

St James & St Christopher

The Old Testament Explained

1. The Pentateuch (Genesis to Deuteronomy)

The beginning of Genesis describes how God creates the heavens and the earth and the first man and woman called Adam and Eve. God creates human beings good and in the 'image of God', but they disobey him. As a result, the human race becomes separated from God. Eventually, God decides to send a flood to destroy everyone except Noah and his family because human wickedness has become so great. Noah and his family are saved along with the animals because they are kept safe in the ark that Noah has built. God promises new hope for the future with the three 'patriarchs', Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God makes a promise to Abram, later called Abraham, that he is going to be the father of a great nation, that his name will be great, and that all nations will be blessed through him. Progress towards this promise seems to be made when Jacob has twelve sons, whose descendants later become the twelve tribes of Israel. At the end of the book of Genesis, Jacob's children live safely in Egypt. By the time the book of Exodus begins, God needs to help the descendants of Jacob because they are now slaves in Egypt. In order to rescue them, God calls Moses to lead his people to freedom. The people escape from Egypt on the night of the 'Passover' and God later gives Moses the Ten Commandments. Deuteronomy ends as Moses dies and God appoints Joshua to succeed him as leader.

2. The Historical Books (Joshua to Esther)

The historical books begin with Joshua leading the people into the 'promised land'. After Joshua dies, God raises up 'judges' to rule the tribes of Israel. This period of time is chaotic and we are regularly reminded that, 'there was no king in Israel, everyone did what was right in their own eyes.' The last judge is Samuel who anoints the first king of Israel called Saul. However, God chooses David instead to be a King 'after his own heart' because Saul is not faithful. God makes a promise to David that his kingdom and his throne will last forever. Under King David, the Israelites have a time of peace and success. When David dies, Solomon becomes King and God grants him wisdom. During Solomon's reign, the first Temple is built in Jerusalem and sacrifices for sin are offered to God there. Things change dramatically when Solomon dies and the ten northern tribes, known as Israel, divide from the two southern tribes, known as Judah, and there is conflict for many years. In the end, God sends all the tribes into captivity. Despite this setback, some of the prophets announce that God will one day allow the people in Babylon to return to their homeland. Eventually, the people do return and a second Temple is built to make sacrifices for sin and offerings to God once again. By

now things have improved, but God's promises to Abraham, to David, and to others, still seem to be incomplete.

3. The Wisdom Material (Job to Song of Songs)

The Psalms are poetry that contain many different types of mood and are sometimes happy, sad, angry, downcast, hopeful, or full of celebration. The Psalms show us how life is different when we trust in God. Psalm 14 tells us, 'The fool says in his heart "There is no God.", but Psalm 144 says, 'blessed are the people whose God is the Lord.' The book of Proverbs contains practical advice on how to live well and constantly compares the behaviour of the wise person to the behaviour of the fool. Job is a story about a man who is tested by losing everything and the Song of Songs is poetry between two lovers. The book of Ecclesiastes searches for meaning in a confusing world and questions whether any sense can be found in a world full of contradictions.

4. The Major Prophets (Isaiah to Daniel)

The Major Prophets are given their name because they are generally longer than the Minor Prophets. The Prophets warn the people that God will bring judgement when they disobey him and call them to return to God and obey his laws. They remind the people that they belong to God and that murder, adultery, theft, dishonesty, greed, and other sins are against God's will. The Prophets recognise that this behaviour is the result of not putting God first or 'idolatry'. It is perhaps not surprising that the prophets receive very rough treatment and are often unpopular. Along with calling the people to repent, the prophets also look forward to a future day when God will restore everything. The Prophets look to the future when all nations will be blessed through Abraham as God promised and when the promise to David will finally bring a king who rules an everlasting kingdom.

5. The Minor Prophets (Hosea to Malachi)

The Minor Prophets are shorter than the Major Prophets, but they contain a similar message. They declare that God is coming to judge the world, bring justice, and set his people free to worship and serve him. Micah announces that a ruler over Israel will come from Bethlehem and the last book of the Old Testament promises that one day the Lord himself will come to his Temple.

The Old Testament tells the story of creation and God's people. It contains 39 books that divide into five sections.