

# The Unfolding Story of Scripture: Part 1

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When I was growing up I was constantly bombarded in Sunday School and in sermons in church with an endless stream of stories coming out of the Bible. I became familiar with key figures like the Good Samaritan, Moses, Peter, David, Abraham, but I never knew that they are all part of one unfolding drama. I did not know if Isaiah came before Moses, after David, before Job, etc. It just never occurred to me that the Bible was one big story.

Gradually it became clear to me that the life of Christ was a story told over and over again in the gospels. Then I realized Paul the apostle came into the picture and wrote lots of letters, but I never got it straight which letter came first. Finally, I got interested in John and the Book of Revelation and I assumed John came last.

But the Old Testament was still a massive confusion. I guess I knew that Genesis started things off but the rest was a trackless wilderness.

In my twenties while at Princeton Theological Seminary, I was assisting in a local church where I taught an adult class. For the first time I got it in my head that it ought to be possible to tell the story of the entire Old Testament in sixty seconds!

Everybody in the class learned how to do it. I'm really not sure what this accomplished for the people in the class, but I know that for me it was very helpful. I began the story with Abraham leaving Ur and going to the promised land; then later being forced

down into Egypt due to a drought; after 400 years then Moses came out of Egypt with the children of Israel; 40 years wandering in the wilderness; Joshua taking the people into the promised land once again; ushering in a period of 400 years of confusion called the judges; the prophet Samuel reluctantly choosing a king; David and all that; the northern tribes break away and get captured by the Assyrians; finally, after 400 years of kings, the southern kingdom is taken off to Babylon and after 70 years about one third dribbled back right up to the date of Jesus' birth, completing 400 years from the end of the southern kingdom.

That's about sixty seconds. In addition over the years, growing up in a missions-minded church, I gained the idea that there were some significant verses in the Old Testament that talked about missions so that it was plain in a vague sense that God always had missions in mind but was apparently waiting for the ascension of Christ to set things in motion.

For example, I actually preached sermons here and there on Isaiah 49:6. The verse seemed plain to me that it was a secondary matter that the children of Israel in bondage in Babylon would get back to their land compared to the importance of sending missionaries to the ends of the earth. Little did I realize for many years that the phrase "ends of the earth" actually referred to the area where they were captives. "It is a light

thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give you for a light to the Gentiles, that you may be my salvation to the ends of the earth." That sounds like a missionary verse, doesn't it? But actually God wants them to witness to their captors - which was probably much more difficult for them than sending missionaries at a distance. In other words, earth was the flat plain, and where the plain ended in the mountains of Iran or Turkey was the ends of the earth.

This radically altered my understanding.

It was probably twenty-five years later

Psalm 67 was another Old Testament reference possibly to missions where in the 7th verse it speaks of "all the ends of the earth shall fear Him".

However, the biggest sea change in my thinking came from Genesis chapter 12 where as we saw in the previous lesson the concept of missions is reiterated five times. All the families of the earth are to be brought into the family of God.

Thus now we have a continuous story running from Abraham to Christ. In the earliest period of the patriarchs,

according to Martin Luther's commentary on Genesis, Abraham was a witness to seven other surrounding peoples.

Then in the period of the Egyptian captivity God had a mission purpose of reaching out to the Egyptians. Who knows what actually happened. Some of the documents discovered in the tomb of King Tut apparently can be found in the Psalms, though that would have been quite a bit later.

The period of the judges was more like the Crusades than it was a witness to the surrounding nations, although there is no question that many of the nations gained a real fear of the God of Israel.

In the period of the kings we see the Queen of Sheba coming to learn from Solomon. We read of the Syrian Naaman coming to Israel to seek the healing power of the God of Israel. We read of Jonah being sent to Nineveh.

Then once again as a result of the Babylonian captivity they are as we have seen in Isaiah expected to be salvation to their very captors.

One missing element in this story is what happened to the northern tribes. We don't know for sure but we do know that in Jesus' day (as Peter put it in the book of Acts) Moses was preached in every city of the empire. Perhaps some of the northern tribal peoples were involved in that kind of diaspora (or dispersion).

So that by mechanisms of going or coming and whether voluntarily or involuntarily, it would seem that God was in the mission business whether

His chosen people fully understood that fact or not.

It seems like today most believers "live and move and have their being" with only the slightest awareness if any at all of the grander plans of God. This is the reason why, after Paul spent three years in Arabia rethinking his understanding of the Bible, he felt he had to refer to God's plan of the ages as being a "mystery."

In doing so he was no doubt aware of his own earlier ignorance of that plan and the general ignorance of his hearers, and he excused them by saying it was a mystery. But clearly it should not have been a mystery. Today it's the same - it shouldn't be a mystery, but it is.

It is terribly unfortunate that the overall purposes of God are either *unknown* or nearly totally *ignored* by believers in the contemporary church. That grim fact is the reason for the importance of a course like this one.

