

# UNLOCKING THE BIBLE

A unique overview of the whole Bible



David Pawson



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Examples

Sample



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with Andy Peck

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Sample



## INTRODUCTION

I suppose this all started in Arabia, in 1957. I was then a chaplain in the Royal Air Force, looking after the spiritual welfare of all those who were not C.E. (Church of England) or R.C. (Roman Catholic) but O.D. (other denominations – Methodist to Salvationist, Buddhist to atheist). I was responsible for a string of stations from the Red Sea to the Persian Gulf. In most there was not even a congregation to call a ‘church’, never mind a building.

In civilian life I had been a Methodist minister working anywhere from the Shetland Islands to the Thames Valley. In that denomination it was only necessary to prepare a few sermons each quarter, which were hawked around a ‘circuit’ of chapels. Mine had mostly been of the ‘text’ type (talking about a single verse) or the ‘topic’ type (talking about a single subject with many verses from all over the Bible). In both I was as guilty as any of taking texts out of context before I realized that chapter and verse numbers were neither inspired nor intended by God and had done immense damage to Scripture, not least by changing the meaning of ‘text’ from a whole book to a single sentence. The Bible had become a compendium of ‘proof-texts’, picked out at will and used to support almost anything a preacher wanted to say.

With a pocketful of sermons based on this questionable technique, I found myself in uniform, facing very different congregations – all male instead of the lifeboat-style gatherings I had been used to: women and children first. My meager stock of messages soon ran out. Some of them had gone down like a lead balloon, especially in compulsory parade services in England before I was posted overseas.

So here I was in Aden, virtually starting a church from scratch, from the Permanent Staff and temporary National Servicemen of Her Majesty's youngest armed service. How could I get these men interested in the Christian faith and then committed to it?

Something (I would now say: Someone) prompted me to announce that I would give a series of talks over a few months, which would take us right through the Bible ('from Generation to Revolution!').

It was to prove a voyage of discovery for all of us. The Bible became a new book when seen as a whole. To use a well-worn cliché, we had failed to see the wood for the trees. Now God's plan and purpose were unfolding in a fresh way. The men were getting something big enough to sink their teeth into. The thought of being part of a cosmic rescue was a powerful motivation. The Bible story was seen as both real and relevant.

Of course, my 'overview' was at that time quite simple, even naive. I felt like that American tourist who 'did' the British Museum in 20 minutes – and could have done it in 10 if he'd had his running shoes! We raced through the centuries, giving some books of the Bible little more than a passing glance.

But the results surpassed my expectations and set the course for the rest of my life and ministry. I had become a 'Bible teacher', albeit in embryo. My ambition to share the excitement of knowing the whole Bible became a passion.

When I returned to 'normal' church life, I resolved to take my congregation through the whole Bible in a decade (if they put up with me that long). This involved tackling about one 'chapter' at every service. This took a lot of time, both in preparation (an hour in the study for every 10 minutes in the pulpit) and delivery (45–50 minutes). The ratio was similar to that of cooking and eating a meal.

The effect of this systematic 'exposition' of Scripture confirmed its rightness. A real hunger for God's Word was revealed. People began to *come* from far and wide, 'to recharge their batteries' as some explained. Soon this traffic was reversed. Tape recordings, first prepared for the sick and housebound, now began to go far and wide, ultimately in hundreds of thousands to 120 countries. No one was more surprised than I.

Leaving Gold Hill in Buckinghamshire for Guildford in Surrey, I found my-

self sharing in the design and building of the Millmead Center, which contained an ideal auditorium for continuing this teaching ministry. When it was opened, we decided to associate it with the whole Bible by reading it aloud right through without stopping. It took us 84 hours, from Sunday evening until Thursday morning, each person reading for 15 minutes before passing the Bible on to someone else. We used the ‘Living’ version, the easiest both to read and to listen to, with the heart as well as the mind.

We did not know what to expect, but the event seemed to capture the public imagination. Even the mayor wanted to take part and by sheer coincidence (or providence) found himself reading about a husband who was ‘well known, for he sits in the council chamber with the other civic leaders’. He insisted on taking a copy home for his wife. Another lady dropped in on her way to see her solicitor about the legal termination of her marriage and found herself reading, ‘I hate divorce, says the Lord’. She never went to the lawyer.

An aggregate of 2,000 people attended and bought half a ton of Bibles. Some came for half an hour and were still there hours later, muttering to themselves, ‘Well, maybe just one more book and then I really must go.’

It was the first time many, including our most regular attenders, had ever heard a book of the Bible read straight through. In most churches only a few sentences are read each week and then not always consecutively. What other book would get anyone interested, much less excited, if treated in this way?

So on Sundays we worked through the whole Bible book by book. For the Bible is not one book, but many – in fact, it is a whole library (the word *biblia* in Latin and Greek is plural: ‘books’). And not just many books, but many *kinds* of books – history, law, letters, songs, etc. It became necessary, when we had finished studying one book, and were starting on another, to begin with a special introduction covering very basic questions: What kind of book is this? When was it written? Who wrote it? Who was it written for? Above all, why was it written? The answer to that one provided the ‘key’ to unlock its message. Nothing in that book could be fully understood unless seen as part of the whole. The context of every ‘text’ was not just the paragraph or the section but fundamentally the whole book itself.

By now, I was becoming more widely known as a Bible teacher and was invited to colleges, conferences and conventions – at first in this country, but

increasingly overseas, where tapes had opened doors and prepared the way. I enjoy meeting new people and seeing new places, but the novelty of sitting in a jumbo jet wears off in 10 minutes!

Everywhere I went I found the same eager desire to know God's Word. I praised God for the invention of recording cassettes which, unlike video systems, are standardized the world over. They were helping to plug a real hole in so many places. There is so much successful evangelism but so little teaching ministry to stabilize, develop and mature converts.

I might have continued along these lines until the end of my active ministry, but the Lord had another surprise for me, which was the last link in the chain that led to the publication of this volume.

In the early 1990s, Bernard Thompson, a friend pastoring a church in Wallingford, near Oxford, asked me to speak at a short series of united meetings with the aim of increasing interest in and knowledge of the Bible – an objective guaranteed to hook me!

I said I would come once a month and speak for three hours about one book in the Bible (with a coffee break in the middle!). In return, I asked those attending to read that book right through before and after my visit. During the following weeks preachers were to base their sermons and house groups their discussions on the same book. All this would hopefully mean familiarity at least with that one book.

