

A book you'll actually read

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A book you'll actually read
On the Old Testament



by Mark Driscoll

On the Old Testament

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Series Introduction

On the Old Testament is part of an ongoing series of books you will actually read. The average person can read these books (minus the appendixes) in roughly one hour. The hope is that the big truths packed into these little books will make them different from the many other books that you would never pick up or would pick up only to quickly put down forever because they are simply too wordy and don't get to the point.

The A Book You'll Actually Read series is part of the literature ministry of Resurgence, called Re:Lit. Resurgence (www.theresurgence.com) is a growing repository of free theological resources, such as audio and video downloads, and includes information about conferences we host. The elders of Mars Hill Church (www.marshillchurch.org) have generously agreed to fund Resurgence along with the Acts 29 Church Planting Network (www.acts29network.org) so that our culture can be filled with a resurgence of timeless Christian truth that is expressed and embodied in timely cultural ways. Free downloads of audio and/or video sermons by Pastor Mark Driscoll on topical issues and entire books of the Bible are available at www.marshillchurch.org.

Introduction

Like many kids, I grew up with a few bits of Bible trivia, such as the shepherd boy David defeating the giant warrior Goliath, and a vague awareness that people such as Abraham and Moses were important, although I was uncertain exactly why. My attendance at a Catholic church was spotty as I grew up until I essentially stopped going to church in my early teen years. Church seemed completely irrelevant to my life. I considered the Bible an outdated book that was more suitable for old scholars than young simpletons like me. I never stopped believing there was a God, but frankly I had no real idea who God was or how my daily life in any way related to him. I lived as many people do and simply tried to be a moral and spiritual person, hoping that God would think I was a good person who lived a good life.

All of that changed following my graduation from high school. As a graduation present, a young Christian woman I was close to named Grace gave me a very nice leather Bible with my name stamped on the cover in gold lettering. It was the first nice Bible I had ever owned. I thumbed through it a few times during the following summer, but considered it to be more of a good luck charm than a source of instruction.

I was living in a fraternity the first weeks of my freshman year of college when I came to the deep realization that the drunken, girl-crazy frat guy life was not for me. In my heart I truly loved Grace, who was attending another college four hours away. I moved out of the fraternity just before my pledge class was arrested, as God in his providence spared me from participating in the crime and serving jail time by mere days. Unsure of what to do next, I found God calling me to himself through a growing appetite for Scripture. It seemed that nearly all of my classes included perogative

comments and conversations about Christianity, and I decided that I needed to determine for myself what my personal beliefs were about Jesus, Scripture, and Christianity.

I was uncertain which church might be safe to attend, and had heard rumors of some bizarre churches and cults that scared me. So, rather than going to a church or campus ministry, I decided to go to the Bible Grace had bought me. Not knowing where to begin, I just started on the first page, assuming that the Bible was to be read like any other book, from front to back. I started with Genesis, where I expected to see God's people living holy, devout lives that would compel God to love them and would give me an example of how to live a good life.

What I read in Genesis actually shocked me. The book seemed to be mainly about the story of one family that descended from a man named Abraham. While God clearly loved and blessed this family, it was far more like an episode of Jerry Springer than I was expecting. Abraham had both a young wife and an old wife, and pimped out his elderly wife Sarah to some king named Pharaoh to save his own skin. Their grandson Jacob was clearly a con man and ended up marrying two sisters. Later, one of Jacob's sons, Reuben, actually slept with one of his father's wives. The great Noah got drunk and passed out naked in his tent like some redneck on vacation. Some guy named Lot also got drunk, and then his two daughters had sex with him so they could get pregnant. In perhaps the oddest plot twist of all, Judah thought he was picking up a prostitute only to later discover that it was his own daughter-in-law; she had pretended to be a prostitute because she wanted to have his baby, which as far as I could tell must have thrown the entire Hebrew trailer park where Genesis took place into a tizzy.

After Genesis, I continued reading the Old Testament only to find that Moses was known to disobey and argue with God, David was an adulterer and murderer, Solomon had so many women living with him that even Hugh Hefner would have blushed, and

other than the occasional person like Joseph, Daniel, or Boaz, most everyone that I had ever heard about in the Old Testament was as messed up as anyone I had ever met.

I finished reading the Old Testament in roughly a month, and although I was enjoying the stories, I was confused about how I should understand them. I had always thought that the Bible was the record of good, moral, religious people and that if I read the Bible I could learn the principles of how to live like them. However, I did not think that having a bunch of wives, sleeping with my mother, impregnating strippers, or being drunk and naked a lot were the application points I was supposed to take from Scripture.

