

Introduction to **The First Testament**

The First Testament (commonly referred to as the Old Testament) is a collection of books that constitutes the first three-quarters of the Bible. It begins a story that is completed in the last quarter of the Bible, in the books of the New Testament. It tells first how God created a world of beauty and harmony and made people—creative, relational beings like himself—to care for this world and develop its potential. Next, it tells how people disastrously turned away from God, and then describes how, ever since, God has been working to bring them back.

An essential aspect of God's plan was to enter into a special relationship with the people of Israel, descendants of Abraham, so that through them he could extend his blessings to people of every nation. The First Testament records that the Israelites looked to three distinct sources of authoritative teaching to guide them in their relationship with God: *the teaching of the law by the priest*, *counsel from the wise* and *the word from the prophets* (see page 738). The books of the First Testament are drawn from these three sources, and accordingly in Hebrew versions they are divided into three groups: the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. This edition presents the books of the First Testament in an order much closer to this Hebrew tradition than to the order readers of English Bibles may be familiar with, which came from a later Greek translation.

The first division, Covenant History, includes not just the books that the Hebrews call the “law” (Genesis–Deuteronomy), but also the books they call the “former prophets” (Joshua–Kings), since all of these books together make up a continuous narrative. It tells the story of God's dealings with humanity from the beginning of the world up to the time when the people of Israel were conquered and sent into exile. The second division presents the books that the Hebrews call the “latter prophets.” While these are traditionally divided into two groups according to their size (the long books being considered the “major prophets” and the short ones the “minor prophets”), here they are presented together in what we believe to be their historical order. The third division contains the “writings.” These are grouped according to what kind of literature they are: song lyrics, wisdom, history or apocalypse.

And so the First Testament is made up of dozens of books of many different kinds. They cover centuries of history and include everything from law codes and architectural descriptions to songs and vision reports. Nevertheless, as the pages of the First Testament unfold, readers can see God continually at work to bring humanity back into relationship with himself by fulfilling his promise to Abraham, made early in Genesis, that through him and his descendants all peoples on earth will be blessed.

Introduction to | **The Covenant History** |

The first quarter of the Bible unfolds as one continuous narrative. It is the story of the people of Israel, beginning with their earliest ancestors. It tells how their nation was formed, how they were miraculously delivered from slavery in Egypt, and how they settled in the land of Canaan. The story relates how the nation flourished under its first kings, how it was later divided into two rival kingdoms, and how it was finally conquered by empires to the east and its people scattered.

The Covenant History explains that because humanity turned away from its Creator, the world was filled with injustice, violence and misery. To rescue humanity, God made a covenant with one man, Abraham, promising that through him and his descendants *all peoples on earth* would be blessed. When his descendants through Isaac and Jacob had grown into the nation of Israel, God brought them out of slavery in Egypt and made a further covenant with them. They were to follow God's laws in order to provide a living demonstration to all the nations around them of God's goodness and wisdom. Later on, God made a covenant with one of their kings, David, promising that one of his descendants would always be on the throne of Israel.

Unfortunately, the people did not honor these covenants with God. They did not follow his laws, and they worshiped other gods. As a consequence, their nation was ultimately destroyed and they were scattered. At this point the narrative stops. But it is clear that the story itself does not end here. The covenant promises God made could not be undone, even by human unfaithfulness. So readers understand that God will continue to act on behalf of this nation and work through it to reach all nations. How God does this is related in the books that make up the rest of the Bible (which do not form a continuous narrative as these do). But there is a hint of what is to come even here. In the last episode of this long story, a king descended from David who has been carried as a captive to Babylon comes to be treated with favor and honor. God's promises are still at work, and so God's plan will continue to move toward its fulfillment.

This story of God's covenants with Israel is told over the course of many different books, which were written at different times and which include not just history but law, poetry and family lists. Nevertheless, these books are tied together in their present arrangement in significant ways. First, each book picks up the story where the previous one leaves off. In addition, a distinct pattern of literary organization is used repeatedly throughout the collection: a simple list of people or places provides a skeleton that is fleshed out as each of its elements is elaborated upon in keeping with the purposes of the inspired author. The result is a type of chronicle in which a characteristic phrase appears at the head of passages of greatly varying lengths.