My purpose was two-fold. On the one hand, to get people so interested in that book that they could hardly wait to read it. On the other hand, to give them enough insight and information so that when they did read it they would be excited by their ability to understand it. To help with both, I used pictures, charts, maps and models.

This approach really caught on. After just four months I was pressed to book dates for the next five years, to cover all 66 books! I laughingly declined, saying I might be in heaven long before then (in fact, I have rarely booked anything more than six months ahead, not wanting to mortgage the future, or presume that I have one). But the Lord had other plans and enabled me to complete the marathon.

Anchor Recordings (<http://anchor-recordings.com>) have distributed my tapes for the last 20 years and when the Director, Jim Harris, heard the recordings of these meetings, he urged me to consider putting them on video. He arranged cameras and crew to come to High Leigh Conference Center, its main hall 'converted' into a studio, for three days at a time, enabling 18 programs to be made with an invited audience. It took another five years to complete this project, which was distributed under the title 'Unlocking the Bible'.

Now these videos are traveling around the world. They are being used in house groups, churches, colleges, the armed forces, gypsy camps, prisons and on cable television networks. During an extended visit to Malaysia, they were being snapped up at a rate of a thousand a week. They have infiltrated all six continents, including Antarctica!

More than one have called this my 'legacy to the church'. Certainly it is the fruit of many years' work. And I am now in my seventieth year on planet earth, though I do not think the Lord has finished with me yet. But I did think this particular task had reached its conclusion. I was mistaken.

HarperCollins approached me with a view to publishing this material in a series of volumes. For the last decade or so I had been writing books for other publishers, so was already convinced that this was a good means of spreading God's Word. Nevertheless, I had two huge reservations about this proposal which made me very hesitant. One was due to the way the material had been prepared and the other related to the way it had been delivered. I shall explain them in reverse order.

First, I have never written out in full any sermon, lecture or talk. I speak from notes, sometimes pages of them. I have been concerned about communication as much as content and intuitively knew that a full manuscript interrupts the rapport between speaker and audience, not least by diverting his eyes from the listeners. Speech that is more spontaneous can respond to reactions as well as express more emotions.

The result is that my speaking and writing styles are very different, each adapted to its own function. I enjoy listening to my tapes and can be deeply moved by myself. I am enthusiastic about reading one of my new publications, often telling my wife, 'This really *is* good stuff!' But when I read a transcript of what I have said, I am ashamed and even appalled. Such repetition of words

and phrases! Such rambling, even incomplete sentences! Such a mixture of verb tenses, particularly past and present! Do I really abuse the Queen's English like this? The evidence is irrefutable.

I made it clear that I could not possibly contemplate writing out all this material in full. It has taken most of one lifetime anyway and I do not have another. True, transcripts of the talks had already been made, with a view to translating and dubbing the videos into other languages such as Spanish and Chinese. But the thought of these being printed as they were horrified me. Perhaps this is a final struggle with pride, but the contrast with my written books, over which I took such time and trouble, was more than I could bear.

I was assured that copy editors correct most grammatical blunders. But the main remedy proposed was to employ a 'ghostwriter' who was in tune with me and my ministry, to adapt the material for printing. An introduction to the person chosen, Andy Peck, gave me every confidence that he could do the job, even though the result would not be what I would have written – nor, for that matter, what he would have written himself.

I gave him all the notes, tapes, videos and transcripts, but these volumes are as much his work as mine. He has worked incredibly hard and I am deeply grateful to him for enabling me to reach many more with the truth that sets people free. If one gets a prophet's reward for merely giving the prophet a drink of water, I can only thank the Lord for the reward Andy will get for this immense labor of love.

Second, I have never kept careful records of my sources. This is partly because the Lord blessed me with a reasonably good memory for such things as quotations and illustrations and perhaps also because I have never used secretarial assistance.

Books have played a major role in my work – three tons of them, according to the last furniture remover we employed, filling two rooms and a garden shed. They are in three categories: those I have read, those I intend to read and those I will never read! They have been such a blessing to me and such a bane to my wife.

The largest section by far is filled with Bible commentaries. When preparing a Bible study, I have looked up all relevant writers, but only after I have prepared

as much as I can on my own. Then I have both added to and corrected my efforts in the light of scholarly and devotional writings.

It would be impossible to name all those to whom I have been indebted. Like many others, I devoured William Barclay's *Daily Bible Readings* as soon as they were issued back in the 1950s. His knowledge of New Testament background and vocabulary was invaluable and his simple and clear style a model to follow, though I later came to question his 'liberal' interpretations. John Stott, Merrill Tenney, Gordon Fee and William Hendrickson were among those who opened up the New Testament for me, while Alec Motyer, G. T. Wenham and Derek Kidner did the same for the Old. And time would fail to tell of Denney, Lightfoot, Nygren, Robinson, Adam Smith, Howard, Ellison, Mullen, Ladd, Atkinson, Green, Beasley-Murray, Snaith, Marshall, Morris, Pink and many many others. Nor must I forget two remarkable little books from the pens of women: *What the Bible is all about* by Henrietta Mears and *Christ in all the Scriptures* by A. M. Hodgkin. To have sat at their feet has been an inestimable privilege. I have always regarded a willingness to learn as one of the fundamental qualifications to be a teacher.

I soaked up all these sources like a sponge. I remembered so much of *what* I read, but could not easily recall *where* I had read it. This did not seem to matter too much when gathering material for preaching, since most of these writers were precisely aiming to help preachers and did not expect to be constantly quoted. Indeed, a sermon full of attributed quotations can be distracting, if not misinterpreted as name dropping or indirectly claiming to be well read. As could my previous paragraph!

But printing, unlike preaching, is subject to copyright, since royalties are involved. And the fear of breaching this held me back from allowing any of my spoken ministry to be reproduced in print. It would be out of the question to trace back 40 years' scrounging and even if that were possible, the necessary footnotes and acknowledgements could double the size and price of this volume.

The alternative was to deny access to this material for those who could most benefit from it, which my publisher persuaded me would be wrong. At least I was responsible for collecting and collating it all, but I dare to believe that there is sufficient original contribution to justify its release.