So, I started asking other students who carried Bibles, wore Christian T-shirts, and were open about being Christians about various churches, hoping to find one where I could get some answers about the stuff I had read in the Bible. I had no idea what the differences were between various churches and was afraid of finding myself in one of those places where everyone wears matching white shoes and drinks Kool-Aid in the end. Most of the students said that one church in particular had a nice pastor who did a good job of just teaching the Bible without any weirdness.

I attended that church and was relieved when nothing strange happened, such as someone lying on the platform and twitching like a freshly caught trout or someone passing the plate fifty times asking for more of my money. The pastor, Doug, seemed very normal and humble, and he simply asked us to open our Bibles. His sermon was easy to understand, and he carefully explained each section of a portion of the Bible. After the service I asked one of the students I recognized from a class what the pastor would be teaching on the next Sunday, and she said that he simply taught through books of the Bible, so the following week we'd be in the next section of that Bible book.

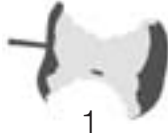
I began regularly attending that church and joined some Bible studies led by that pastor. In God's providence, he had a degree in Hebrew from Trinity Evangelical Di-

vinity School and was very well learned in the Old Testament. He patiently explained to me how the Old Testament is about Jesus and how Jesus came to live the sinless life we could not live, die the death for sin we should have died, and rose to give the gift of salvation that we could not earn. As I learned about Jesus from the Old Testament, my desire to know, love, follow, and obey Jesus grew quickly, and I was baptized as a Christian in that church at the age of nineteen. Shortly thereafter, Grace transferred to my college, and we attended Doug's church together and were later married by him when we were twenty-one. The following year we graduated and returned to our hometown of Seattle because God had called us to plant a church there.

At the age of twenty-five we began Mars Hill Church as a small Bible study in our living room. The rest of the story of that church is chronicled in another book I wrote called *Confessions of a Reformation Rev.*,¹ but the basic gist is that the church attracted many young non-Christians who knew very little about Jesus or the Bible, especially the Old Testament. I began meeting with people to answer their questions just as Pastor Doug so graciously had for me. Many people became Christians and were baptized in our small new church. As the church grew from dozens to hundreds and then thousands of people over the years, I could no longer meet with everyone to personally answer their questions. Instead, I began writing booklets that we self-published in our church for people to read. In these little books, I tried to answer the questions I once had and that people I had met with had asked me. Over the years, our church has given away thousands of copies of these booklets for people to read and give to their friends. Upon seeing these brief books, my friends at Crossway asked if they could publish them, which was a humbling encouragement.

1. Driscoll, Mark. *Confessions of a Reformation Rev.: Hard Lessons from an Emerging Missional Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006.

Subsequently, after some editing, these books are now appearing as the series *A Book You'll Actually Read*. Before we begin answering common questions about the Old Testament, I want to sincerely thank Pastor Doug for being a wonderful first pastor, Grace for buying me my first Bible and being the love of my life and mother of our five children, and the people of Mars Hill Church who have entrusted to me the great honor of teaching them the Bible about Jesus.



Answers to Nine Common Questions about the Old Testament

In this chapter I will answer nine of the most common questions I have both had and heard regarding the Old Testament. Before we begin, though, I want to provide some introduction to the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, because I am writing this book with the assumption that many people who read it will do so because, like me, they are hoping to begin with the basics and proceed from there without getting lost in a forest of untaught assumptions, unknown words, and unexplained concepts. Therefore, before we examine the Old Testament in particular, I want to first briefly explain the entire Bible in general.

The New Testament speaks of the Old Testament as Scripture, for which the Greek word is *graphie*, meaning “writing.” The word *bible* comes from the Greek word for book. *Holy Bible*, therefore, means “Holy Book.”

Our Bible, like history, is divided into the period prior to Jesus’ coming (BC or “before Christ”) and the period following his coming (AD or *anno Domini*, which is a Latin phrase meaning “in the year of our Lord”). The Bible actually contains sixty-six separate books. Thirty-nine books are in the Old Testament, which is a record of time from God creating the world and our first parents Adam and Eve up until the coming of Jesus Christ into human history. The twenty-seven books of the New Testament begin with the four Gospels, which record the life, death, burial, resurrection, and return to heaven of Jesus, and then proceed to instructions to various

Christians and Christian churches about how to think and live in light of who Jesus is and what he has done. In this way, the Bible is really more of a library of books rather than a single book. However, there is unity and continuity between the various books of the Bible and their Old Testament and New Testament groupings. This point is illustrated by the fact that the New Testament has roughly three hundred explicit Old Testament quotations, as well as upwards of four thousand Old Testament allusions. In many ways, the Old Testament is a series of promises that God makes, and the New Testament is the record of the fulfillment of those promises.

