



# SETTING THE SCENE

## Introduction to Understanding the Bible

### A. WHY A BIBLE OVERVIEW?

D.L. Moody once said that he had never met a useful Christian worker who did not have a good grasp of the Word of God. The Bible itself tells us that it is God-breathed and is therefore profitable for a wide range of practical purposes (2 Timothy 3:16-17). If we are to be effective servants, we must learn to handle it correctly (2 Timothy 2:15).

Our aim in this first section is to explain how this Bible overview is put together and can hopefully help you in your Christian life and ministry. Remember that to some extent all ministry is the ministry of the Word of God – you can only minister what you know! The course is not exhaustive. The *Learn2Lead* team hope that once you have gone through it your appetite will be whetted for further more detailed study.

### **Overall we shall be attempting to help you gain four things:**

- 1** An understanding of the Bible as a book with different types of literature.
- 2** A feeling for the flow of biblical history.
- 3** The big picture of God's plan focusing on Jesus Christ.
- 4** The ability to draw practical lessons from the Bible for today. In doing this we must avoid the danger of reading about the Bible, but never reading the Bible for ourselves.



*Have you ever read through the whole Bible from beginning to end?*

Why not begin today? Make it a commitment in doing this overview. You will need to plan for about 80 hours of reading time.

## B. THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

Without doubt the Bible is the most remarkable book ever written. In its present version it contains 66 books, written by 40 authors over a period of about 1400 years. It is divided into two broad sections: the Old Testament (written mostly in Hebrew with a few passages in Aramaic) and the New Testament (written in Greek).

The authors included people drawn from all walks of life and although hundreds of years old, the Bible is still widely read today. As far as literature is concerned it can be divided into several types:

- **Law:** First five books are known as the Torah or Pentateuch.
- **History:** In some senses the whole of the Bible is historical since it is set in the real world. Most books have some reference to historical events, but certain of them are written specifically to record history. See especially Genesis, Exodus, Joshua to Esther, the New Testament Gospels and Acts.
- **Poetical or Wisdom:** These include the Old Testament books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon. Prophecy Five books of the Old Testament major prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Daniel and Ezekiel); twelve minor prophets (Hosea to Malachi) and the New Testament book of Revelation.
- **Gospels:** Probably the best-known Bible books, they tell the story of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. Yet they are designed not just to record the events, but to explain the truth that lies behind them.
- **Letters:** Twenty one of them written by the apostles (13 by Paul) to the Early Churches and individual Christians. They develop further the teaching of the Gospels.

When studying an individual book from the Bible, it is important to take note of the type of literature that it belongs to since this will often determine the way that it should be understood and interpreted.

Although the 66 books (39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament) are complete in themselves, the unity of the whole Bible as God's message must never be lost sight of. It is very important to realise that the Bible does not comprise of two separate sections "Old" and "New", but is one book.

*"The New is in the Old concealed. The Old is in the New revealed"*

The New Testament does not replace the Old Testament, instead it completes the story. It is important to grasp that since one in every three New Testament verses quote the Old Testament, it follows that the New Testament cannot be understood without knowing the Old Testament.



*What are the dangers in just reading the New Testament?*

### C. THE BIBLE AS HISTORY

Since the Bible is written within the framework of human history it is vital that we understand how the various books fit within this framework. Only in this way can we hope to grasp their purpose and meaning.

We have already seen that the arrangement of our Bibles is due largely to a literary rather than a historical framework. For a better and more complete understanding we need to be able to put the books into a chronological order.

Look at the Old Testament time line on page 15. Whenever studying an Old Testament book we should mentally locate it historically on this chart. Since the Bible is historical, history involves place and so geography is also a key ingredient to understanding the Bible. A good Bible atlas should be obtained and studied. The land of Canaan, Palestine or Israel is the key to the story.



*Why does knowing when and where a book is written help you to understand it better?*

### D. THE BIBLE AS THEOLOGY

In reading and studying the Bible it is possible to get so immersed in the literary and historical details that we lose sight of the “big picture”. At the end of the day the most important thing in a Bible overview is to ensure that its overall message as God’s revelation to human beings is grasped and understood. It should be no surprise to us that the one central theme of the whole Bible is Jesus Christ and God’s plan of salvation through Him.

Without forgetting what we have learnt about the literary and historical settings of the Bible books and passages, we must always attempt to locate the specific section of the Bible we are studying within the overall theme. **Biblical theology** is the study of how God has slowly revealed the truth of Jesus Christ over the centuries. **Systematic theology** draws together the whole of the Bible’s teaching on a particular theme. This approach is used in the **Understanding Doctrine** Track in the second volume of *Learn2Lead*.

We can therefore expect to see Christ in all the Scriptures, although we must understand that in the Old Testament there is only a shadow of what is to come in the New Testament.



Whenever you see this symbol in the rest of the Bible overview you will know that we want you to be aware of the big picture. You will find it in the Old Testament sections (studies 1-6). When we come to the New Testament we will soon discover that everything is dominated by Jesus Christ.

This theme is too big to deal with in detail here, but it may help to begin to consider the following questions:



*In God's purposes which comes first – Revelation 21 and 22, or Genesis 1 and 2? Did God make a physical creation as a picture of the spiritual one? Did the beginning point to the end? Note some of the connections between the first and the last two chapters of the Bible.*



*Who was the first man in God's purposes? Adam or Christ? Was Adam made in Christ's likeness or Christ in Adam's?*

To understand biblical theology it is necessary to look at the **covenants** God made with Adam (Genesis 3:15); Noah (Genesis 9); Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3; 13:14-17; 15:1-18 and 17:1-8); Moses and the Jewish nation (Exodus 19:3-8 and Deuteronomy 30:1-20) and David (2 Samuel 7:14-17). They point to the coming Christ who as the promised seed will bring blessing to the whole earth through the fulfilment of God's holy law and as king over God's eternal kingdom.



**Compare Jeremiah 23:5,6; 31:31-40 and 32:40-44 with Luke 22:20 and Hebrews 7:22; 9:15.**



*In what ways do the Old Testament covenants prepare for the new covenant?*

It may be helpful to consider this outline:

- **The Pentateuch** describes the “Sigh for the Priest”
- **The Historical books** describe the “Cry for the King”
- **The Prophetic books** describe the “Quest for the Prophet”
- **The Poetical books** describe the “Search for Wisdom and Truth”

Jesus Christ comes as Priest (to fulfil the Old Testament sacrifices); as King (to fulfil all the shadows of the Old Testament Israel); and as Prophet (to fulfil all the declarations of the Old Testament prophets). He is the final and complete revelation of God's wisdom and truth (to fulfil the searchings of the Old Testament poets and philosophers).

Thus in reading the Bible we must always ask how the particular section relates to Jesus Christ and how it fits into the big picture.

## E. THE BIBLE AS PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Throughout this Bible overview the *Learn2Lead* team have tried to help you see how the Bible should be applied practically to your individual Christian life and ministry. You will be encouraged to think of the ways in which the Bible's varied literary approach and vast historical details can be applied to life in the 21st century without losing sight of the big picture.

**F. OLD TESTAMENT TIME-LINE**