I can only offer an apology and my gratitude to all those whose studies I have

plundered over the years, whether in small or large amounts, hoping they might see this as an example of that imitation which is the sincerest form of flattery. To use another quotation I read somewhere: ‘Certain authors, speaking of their works, say “my book” ... They would do better to say “our book” ... because there is in them usually more of other people’s than their own’ (the original came from Pascal).

So here is ‘our’ book! I suppose I am what the French bluntly call a ‘vulgarizer’. That is someone who takes what the academics teach and make it simple enough for the ‘common’ people to understand. I am content with that. As one old lady said to me, after I had expounded a quite profound passage of Scripture, ‘You broke it up small enough for us to take it in.’ I have, in fact, always aimed to so teach that a 12-year-old boy could understand and remember my message.

Some readers will be disappointed, even frustrated, with the paucity of text references, especially if they want to check me out! But their absence is intentional. God gave us his Word in books, but not in chapters and verses. That was the work of two bishops, French and Irish, centuries later. It became easier to find a ‘text’ and to ignore context. How many Christians who quote John 3:16 can recite verses 15 and 17? Many no longer ‘search the scriptures’; they simply look them up (given the numbers). So I have followed the apostles’ habit of naming the authors only – ‘as Isaiah or David or Samuel said’. For example, the Bible says that God whistles. Where on earth does it say that? In the book of Isaiah. Whereabouts? Go and find out for yourself. Then you’ll also find out when he did and why he did. And you’ll have the satisfaction of having discovered all that by yourself.

One final word. Behind my hope that these introductions to the Bible books will help you to get to know and love them more than you did lies a much greater and deeper longing – that you will also come to know better and love more the subject of all the books, the Lord himself. I was deeply touched by the remark of someone who had watched all the videos within a matter of days: ‘I know so much more about the Bible now, but the biggest thing was that I felt the heart of God as never before.’

What more could a Bible teacher ask? May you experience the same as you read these pages and join me in saying: Praise Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

J. David Pawson  
Sherborne St John, 2008

Yes I thought I knew my Bible  
Reading piecemeal, hit or miss  
Now a part of John or Matthew  
Then a bit of Genesis

Certain chapters of Isaiah  
Certain psalms, the twenty-third.  
First of Proverbs, twelfth of Romans  
Yes, I thought I knew the Word

But I found that thorough reading  
Was a different thing to do  
And the way was unfamiliar  
When I read my Bible through.

You who like to play at Bible  
Dip and dabble here and there  
Just before you kneel all weary  
Yawning through a hurried prayer.

You who treat this crown of writings  
As you treat no other book  
Just a paragraph disjointed  
Just a crude impatient look.

Try a worthier procedure  
Try a broad and steady view;  
You will kneel in awesome wonder  
When you read the Bible through.

*Author unknown*

Sample



I.

OLD TESTAMENT

Sample



# THE MAKER'S INSTRUCTIONS

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6. Deuteronomy	147

Sample



# 1. OVERVIEW OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

God has given us a library of 66 books. The Latin word *biblia*, translated as ‘bible’, literally means ‘books’. The 39 Old Testament books, which cover over 2,000 years, were written by a variety of authors and include many types of literature. It is no surprise, therefore, that many people come to the Bible wondering how it all fits together.

God did not arrange the Bible topically so that we could study themes individually: he arranged it so that we could read a book at a time. The Bible is God’s truth about himself and how we should relate to him, set in the context of history. It tells how people, principally the nation of Israel, came to experience God for themselves and respond to his Word. Far from being a dry theological textbook, it is the vibrant story of God’s redeeming work in the lives of his people.

Many fail to grasp the overall message because they have an insufficient understanding of the background to the Bible. This chapter aims to provide an overview of the Old Testament so that any particular portion of Scripture can be given its correct context.

## Geography

If we are to understand the Old Testament there are two maps we need to appreciate first of all: those of the Promised Land and the Middle East.

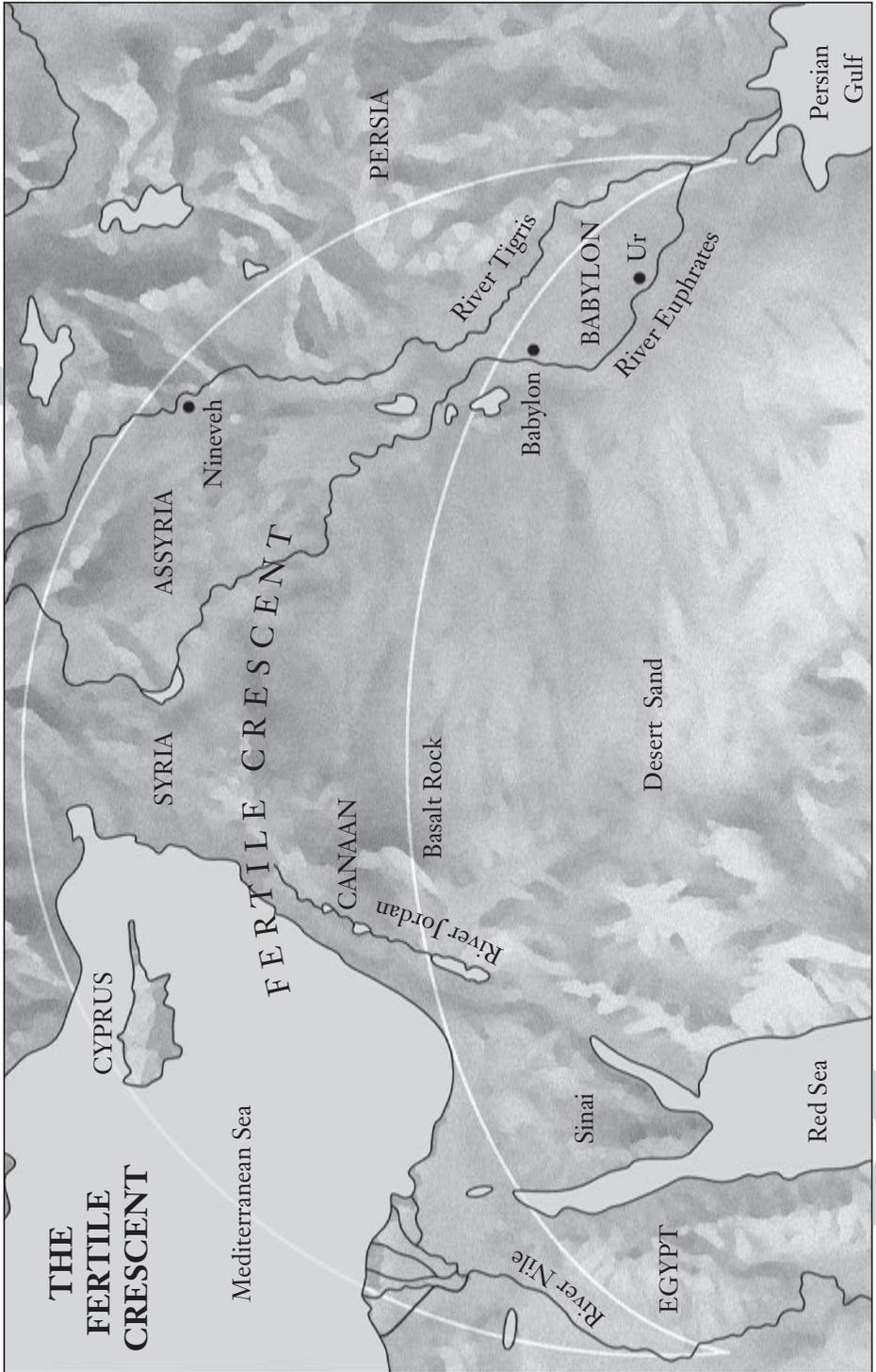
The key area in the map of the Middle East is what geographers call ‘the Fertile Crescent’ – the band of fertile land which stretches from the River Nile in Egypt in the west, north-east through the land of Israel and then south and south-east to the plains surrounding the rivers Tigris and Euphrates in what used to be called Mesopotamia (which means ‘the middle of the rivers’, *meso* – ‘middle’ and *potamia* – ‘rivers’). This fertile area comprised the centers of power in the ancient world, with Egypt located in the west and Assyria and later Babylon in the east. Israel was wedged between these two and much of the Old Testament is written with the struggles between these world powers in the background. There are also significant times when their threats or activities impinge directly on Israel.