The Bible was originally written over a period of roughly fifteen hundred years by more than forty authors in three languages (the Old Testament in Hebrew, with a bit of Aramaic in Ezra and Daniel, and the New Testament in Greek). Authors of the Old Testament include kings, peasants, philosophers, fishermen, poets, statesmen, scholars, and more. Some books of the Bible clearly state their author (e.g., Josh. 24:26 says that Joshua wrote the book bearing his name). Other books of the Bible do not reveal to us who wrote them (e.g., 1 and 2 Kings). Some books of the Bible are deeply personal, so they require knowledge of the author to be fully appreciated (e.g., Lamentations and Nehemiah 1–7 are essentially journal entries). Meanwhile, other books are historical and literary works that do not necessitate an awareness of who penned them.

Regarding its style, the Bible includes historical records, sermons, letters, a hymn-book, love songs, geographical surveys, architectural specifications, travel diaries, population statistics, family trees, inventories, and numerous legal documents. The Bible is very multicultural, as people from varying continents (Asia, Africa, and Europe), periods of history, backgrounds, incomes, and cultures contributed to the writing of its books.

When first reading through the Old Testament, some people are understandably confused because they simply read through the books of the Bible in the order that they appear, only to find that they are not in chronological order and therefore are difficult

to interrelate. This is because our Bible is organized by literary type, much like the books on the shelf at your local library. Therefore, if you would like to read the Old Testament in chronological order, you may want to purchase a chronological Bible so that you can see the timing and relationship between people and events. To help you better understand the books of the Bible according to their literary type, I will later explain each of the Old Testament genres (Pentateuch, history, wisdom, and prophets).

As one reads the Bible, especially the Old Testament, it quickly becomes clear that it includes many records of people, places, and events explained in their historical context. The settings of the Bible range from ancient Egypt under king Pharaoh to Rome under the rule of Augustus. The Bible reveals to us that God is sovereign over history and works in history for individuals, family lines, and nations. What makes the biblical account of history unique is that it does not merely tell us of people, events, and ideas, but it also explains their theological meaning in relation to God. Therefore, the historical record of the Bible is written with the primary purpose of revealing who God is through his work in history so that we can see our lives as inextricably connected to him in every way and only meaningful when understood in light of him.

For these and innumerable other reasons, the Bible is the bestselling book of all time and is available in nearly three thousand languages. However, when you pick up a Bible, while its content will be the same as the ancient version, there are a few differences. The Old Testament was written on papyrus—a form of paper made out of reeds; the New Testament was written on parchments (prepared animal skins). A lecturer at the University of Paris created the Bible's chapter divisions in the early 1200s, which accounts for our current 1,189 chapter divisions. The Bible's 31,173 verse divisions were fully developed by 1551, in an effort to provide addresses (not unlike those on our homes) that would help us find particular sections.

Roughly three-quarters of the Christian Bible is the Old Testament. The Old Testament has 929 chapters and 23,214 verses. The New Testament has 260 chapters

and 7,959 verses. In the Old Testament, the longest book is Psalms and the shortest book is Obadiah. In the New Testament, the longest book is Acts and the shortest book is 3 John.

With this brief introduction to the Bible in general, we are prepared to examine the Old Testament in particular. For many, the Old Testament is particularly difficult to comprehend and navigate because of its sheer size and cultural distance from our present age. To make matters worse, theological giants like Martin Luther and John Calvin never produced a single volume dedicated to Old Testament theology. Meanwhile, the majority of Old Testament “scholarship” during the past few hundred years has greatly undermined the message of the Old Testament; such “scholarship” critiques the Old Testament as a very primitive and naïve spirituality that we should evolve beyond, which only further distances Christians from the majority of their Bible.

Some of the devaluation of the Old Testament may be caused by its very title. The term “old” seems to denote information that is archaic, dated, and irrelevant in comparison to the New Testament. It was the early church father Origen (185–254) who first coined the phrases Old and New Testaments. Prior to this designation, the Jews and early church would have only known what we call the Old Testament as the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings, or the Scriptures. Origen’s confusion came from misunderstanding Jeremiah’s use of the old and new covenants in Jeremiah 31:31. By “new,” Jeremiah did not mean something detached from the prior works of God, but something renewed or fulfilled. Therefore, the new covenant is the renewal or fulfillment of the old.