The first list is one of “generations.” The phrase *this is the account of [X]* means “this is what came from [X].” This phrase occurs eleven times in the book of Genesis. It introduces accounts first of the world’s creation and the earliest people, and then of Israel’s ancestors and others in their family tree. This particular phrase is repeated in later parts of the Covenant History, tying the whole collection together. The formula is found for a twelfth time in Numbers, when a twelve-tribe confederacy is gathered into a nation. And the author of the book of Ruth also uses it at the start of David’s genealogy, suggesting by allusion that God’s purposes are continuing to unfold as a royal dynasty is founded in Israel. These repetitions of the phrase in later parts of the Covenant History help tie the whole collection together.

The material from the middle of Exodus through Leviticus to the end of Numbers is organized according to the stops that the Israelites made on their journey from Egypt to Canaan. The phrase that introduces the passages in this material characteristically speaks of the Israelites “setting out” from one location and “coming to” the next. A summary of all the stops is inserted into the narrative at the end of the journey.

A similar literary pattern is evident in the first half of the book of Joshua, as the Israelites invade Canaan and conduct a campaign against the first and greatest threat they face, the “royal cities” of the region. These cities have their own kings and are thus heavily fortified and defended. The narrative follows the army as it overcomes one city after another; at the end of the campaign, a list of all the defeated kings is included in the text. The same pattern is evident in the book of Judges, where the phrase *again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD* is used repeatedly to introduce the people’s falling away from God’s ways and their eventual repentance and deliverance by a judge that God raises up.

This pattern also structures the long book of Samuel–Kings (commonly called 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings). This book describes how the monarchy was established in Israel and then provides reports of the noteworthy events of the reign of each king down to the Babylonian exile. These reports are introduced (or sometimes concluded) by a standard phrase, which names the king, states when he assumed the throne, and tells the number of years he reigned.

The end result of this chronological continuity and common literary patterning is an interweaving of books of different types, from different times, into a unified whole. They were likely gathered in this way at the time of the last events they narrate, that is, during the Babylonian exile. The message for the Israelites living at the time of this compilation was that they were a chosen people, the ones through whom God would rescue all peoples. Their own failure had led to their current exile and punishment. But the one, true Creator God had given his word that Israel would be saved, and through them, the world.

The book of Genesis explains why and how one nation came to have a special role in God's plans for all of humanity. It first describes how God created a world of order and harmony, but then relates how this order and harmony were shattered when people turned away from God. The book traces the destructive consequences of human rebellion and pride, showing how these filled the world with violence, injustice and suffering. This led God to condemn and restrain human wickedness through the judgment of the great flood.

The book then narrows its focus down to one family. It describes how God promised to make a man named Abraham the ancestor of a great nation, and to use him and his descendants to bring people of all nations back to himself. God renewed this covenant with Abraham's son Isaac, and with Isaac's son Jacob. Jacob had twelve sons, and one of them, Joseph, was able to save his entire extended family from perishing in a famine. Joseph brought them to Egypt, where God had already preserved and protected him through many difficulties.

As the book ends, a sequel is clearly in view. Abraham's descendants have rapidly grown into a league of large tribes, and they must somehow make their way back to the land that God has promised to them. And so Genesis leads naturally into the story told in the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers of how the nation of Israel was formed.

Genesis is divided into twelve parts by eleven repetitions of the phrase *this is the account of* a certain person, meaning "this is what came from" that person. These phrases each introduce sections in the book that describe the descendants of the person named. In some sections these descendants are simply listed, but in others their exploits are traced in detail. The general pattern is that after briefly considering their siblings, Genesis focuses on those in each generation through whom God is working to fulfill his promises. This form of the book is appropriate to the book's story-telling function, as it is sibling rivalries that drive much of the book's plot forward.