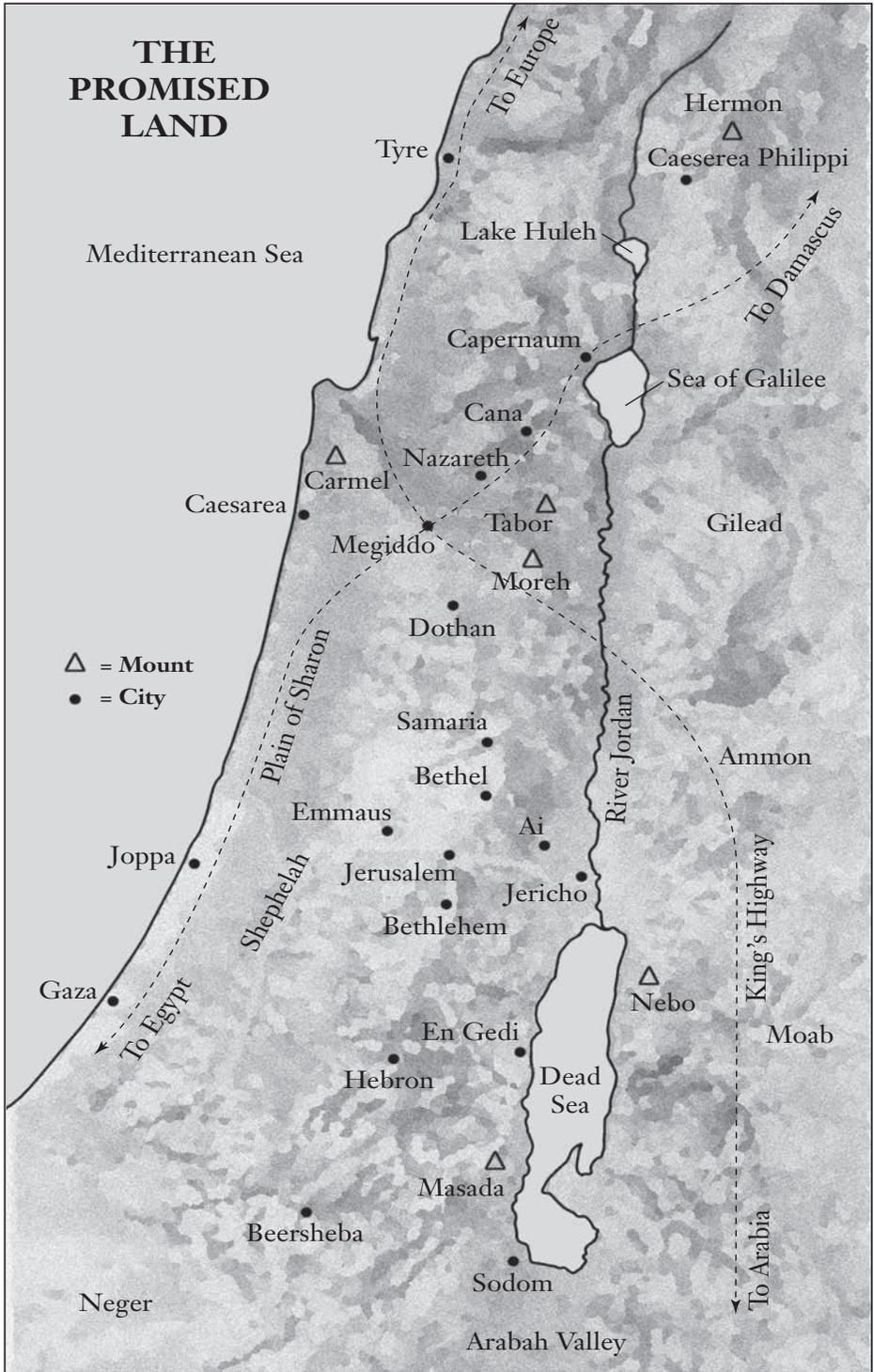
Israel’s geographical position made it significant as a trade route. The Syrian Desert to the east of Israel meant that traders and armies from the orient needed to cross Israel’s border as they moved between Asia, Africa and Europe. A mountainous area of basalt rock to the south-west of the Sea of Galilee funneled the travelers through Jezreel and on through to Megiddo. A great trunk road entered Palestine through the Syrian Gate, running through Damascus, across the Bridge of Jacob’s Daughters and over a basalt dam to the Lake of Galilee. It then ran south-west via the Plains of Megiddo to the Coast Plain, through Lydda and Gaza to Egypt. Israel was a narrow corridor – to the east was the rift valley, which ran north to south down to the Dead Sea, and to the west was the Mediterranean Sea.