Likewise, the New Testament is inextricably linked to the Old Testament as its renewed fulfillment. By way of example, God’s people in the Old Testament received saving grace from God in the same way that Christians in the New Testament do, simply by having faith in God’s promises that Jesus would pay the penalty for sin

through the cross and empty tomb.¹ In an amazing illustration of just how the New Testament is the renewed fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testament, Paul says that Abraham believed by faith that his seed (Jesus) would save him—and this is the gospel or good news about Jesus Christ that Christians today still trust.²

Additionally, the Old Testament was the Bible that Jesus read, believed, and taught because the New Testament had not yet been written. Furthermore, the Bible says that because of studying the Old Testament, “Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.”³

In the pages of the Bible you will read brutally honest accounts of the pain and joy of human life. Most importantly, you will meet One God who reveals himself as “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”⁴ It is this Lord, also known as the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the great hero of the Old Testament. It is he who crushes false gods, heals the sick, redeems the enslaved, lifts up the downcast, cares for the poor, disciplines his people, and powerfully rules over human history with a perfect blend of love and justice.

Finally, as we read the Old Testament we must remember that our position in history is not entirely unlike the Old Testament Christians. They read the Old Testament in faith, anticipating the first coming of Jesus to fulfill the promises of the Old Testament. We now read both the Old and New Testaments in faith, eagerly awaiting the second coming of Jesus to fulfill the remaining promises of Scripture given to his people.

1. For example, see Hebrews 11.

2. Gal. 3:8, 14.

3. Luke 2:52.

4. Ex. 34:6–7.

Having examined the Bible in general and the Old Testament in particular, we will now answer the nine most common questions I have had and heard about the Old Testament.

1. Who Wrote the Old Testament?

This question, in many ways, is the most important question we will answer, because how we answer this question in a very real sense determines how we will answer the remaining eight questions. Therefore, it is very important that we consider this question with the utmost seriousness because in it we are determining our personal opinion of the degree to which the Bible is both perfect and authoritative.

On one hand, the Old Testament is written by various human authors, and it clearly tells us who they were. Examples include David writing various psalms,⁵ Moses writing all but the closing of the first five books of the Old Testament, also known as the Pentateuch or Law,⁶ Joshua writing the book bearing his name,⁷ Solomon writing Ecclesiastes,⁸ Nehemiah writing the book bearing his name,⁹ Daniel writing the book bearing his name,¹⁰ Ezekiel writing the book bearing his name,¹¹ Jeremiah writing the book bearing his name,¹² Isaiah writing the book bearing his name,¹³ and Habakkuk writing the book bearing his name,¹⁴ to only list a few. Other books of

5. For example, Psalms 3:1, 4:1, 5:1, 6:1, 7:1, 8:1, 9:1, and so forth.

6. Ex. 17:14; Deut. 31:24–26.

7. Josh. 24:26.

8. Eccl. 1:1.

9. Neh. 1:1.

10. Dan. 7:1.

11. Ezek. 43:10–11.

12. Jer. 30:2.

13. Isa. 8:1; 30:8.

14. Hab. 2:2.

the Old Testament were spoken by a prophet while a trained scribe wrote down what was said. By way of contemporary analogy, this method is akin to a judge who speaks while presiding over a trial and has a trained stenographer faithfully record every word that he speaks for legal and historical record. For a good example of this kind of Old Testament writing, perhaps the best place to read is Jeremiah 36. Therefore, on one hand the Scripture itself is clear that various human authors were used to record the words that fill the pages of our Bible.

On the other hand, the human authors of Scripture are not the only authors of Scripture. God communicated through the authors of Scripture in a real and miraculous way so that his divine truth could be perfectly communicated through men. The divine and human authorship of Scripture is very much like Jesus himself, who was both fully God and fully man. God the Father chose to work through the humanity of Jesus to reveal himself to us in a manner akin to how he had previously revealed himself to us as God through the men who wrote the Old Testament.

Furthermore, the Old Testament is clear that God spoke through his prophets,¹⁵ and so what the prophet said in God's name was what God said. The Old Testament prophets through whom God gave us the Scriptures state this fact clearly. The phrase "thus says the Lord" is repeated hundreds of times throughout the Old Testament by God's messengers. Other similar statements about prophets speaking by divine authority appear, according to some scholars, as many as 3,800 times throughout the Old Testament. The prophets were well aware that in particular moments of divine revelation given to them by God the Holy Spirit, they were in fact speaking the very words of God himself. In some ways, the prophet was God's megaphone.¹⁶ Therefore, to reject what a prophet had said was to reject what God had commanded.¹⁷

15. 1 Kings 14:18; 16:12, 34; 2 Kings 9:36; 14:25; Jer. 37:2; Zech. 7:7, 12.