The book of Genesis has been assembled from ancient materials that have been preserved in a variety of forms. It contains several family lists, as well as poetic passages of varying lengths. It also includes explanations of how people and places got their names, such as Beer-sheba ("the well of the oath") or Israel ("he struggles with God"). It incorporates the records of legal proceedings—such as Abraham's purchase of a burial cave—and of military campaigns. The book also includes numerous stories that tell how particular things came to be (for example, "Why is there a bow in the sky after it rains?"). It weaves all of

these materials together to document the origins of humanity, the cause of its distress, and the beginnings of the plan that God set in motion to restore the order and harmony of the world he created.

Genesis is traditionally attributed to Moses, the leader who brought the people of Israel out of Egypt. He would have had opportunity and good reason to assemble a record of his people's origins and an explanation of their special role in God's plan. Genesis and the other "books of Moses" (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) were eventually worked into the continuous story that runs through the first quarter of the Bible.

Genesis

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

And God said, “Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water.” So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. God called the vault “sky.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day.

And God said, “Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.” And it was so. God called the dry ground “land,” and the gathered waters he called “seas.” And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, “Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds.” And it was so. The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the third day.

And God said, “Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years, and let them be lights in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth.” And it was so. God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars. God set them in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth, to govern the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the fourth day.

And God said, “Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky.” So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living and moving thing with which the water teems, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the fifth day.

And God said, “Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: livestock, creatures that move along the ground, and wild animals, each according to its kind.” And it was so. God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, “Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals,^a and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

So God created human beings in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move on the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.” And it was so.

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.

By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the LORD God made the earth and the heavens.

Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth^a and no plant had yet sprung up, for the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground, but streams^b came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground. Then the LORD God formed a man^c from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. The LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. (The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin^d and onyx are also there.) The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of

Cush.⁶ The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Ashur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will certainly die.”

The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”

Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals.

But for Adam⁷ no suitable helper was found. So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs⁸ and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib⁹ he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

The man said,

“This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called ‘woman,’
for she was taken out of man.”

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’”

The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’ ”

“You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, “Where are you?”

He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.”

And he said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?”

The man said, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.”

Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?”

The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

So the LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this,

“Cursed are you above all livestock
and all wild animals!

You will crawl on your belly
and you will eat dust
all the days of your life.

And I will put enmity
between you and the woman,
and between your offspring⁷ and hers;

he will crush⁸ your head,
and you will strike his heel.”

To the woman he said,

“I will make your pains in childbearing very severe;
with pain you will give birth to children.

Your desire will be for your husband,
and he will rule over you.”

To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat of it,’

“Cursed is the ground because of you;
through painful toil you will eat of it
all the days of your life.

It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
and you will eat the plants of the field.

By the sweat of your brow
you will eat your food
until you return to the ground,
since from it you were taken;
for dust you are
and to dust you will return.”

Adam⁹ named his wife Eve,¹⁰ because she would become the mother of all the living.

The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them. And the LORD God said, “The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.” So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove them out, he placed on the east

side^o of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.

Adam^o made love to his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain.^o She said, “With the help of the LORD I have brought forth^o a man.” Later she gave birth to his brother Abel.

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

Then the LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.”

Now Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let’s go out to the field.” While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?”

“I don’t know,” he replied. “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

The LORD said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.”

Cain said to the LORD, “My punishment is more than I can bear. Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.”

But the LORD said to him, “Not so^o; anyone who kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over.” Then the LORD put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him. So Cain went out from the LORD’s presence and lived in the land of Nod,^o east of Eden.

Cain made love to his wife, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Enoch. Cain was then building a city, and he named it after his son Enoch. To Enoch was born Irad, and Irad was the father of Mehujael, and Mehujael was the father of Methushael, and Methushael was the father of Lamech.

Lamech married two women, one named Adah and the other Zillah. Adah gave birth to Jabal; he was the father of those who live in tents and raise livestock. His brother’s name was Jubal; he was the father of all who play stringed instruments and pipes. Zillah also had a son, Tubal-Cain, who forged all kinds of tools out of^o bronze and iron. Tubal-Cain’s sister was Naamah.

Lamech said to his wives,

“Adah and Zillah, listen to me;
wives of Lamech, hear my words.

I have killed a man for wounding me,
a young man for injuring me.