Israel, therefore, was at the crossroads of the world, with trade routes arriving from all directions and Megiddo the place where they all met. Overlooking this ‘crossroads’ was the village of Nazareth, and doubtless Jesus would have sat on the hill there and watched the world go by.

This location has spiritual significance. God was planting a people at a crossroads where they could be a model of the kingdom of heaven on earth. The whole world could see the blessing that comes to people living under God’s rule – and the curse that comes when they disobey. Israel’s unique position is no accident.

Turning to the internal geography of the Promised Land, the northern part containing the crossroads of the world was called Galilee, or ‘Galilee of the Nations’ because of its international flavor. The southern part, Judea, was more mountainous and isolated from the rest of the world, encouraging a more distinctively Jewish culture with the capital of Jerusalem at its center.





The Promised Land is about the same size as Wales, but it includes every kind of climate and scenery. Wherever you live, there is somewhere in Israel that is just like home. The place most like England is just south of Tel Aviv. Carmel in the north is known as ‘Little Switzerland’. Just 10 minutes from Carmel you can sit down among palm trees. Prominent in the land is the River Jordan, which rises on Mount Hermon and runs north to south within the rift valley mentioned earlier, through the Sea of Galilee and down to the Dead Sea. A fertile plain surrounds its course.

All the flora and fauna of Europe, Africa and Asia can be found in Israel. Scots pine trees grow next to palm trees from the Sahara. In biblical times the wild animals in the country included lions, bears, crocodiles and camels. It seems as if the whole world was somehow squeezed into one small country.

## History

Having made ourselves familiar with the general geography of the Old Testament world, we now need to consider an outline of the history of the Old Testament. It may sound daunting to have to cover 2,000 years or more, but a simple chart will help us to grasp the basics (see p. 11).

The Old Testament covers over 2,000 years of history before the time of Christ. Genesis 1–11 covers the ‘prehistoric’ part – the creation of the universe, the Fall of man in the Garden of Eden, the Flood and the Tower of Babel. The focus here is on humankind in general, though including a ‘godly’ line. But we can chart the history of Israel itself from 2000 BC, when God calls Abraham (though it would be centuries before the nation was formed).

The Old Testament period can be divided into four equal parts of roughly 500 years each. Each period has a key event, a prominent person and a type of leadership.

<b>2000</b>	<b>1500</b>	<b>1000</b>	<b>500</b>
Election	Exodus	Empire	Exile
Abraham	Moses	David	Isaiah
Patriarchs	Prophets	Princes	Priests

In the first period the patriarchs led Israel: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. In the second period Israel was led by prophets, from Moses to Samuel. In the third period they were led by princes (kings), from Saul to Zedekiah. The fourth period saw the priests take the lead, from Joshua (a priest who returned to Judah from exile under Zerubbabel's rule) to Caiaphas in the time of Christ.

None of the leader types was ideal and each individual brought his own flaws to the task. The nation needed a leader who was a prophet, priest *and* king, and they found him in Jesus. Each stage, therefore, was a foreshadowing of the ideal leader who was to come.

This time line is broken by two 400-year gaps. The first comes between the patriarchs and the prophets around 1500 BC and the second after the priests at 400 BC. During these two sets of 400 years God said nothing and did nothing, so there is nothing in the Bible from those two periods. There were some Jewish books written in the second of these two periods, known collectively as the Apocrypha, but they are not part of the Bible proper because they do not cover the time when God was speaking and acting. Malachi is therefore the last book in the Old Testament of our standard English Bibles, then there is a 400-year gap before Matthew's Gospel.

It is especially interesting to note the events in world history which took place during these two gaps. The Egyptian, Indian and Chinese cultures developed during the first gap, while in the second Greek philosophy developed through Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Other great figures of this time include Buddha, Confucius, Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar. So much happened which historians regard as important, but it was of little relevance to God. It was *his* history with *his* people which really mattered.

## A brief overview of the books

Genesis 12–50 covers the first period of Israel's history when the nation was led by the patriarchs (see the table on page 11). It is possible that the book of Job was written at this time, since there are parallels with the sort of life the patriarchs would have lived.

Relatively few books cover the next quarter. Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and



Deuteronomy were all written by Moses. The books of Joshua, Judges and Ruth continue the history of that period.

There are more books associated with the third quarter: Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, plus the poetic books: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon. During this third quarter and after Solomon's time there was a civil war when the 12 tribes divided into two parts, the 10 tribes in the north calling themselves Israel, the two in the south Judah. This is the end of the united nation. There were prophets during that time – Elijah and Elisha – but they didn't have their own books.

Finally there are a large number of prophetic books associated with the Exile (the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians, then the tribes in the southern kingdom of Judah were forced into exile by the Babylonians). Some contain prophecies from before the Exile, some during it, some after, and some have a mixture because the prophet overlaps more than one phase. This tells us something of the importance of this event to Israel's history. It meant the loss of the land God had promised them and struck at the heart of their identity as a nation.

Prophets warned the people that they were going to lose the land and prophets (sometimes the same ones) comforted them when they did lose the land. There were prophets urging them to rebuild the temple when they returned to Judah after 70 years away. The books of Daniel and Esther are written from Babylon itself. The prophets Ezra and Nehemiah helped to rebuild Jerusalem and renew the people once they had returned.

This brief outline is enough to demonstrate that the books of the Old Testament are not always in chronological order. The 'history books' are fairly accurately arranged, but the prophets are organized according to size not chronology. Hence it can be confusing to know who was speaking when.

## The rise and fall of a nation

There is another aspect of the chart given on page 11 which is worth underlining. The chart shows a dotted line representing the fortunes of the nation, which reach their height under David and Solomon. The line's gentle rise indicates the

progress up to this point, with a sharp drop once the peak is reached. Every Jew looks back to that period and longs for it to return. It was the golden age. They look for a son of David to restore their prosperity.

The last question the disciples asked Jesus before he ascended to heaven was about when he would restore the kingdom to Israel. They are asking the same question 2,000 years later.