You can go back through the whole Old Testament yourself, and there are glimmers of a larger story at a number of points. One of the clearest is in Exodus 19 where God says to Moses beginning in verse 4,

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. Now if you obey Me fully and keep My covenant, then out of all nations you will be My treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

A clear NT reference to this is in I Peter 2. Peter says,

You also like living stones are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

If you stop right there you get the

impression that the Reformation doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is what is being mentioned. However in verse 9, Peter goes on,

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God *that you may declare the praises of Him* who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light.

This latter statement does not negate the Reformation idea that we all have direct access to God somewhat like priests. But it emphasizes the more important role of a priesthood to *declare the praises* of Him Who called us out of darkness into His wonderful light. In other words the missionary significance of Exodus 19 is clearly preserved in what Peter says in I Peter chapter 2.

This idea of a distinct plan unfolding from Genesis 12 on is fairly easy to establish.

In more recent years I have gained an even larger picture, more difficult to see, and it has to do with events prior to Genesis 12. When you stop to think about it, it does not seem very impelling to suppose that at Genesis 12, with Abraham, God launched an entirely new plan.

What kind of a plan would it be that would unify the Bible not just from Genesis 12 on but unify the Bible from Genesis 1:1 on?

One reason we cannot easily see the connection between the first 11 chapters of Genesis and what follows is because our cultural heritage, for most of us, is the Reformation, a period during which the big issue was how to get to heaven. The Catholics seemed to be saying you work your way to heaven or even pay your way to heaven, while

the Protestants insisted that you must believe your way to heaven. I think that the Protestants by emphasizing belief were more safely right, although their emphasis has often been understood to mean “belief in certain doctrines” not the kind of heart belief the Bible talks about. Of course, the Catholic emphasis on works is not entirely wrong either. In fact, Biblically you cannot separate heart faith from heart obedience. They are two sides of the same coin.

Thus, in a sense, the Protestants gave a better answer to the wrong question, a better way of going to heaven, but the question was not central in scripture. Jesus even went so far as to say “He who would save his life will lose it but he who will lose his life for my sake and the Gospel will find it.” In other words, a better answer to the wrong question or at least to a lesser question.

Back to the point. If Genesis 12 is interpreted to be merely the beginning of a global campaign to get people out of this planet and into heaven, then the earlier part of Genesis does not easily fit in.

However, if, as we saw in the previous lesson, the blessing of God through Abraham actually inducts those who respond into *a kingdom at war*, then we can easily note that that war began with Genesis 1:1, the first defeat coming when Satan seduced Adam and Eve; God struck back with the choice of Noah and the elimination of an evil generation. Then God’s choice of Abraham is seen as another “selectivity” which enables another

new beginning to be played out in the text of the rest of the Bible and the subsequent centuries of the expansion of the Kingdom of God.

Thus, what unifies the Bible is not simply the redemption of humans but their redemption to fight a war against evil. We look almost in vain for reflections of this war in David’s prayers and Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the temple. It is hard not to think that their own salvation from their enemies is the most important thing. God’s concern for “the foreigner” is there but very marginally so.

Meanwhile God’s chosen people are not necessarily the only people on earth who seek His face. His people will both bless and be blessed in their Babylonian captivity. They will regard it as mere punishment rather than an opportunity to witness or an opportunity to gain a clearer understanding of Satan’s continued intelligent opposition, yet witness they did, and learn they did, despite their overwhelming preoccupation with their own situation, their own land, etc.. (Isa 49:6)

In preparation for the next lesson there is one thing to note about the differences between the OT and the NT.

In Genesis Joseph tells his brothers, “You did not send me to Egypt, God did.” This gives us an example of how the OT often looks at things from the point of view of God’s purposes in an event. This statement does not constitute a denial of what the brothers

did. It is simply a different way of looking at it.

Something similar exists in the case of David sinning by counting the people. In 2 Sam 24:1-25 the text has God being the one who “incited” David to do this wrong. The same 25 verses, verbatim, occur in a centuries newer document, I Chron 21:1-25, where the only difference is that this text says that Satan “incited” David to do wrong.

Note that Chronicles was written after the Babylonian captivity took place and it is possible that the Jewish theologians had had their awareness sharpened regarding Satan due to their many years of living in the domain of the dualistic Zoroastrians who acknowledged two equal Gods, one good and one bad.

The Jews rejected the dualism but may have recognized more clearly than before the existence of personal opponent and destroyer of God’s work.

The word *satan* occurs in the OT over 20 times mostly in the sense of “adversary,” but as an evil person only in 1 Chron and Job. When Jesus called Peter a *satan* he was no doubt saying Peter was a *adversary*. Most of the time in the NT the word *satan* refers to an evil intermediate being working to tear down the works of God and thus His reputation.

The result of the Babylonian experience is a striking difference between the OT perspective on evil and the NT point of view, which incorporates in numerous passages the

existence of Satan as a person, something rarely represented in the OT. But that will have to wait until next time. This is merely Part I.