16. 1 Kings 13:21, 26; 21:19; 2 Kings 9:25–26; Hag. 1:12, cf. 1 Sam. 15:3, 18.

17. Deut. 18:19; 1 Sam. 10:8; 13:13–14; 15:3, 19, 23; 1 Kings 20:35, 36.

The belief that God wrote Scripture in concert with human authors whom he inspired to perfectly record his words is called *verbal plenary inspiration*. Very simply, this means that God the Holy Spirit inspired not just the thoughts of Scripture, but also the very details and exact words that were perfectly recorded for us as Scripture. Jesus himself echoed this truth when he said that because God gave us Scripture, it could not be broken.¹⁸

The Old Testament itself teaches this by stressing how important the exact words of divinely inspired Scripture are:

- “You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the *words* that you shall speak to the people of Israel.”¹⁹
- “Take to heart all the *words* by which I am warning you today, that you may command them to your children, that they may be careful to do all the *words* of this law. For it is no empty *word* for you, but your very life, and by this *word* you shall live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess.”²⁰
- “Every *word* of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his *words*, lest he rebuke you and you be found a liar.”²¹

Furthermore, when the New Testament reflects back upon the Old Testament, it is very clear that Scripture is unlike anything else that has or ever will be written; it alone is divinely inspired by God the Holy Spirit and perfect, despite the fact that it was penned by human authors through whom God chose to speak. The following New

18. Matt. 5:18; Luke 16:17; John 10:35.

19. Ex. 19:6.

20. Deut. 32:46–47.

21. Prov. 30:5–6.

Testament verses are clear examples that this doctrine comes from what Scripture itself plainly states:

- “The prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.”²²
- “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.”²³
- “No prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”²⁴

Therefore, the answer to the question, who wrote the Old Testament? is that God wrote the Old Testament through human authors whom God the Holy Spirit inspired to perfectly pen his truth. Subsequently, Christians believe that Scripture is our highest authority, or metaphorical Supreme Court, by which all other lesser authorities are tested. Practically, this means that lesser courts of reason, tradition, and culture are under the highest court of truth, which is divinely inspired Scripture. During the Protestant Reformation, the slogans *sola Scriptura* and *prima Scriptura* became popular

22. 1 Peter 1:10–12.

23. 2 Tim. 3:16–17.

24. 2 Peter 1:20–21.

to summarize this conviction; they mean Scripture alone is our highest authority. This should not be confused with *solo Scriptura*, which is the erroneous belief that truth is only to be found in Scripture and nowhere else. Scripture itself tells us that God reveals truth to us in such things as creation and our conscience, but that the beliefs we may subscribe to from such forms of lesser revelation are to be tested by Scripture. The Old Testament models this for us when it does occasionally quote other books such as the book of Jashar²⁵ and the Book of the Wars of the Lord.²⁶ In quoting them, the Bible is not saying that they should be included as sacred Scripture, but rather that they do contain some helpful truth. Practically speaking, this means that a mechanic, doctor, or computer programmer may not consult Leviticus to turn a brake drum, perform open heart surgery, or make an addition to a Linux program, but these experts do possess some helpful truths that, if not forbidden or contradicted by Scripture, are to be gladly received for our benefit.

Having established that Scripture is our highest and most perfect authority and source for truth, we will now examine how the Old Testament speaks of itself.

2. What Does the Old Testament Say about the Old Testament?

The Old Testament often speaks of itself in terms that are both truthfully authoritative and practically helpful. These self-revealing statements are incredibly important because if the Old Testament itself does not say that it is true or helpful, then we have no grounds to claim such things ourselves. The Old Testament does indeed have much to say about itself: it is a perfect guide for our life,²⁷ altogether pure,²⁸

25. Josh. 10:13; 2 Sam. 1:18.

26. Num. 21:14.

27. Prov. 6:23.

28. Pss. 12:6; 119:140.

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“Simply and superbly written! Mark Driscoll has given us tools that can be placed in the hands of a skeptic or seeker, a new believer or mature saint.”

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MARK DRISCOLL is the founding pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle, one of the fastest-growing churches in America. He is president of the Acts 29 Church Planting Network and is the author of several books, including *Vintage Jesus*.

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