The line continues its descent until Israel is exiled by Assyria in 721 BC and then Judah by Babylon in 587 BC.

Following the 400-year gap John the Baptist arrives, the first prophet for a long time. Then comes the life and ministry of Jesus. The New Testament covers 100 years compared to the 2,000-plus years of the Old Testament.

## The order of the books

We have noted already that the chronology of Old Testament history is different from the order in which the books appear. There is also a big difference in the order of books as included in the English Old Testament compared with the Hebrew Bible. The English Bible is arranged in terms of **history**: Genesis to Esther, then **poetry**: Job to Song of Solomon, then **prophecy**: Isaiah to Malachi. The prophets are further split into the **major prophets**: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, and the **minor prophets**: Hosea to Malachi. However, the descriptions ‘major’ and ‘minor’ are given because of the size of the book and nothing else. These divisions are generally highlighted in the contents page, if at all, so most readers are unaware of the change of category when they move from one section to the next.

The Hebrew Scriptures have three clear divisions. The first five books are not regarded as history but as **law**, and are known by the first words read as the scroll was unrolled. The next section goes under the title of **prophets**, a surprising title because it includes a number of books listed in the English Bible as history. Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings are called the **former prophets**, with the major and minor prophets (as they are called in the English Bible) listed as **latter prophets**. This is because the Jews see the history books as prophetic history – history according to how *God* perceived what was happening and what

HEBREW		ENGLISH	
<p><b>LAW (TORAH, PENTATEUCH)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* In the beginning (Genesis)</li> <li>* These are the names (Exodus)</li> <li>* And he called (Leviticus)</li> <li>* In the wilderness (Numbers)</li> <li>* These are the words (Deuteronomy)</li> </ul> <p><b>PROPHETS</b></p> <p><b>Former:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Joshua</li> <li>* Judges</li> <li>* Samuel</li> <li>* Kings</li> </ul> <p><b>Latter:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Isaiah</li> <li>Jeremiah</li> <li>Ezekiel</li> <li>Hosea</li> <li>Joel</li> <li>Amos</li> <li>Obadiah</li> </ul>	<p>Jonah</p> <p>Micah</p> <p>Nahum</p> <p>Habbakuk</p> <p>Zephaniah</p> <p>Haggai</p> <p>Zechariah</p> <p>Malachi</p> <p><b>WRITINGS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Praises (Psalms)</li> <li>* Job</li> <li>* Proverbs</li> <li>* Ruth</li> <li>* Song of Songs</li> <li>* The Preacher (Ecclesiastes)</li> <li>* How? (Lamentations)</li> <li>* Esther</li> <li>* Daniel</li> <li>* Ezra</li> <li>* Nehemiah</li> </ul> <p>* 1, 2 The words of the days (Chronicles)</p> <p>'go up' (alya) (last words)</p> <p>[Luke 24:27, 44]</p>	<p><b>HISTORY (PAST)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Genesis</li> <li>* Exodus</li> <li>* Leviticus</li> <li>* Numbers</li> <li>* Deuteronomy</li> <li>* Joshua</li> <li>* Judges</li> <li>* Ruth</li> <li>* 1, 2 Samuel</li> <li>* 1, 2 Kings</li> <li>* 1, 2 Chronicles</li> <li>* Ezra</li> <li>* Nehemiah</li> <li>* Esther</li> </ul> <p><b>POETRY (PRESENT)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Job</li> <li>* Psalms</li> <li>* Proverbs</li> <li>* Ecclesiastes</li> <li>* Song of Songs</li> </ul>	<p><b>PROPHECY (FUTURE)</b></p> <p><b>Major (4):</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Isaiah</li> <li>Jeremiah</li> <li>* Lamentations</li> <li>Ezekiel</li> <li>* Daniel</li> </ul> <p><b>Minor (12):</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hosea</li> <li>Joel</li> <li>Amos</li> <li>Obadiah</li> <li>Jonah</li> <li>Micah</li> <li>Nahum</li> <li>Habbakuk</li> <li>Zephaniah</li> <li>Haggai</li> <li>Zechariah</li> <li>Malachi</li> <li>'curse' (last word)</li> </ul>

(The asterisks indicate books which appear in different sections of the Hebrew and English Bibles.)

was important. All history is based on the principle of selection and connection – what is included and why it is included. The Bible’s history is no exception, except that it is the prophets under God’s inspiration who make the selection.

Ruth and the books of Chronicles are history within the English Bible but are not regarded as prophetic history within the Hebrew Bible. Indeed, there is no direct action of God mentioned in the book of Ruth, although the people in the story refer to him for blessings, and so on. Instead these books form part of the **writings**, the third and last division in the Hebrew Scriptures. There are more surprises here, for the poetry books are included, and Daniel, who we might expect to be included among the prophetic books.

This division may seem odd, but it is the division that Jesus refers to when he appears to the two on the road to Emmaus and the ten disciples, following his death and resurrection. We read about how he took them through the law, the prophets and the writings, and showed them everything concerning himself. This was the Old Testament division Jesus knew and accepted and I believe we could find it helpful too.

There are other Jewish history books which are not part of the Bible. The books of the Apocrypha are mostly ‘history’, although some contain other types of literature. They include fascinating stories, offering insights into the life of the Maccabees in their rebellion against the Greeks who occupied the land in the centuries before Christ. But these books were not judged to be records inspired by God and so were not included when the Old Testament canon was finally agreed. They have been incorporated into Roman Catholic Bibles. In this volume the books have been re-arranged in chronological order, more or less, so that readers may hear the words of God in the order in which he spoke them and thus make more sense of the progressive revelation they contain

## Conclusion

The Old Testament may seem confusing at first sight, but I hope this overview will help you to navigate successfully through its pages. There is no substitute, of course, for reading and re-reading the text itself. The exercise need not be academic. God has inspired the writing of the Old Testament and will meet with you through its pages. You only have to ask him.

Sample



## 2. GENESIS

### Introduction

The Bible is not one book, but many. The word ‘Bible’ comes from the plural word *biblia* which means ‘library’ in Latin. It consists of 66 separate books and is different from any other book of history in that it starts earlier and finishes later. Its first book, Genesis, starts at the beginning of the universe and its last, Revelation, describes the end of the world and beyond. The Bible is also unique because it is history written from God’s point of view. A political history or a physical history of the universe has a focus determined by human interest, but in the Bible God selects what is important to him.

