or exiled from His presence. At the end of both books, God's people find themselves in a state of exile (Gen. 50:24; 2 Chron. 36:15–21).
 - Genesis ends with a note of prophetic hope (Gen. 49:8–12), anticipating a Judahite king to whom belongs the obedience of all the nations. Similarly, Chronicles ends anticipating a coming Judahite temple-builder (2 Chron. 36:22–23). A helpful point is knowing that Chronicles is an abbreviated commentary on the entire Hebrew bible.

III. CONCLUSION

A. The role of the OT is central to what we learn in the NT. The OT story of God is seen in both the Christian and Jewish organization of it. No matter how one chooses to approach it, the overarching message is clear – God gave hope to the Jewish people that he would redeem them through a coming Messianic figurehead – Jesus, the Christ. Thus, as articulated by Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola in their book *Jesus: A Theography*:

...the Bible is an organic, living document. As with every living organism, everything is connected to everything else. You can start anywhere and get everywhere. Each verse is a doorway or dormer that can lead into other venues that have their own portals into God’s presence. The whole Bible is a beautiful, intricately woven tapestry—or in digital terms, a measureless interconnected network—where unexpected similarities, surprising parallels, and profound paradoxes can be found. It was this kind of intimacy with the Bible that Jesus the Jew manifested in almost everything that proceeded out of His mouth.¹³

1 The death of OT language is argued to be the result of four components: (1) the people who are supposed to be fluent (the church) have lost large portions of their grammar, syntax, and vocabulary; (2) the sermons preached are in favor of the NT; (3) the Psalms are not used in the development of worship; and (4) the lectionary use of the OT is truncated.

2 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Books, 2006), states, “The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, blood-thirsty, ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully” (51).

3 Even the words and phrases of popular prosperity gospel preachers are clearly distinct from the language and message of the Bible—e.g., “to speak faith,” “positive confession,” “divine wealth,” “divine health,” “destiny,” “seed faith.” For a further analysis and discussion on such distinctive rhetoric, see Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 251–54.

4 Adolf von Harnack states, “The thesis that is to be argued in the following may be stated thus: the rejection of the Old Testament in the second century was a mistake which the great church rightly avoided; to maintain it in the sixteenth century was a fate from which the reformation was not yet able to escape; but still to preserve it in Protestantism as a canonical document since the nineteenth century is the consequence of a religious and ecclesiastical crippling” (Marcion: *The Gospel of the Alien God*, trans. John E. Steely and Lyle D. Bierma [Eugene, OR: Wimpf & Stock, 2007], 134).

5 For a thorough treatment of this issue, see Brent Strawn, *The Old Testament is Dying: A Diagnosis and Recommended Treatment* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

6 The word ἀποκρυφα, πῶκρυφος (ἀρῶκρυφῶς), means, “hidden.” See, BDAG, “πῶκρυφος,” 114. The seven books included in the Apocrypha are: Tobias, Judith, Baruch, Ecclesiasticus, Wisdom of Solomon, 1 and 2 Maccabees.

7 An excellent overview of the Bible’s overarching narrative can be found in Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014).

8 Cf. Brevard Childs, “The Nature of the Christian Bible: One Book, Two Testaments,” in *The Rule of Faith: Scripture, Canon, and Creed in a Critical Age*, eds. Ephraim Radner and George Sumner (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1998), 120–21.

9 Although this is extremely simplified, the four main components that contributed to the canonization/finalization of the Christian Bible in the early Church are as follows: (1) Was the book/letter accepted by a community or communities? (2) Were the writings ancient? (3) Were the writings of divine/apostolic origin? (4) What was the content of the writings (i.e., did they complement the rich oral and written traditions of the testimony of God)?

10 The English names of the Torah—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy—come from the Greek names of the books. Genesis = “Origins;” Exodus = “Coming Out;” Leviticus = “From the Levites;” Numbers = “From the Numbers of the Tribes;” Deuteronomy = “Second Law.” While the Greek names are derived from what the book is about, the Hebrew names come from the first principal word of the book. Bereishit = “In the Beginning;” Shémōt = “Names;” Vayikra = “And He Called;” Bémidbar = “In the Wilderness;” and Devarim = “Words.” The Greek name for these books is Pentateuch, meaning “five books;” the Hebrew name is Chumash, also meaning “five” (specifically, this title refers to the books in their codex form; when in their scroll form, they are referred to as Sefer Torah). They are also called the “Torah,” usually translated as “law” but technically means “teachings,” because contained within them are the “teachings” of God to Israel.

11 The word “Tanakh” comes from how the Hebrew Bible is structured into its three primary sections as seen in the chart above—i.e., Torah (T), Nevi’im (N), Ketuvim (K)—TNK = Tanakh.

12 Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (Leicester, England: Apollos Publishing, 2003), 47–50.

13 Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola, *Jesus: A Theography* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012), xxi.