### Themes

There are essentially two main themes in the Bible: what has gone wrong with our world and how it can be put right. Most agree that our world is not a good place to live in, that something has gone terribly wrong. The book of Genesis tells us exactly what the problem is, while the rest of the Bible tells us how God is going to put it right by rescuing sinful humanity from itself. The 66 books of the Bible form part of one great drama – what we might call the drama of redemption. The book of Genesis is vital because it introduces us to the stage, the cast and the plot of this great drama. Moreover, without the first few chapters of Genesis, the rest of the Bible would make little sense.

## BEGINNINGS

The Hebrew title for this book is simply ‘In the Beginning’. The Hebrew Scriptures were in the form of rolled-up scrolls and the name of each book was the first word or phrase written at the top of the scroll, visible to anyone seeking to identify which book it was.

When the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek in about 250 BC, the translators changed the name of the first book to ‘Genesis’, which actually means ‘origins’ or ‘beginnings’. It is a very appropriate title as the book includes the origin of so much – our universe, the sun, moon and stars, planet earth. Here we have the origin of plants, birds, fish, animals, humans. We have too the beginning of sex, marriage and family life, the origin of civilization, government, culture (arts and sciences), sin, death, murder and war. We also have the first sacrifices, of both animals and humans. In short, we have a potted history of humanity. The first 11 chapters of Genesis could be called ‘the prologue to the Bible’.

## THE NEED FOR REVELATION

Genesis not only deals with origins, it also deals with the ultimate questions of life. Where did our universe come from? Why are we here? Why do we have to die?

It is immediately obvious that these questions cannot be answered by any human being. Historians record what people have seen or experienced in the past. Scientists observe what is observable now and suggest how things may have begun. But neither group can tell us why it all began and whether the universe as it exists now has any meaning. Philosophers can only guess at the answers. They speculate about the origin of evil and why there is so much suffering in the world, but they do not actually know. The only person who could really answer these questions for us is God himself.

## Who wrote it?

When we open the book of Genesis, therefore, we are immediately faced with the question: Are we reading the results of human imagination or a book of divine inspiration?

The question can be answered by adopting an approach similar to that used

in scientific enquiry. Science is based on steps of faith: a hypothesis is produced and then tested to see if it fits the facts. So science progresses with a series of leaps of faith, as theories are posited and action is taken based on the theories. Similarly, in order to read Genesis properly we must take a step of faith before we even open the book. We must assume that it is a book of divine inspiration and then see if the answers it gives fit the facts of life and the universe as we see them.

There are two clear facts in particular which are perfectly explained by the answers in Genesis. Fact number 1 is that we live in a wonderful world of magnificent beauty and extraordinary variety. Fact number 2 is that the world has been ruined by those who live in it. We are told that 100 different species are becoming extinct every day, and we are becoming increasingly conscious of the damaging effects which modern production has on our environment. Genesis perfectly explains why these two facts can be true, as we will see later.

## **The place of Genesis**

Genesis is not just the first book, it is the *foundational* book for the whole Bible. Most, if not all, biblical truths are included here, at least in embryo. This book is the key that unlocks the rest of the Bible. We learn that there is one God, the creator of the universe. We are also told that of all the nations, Israel were the people chosen for blessing. Scholars call this ‘the scandal of particularity’, that of all the nations, Israel should be especially selected. This is a theme which runs through the Bible to the very last page.

The importance of Genesis is confirmed if we ask ourselves what the Bible would be like if it began with Exodus instead. If that were the case, we would be left wondering why we should be interested in a bunch of Jewish slaves in Egypt. Only if we had a particular academic interest in the subject would we read any further. It is only by reading Genesis that we understand the significance of these slaves as descendants of Abraham. God had made a covenant with Abraham promising that all nations would be blessed through his line. Knowing this, we can appreciate why God’s preservation of these slaves is of interest as we see how his unfolding purposes are achieved.

## **What sort of literature is Genesis?**

Many readers of Genesis are aware of the considerable debate about whether

the book is God's revelation. Some have suggested that it is a book of myths with little historical basis. I would like to make three preliminary points concerning this.

1. The whole of the Old Testament is built on the book of Genesis, with many references throughout to characters such as Adam, Noah, Abraham and Jacob (known later as Israel). The New Testament also builds on the foundations which Genesis provides and quotes it far more than the Old Testament does. The first six chapters are all quoted in detail in the New Testament, and all eight major New Testament writers refer to the book of Genesis in some way.
2. Jesus himself settles all questions concerning its historicity by his frequent references to the characters of Genesis as real people and the events as real history. Jesus regarded the account of Noah and the Flood as an historical event. He also claimed to be a personal acquaintance of Abraham. John's Gospel records his words to the Jews: 'Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.' Later he said, '...before Abraham was born I am.' John also reminds us in his Gospel that Jesus was there at the beginning of time. When Jesus was asked about divorce and remarriage, he referred his questioners to Genesis 2 and told them they would find the answer there. If Jesus believed that Genesis was true we have no reason to do otherwise.
3. The apostle Paul's theological understanding assumes that Genesis is historically true. In Romans 5 he contrasts Christ's obedience with Adam's disobedience, explaining the results in life for the believer. This point would have no meaning if Adam had not been a real historical figure.

### **If Genesis is not true, neither is the rest of the Bible**

Such considerations do not have implications for Genesis alone. If we do not accept that Genesis is true, it follows that we cannot rely on the rest of the Bible. As we have already noted, so much of the Bible builds on the foundational truth in Genesis. If Genesis is not true, then 'chance' is our creator and the brute beasts are our ancestors. It is not surprising that this book has been more under attack than any other book in the entire Bible.

There are two prongs to the attack: one is scientific and the other spiritual. We will examine aspects of the scientific attack when we look at the contents of Genesis in more detail later. For now we merely need to note the claim that many

of the details included in the early chapters do not square with modern science – details such as the age of the earth, the origin of man, the extent of the Flood and the age of people before and after the Flood.

Behind the scientific attack, however, it is possible to discern a satanic attack. The devil hates most the two books in the Bible which describe his entrance and his undignified exit: Genesis and Revelation. He therefore likes to keep people from believing the early chapters of Genesis and the later chapters of Revelation. If he can persuade us that Genesis is myth and Revelation is mystery, then he knows he can go a long way towards destroying many people's faith.

## **How did Genesis come to be written?**

Genesis is one of five books which form a unit in the Jewish Scriptures known either as the Pentateuch (*penta* means 'five') or the Torah (which means 'instruction'). The Jews believe that these five books together form the 'maker's instructions' for the world and so they read through them every year, taking a portion each week.

It has long been the tradition among Jews, Christians and even pagan historians that Moses wrote these five books and there seems to be no good reason to doubt it. By the time of Moses the alphabet had replaced the picture language which prevailed in Egypt and is still used in China and Japan today. Moses was university educated and so had the learning and the knowledge to compile these five books.

There are, however, two problems to consider if Moses wrote these five books.

### **PROBLEMS OVER MOSES' AUTHORSHIP**

The first problem is quite minor. At the end of Deuteronomy Moses' death is recorded. It is a little unlikely that he wrote that part! Joshua probably added a note about it at the end of the five books to round off the story.

The second, and major, problem is that the book of Genesis ends about 300 years before Moses was born. He would have no problem writing the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, since he lived through the events they record. But how could he have obtained his material for the book of

## Genesis?

The problem is easily overcome, however. Studies made of people in non-book cultures have revealed that those who cannot write have phenomenal memories. Tribes which have no writing learn their history through the stories passed on around the camp fire. This oral tradition is very strong in primitive communities and would have been so among the Hebrews, especially when they became slaves in Egypt and wanted their children to know who they were and where they had come from.

There are two kinds of history normally passed down in this memory form. One is the genealogy, since their family tree gives people an identity. There are many genealogies in Genesis, with the phrase ‘these are the generations of’ (or ‘these are the sons of’ in some translations) coming 10 times. The other is the saga or hero story – telling of the great deeds which ancestors accomplished. Genesis is composed almost entirely of these two aspects of history: stories about great heroes interspersed with family trees. With this in mind, it is easy to see how the book was composed from memories which Moses gleaned from the slaves in Egypt.

Nonetheless, this does not answer all the questions about Moses’ authorship. There is one part of Genesis which he could not possibly have picked up that way, and that is the first chapter (or rather 1:1 through to 2:3, since the chapter division is in the wrong place). How did Moses compose the chapter detailing the creation of the world?

It is at this point that we must exercise faith. Psalm 103 refers to God making his ways known through Moses, including the creation narrative. It is one of the few parts of the Bible that must have been dictated directly by God and taken down by man, just as God clearly tells John what to write in Revelation when describing the end of the world. Usually God inspired the writers to use their own temperament, memory, insight and outlook to shape his Word (as with Moses in the rest of Genesis), and he so overruled by the inspiration of his Spirit that what resulted was what he wanted written. But he gave the story of creation in direct revelation.

A confirming detail is provided when we consider that there was no record of the Sabbath being observed before the time of Moses. We do not read that taking a day for Sabbath rest was part of the lifestyle of any of the patriarchs. Indeed,

there is no trace at all of the concept of a seven-day week. Any time references are to months and years. Since we have Genesis 1 at the beginning of our Bible, we assume quite wrongly that Adam knew about it and observed a Sabbath as a model to everyone after him. But it seems instead that Adam looked after the Garden of Eden *every* day and had time with the Lord in the evenings. Likewise there is no suggestion that Abraham, Isaac or Jacob took a Sabbath, and their work as herdsmen probably offered little time for rest.

All this need not surprise us if, as suggested above, Moses received the first chapter – including the concept of Sabbath rest – from God himself. With this knowledge, he was then able to introduce the Sabbath concept into the life of Israel through the Ten Commandments.

To summarize, then, Genesis is clearly a book from God and should be read with this assumption. It is also a book written by Moses, using his education and gift for writing from his time in Egypt to record the extraordinary works of God as he reverses the effects of the Fall in the call of Abraham.

## **The shape of Genesis**

It is instructive to note the overall shape of the book. The first quarter (Chapters 1–11) forms a distinct unit, covering many centuries and the growth and spread of nations throughout the ‘Fertile Crescent’ (the land stretching from Egypt to the Persian Gulf in the Middle East). The watershed comes with God’s call of Abraham in Chapter 12. The next three-quarters of the book has a narrower focus, chronicling God’s dealings with Abraham and his descendants, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph.

There are other divisions within this overall shape. In Chapters 1–2 everything is described as good, including human beings. In Chapters 3–11 we see the origin and results of sin as man drifts spiritually and physically away from Eden. We see God’s character, his justice in punishing man, and his merciful provision even within this punishment.

In Chapters 12–36 six men are contrasted: Abraham with Lot, Isaac (child of promise) with Ishmael (child of flesh), and Jacob with Esau. We are faced with two kinds of people and asked which we identify with. God is tying his own reputation to three men, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, flawed as they are. Finally the text focuses on Joseph, an altogether different character. We will see later

how and why he is so distinct from his forefathers.

## In the beginning God

Let us turn now to the book itself and to the amazing chapter with which it opens. It begins with the words, 'In the beginning God'.

Genesis is full of beginnings, but it is clear that God himself does not begin here. God is already there when the Bible opens, for he was already there when the universe came to be. Philosophical questions concerning where God came from are really non-questions. There had to be an eternal something or someone before the universe existed and the Bible is clear that this person is God. It is the fundamental assumption of the Bible that God exists eternally, that he has always been there, that he will always be there, and that he is the God who is. His very name, 'Yahweh', is a participle of the Hebrew verb 'to be'. An English word which conveys the nature of God contained in the word 'Yahweh' is 'always': he has always been who he is and will always be just the same.

While we do not need to explain the existence of God, we do need to explain the existence of everything else. This is the very opposite of modern thinking, which looks around at what is there and assumes that we need to prove the existence of God. The Bible comes at the question from the other direction and says that God was always there and we have to explain now why anything else is there.

Certainly when Moses was writing, every Hebrew knew that God existed. He had rescued his people out of Egypt, divided the Red Sea and drowned the Egyptian army, so their personal experience told them that God was there. Further 'proof' was unnecessary.

## The need for faith

The New Testament suggests a useful approach to considering God which will help us in our reading of Genesis. In Hebrews 11 we read two things about creation. First that it is 'by faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible'. Then, a little later in the same chapter, we read that 'anyone who comes to him

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