

# The Bible

The Bible is the world's best-selling book. It has been translated into more languages than any other book in history. And it has been honored over the ages as a unique book—a book given by God Himself, containing a timeless message for all human beings, everywhere. Other religions have sacred books. But none compares with the Bible. It is a unique book. This collection of 66 works by many different authors, written and compiled over a span of some 1,600 years, is the only book that can support a claim to have been inspired by God Himself. It is the only book that accurately conveys the message God intends to communicate to humanity—and to you and me. How important, then, that you and I read Scripture carefully and intelligently. How important that we have some grasp of how each of the over 1,100 chapters of the Bible fits into the whole. How important to sense the contribution each chapter makes to our understanding of God, and to deepening our relationship with Him.

## A Word from God

The prophets and writers whose works are recorded in our Bible were convinced of one thing. Their message was not of their own invention. What they communicated was the very Word of God.

Affirmations like these lead us to see Scripture in a unique light. The Bible is not speculation, but revelation. It is not simply inspiring, but inspired. As such the Bible is an authoritative word from God, and has been recognized as authoritative by believers from the beginning.

### **Revelation**

Hebrew and Greek words translated “revelation” mean “to uncover, expose, disclose, or make known.” According to Scripture, God has made known information that mankind needs to know, and has also made Himself known to us in that information, and in the person of Jesus Christ. Key Verse: “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him—but God has revealed it to us by His Spirit” ( *1 Cor. 2:9–10* ).

While this high view of the Bible is the traditional one, held by believers since the beginning, the past century has seen the emergence of other views. Some suggest that the Bible is simply a record of man's search for God, not of God's revelation to man. In this view Scripture is no more than an account of the efforts of religious people to probe ultimate questions. Another contemporary view holds that the Bible is a report of human experience with God. The human authors struggled to put what they experienced into words, and often adopted miraculous language to describe rather ordinary events. God thus didn't really free Israel from slavery by a series of miraculous acts. But the Israelites found freedom so wonderful that they used the language of miracles to express their awe. An even newer view holds that most of the Old Testament is a reconstruction of Israel's history by a Jewish priestly class that wanted support for its superior social position in postexilic society. In the same way, the Gospels are supposed to be a reconstruction by the church leaders of Jesus' life, intended to support their notion that the simple rabbi from Nazareth was divine.

These and other theories, which in effect rob Scripture of its authority, fall short in many ways. First, they rest on speculation, without sound historical support. In contrast, archeological finds have consistently shown not only the details of Scripture but also the broad portrayals of ancient cultures to be stunningly accurate. Second, the notion that Scripture is a human invention collapses when tested by prophecy. Scores of detailed predictions, often made hundreds or even thousands of years before the event described, make clear a supernatural source. As God says through Isaiah, “I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times what is still to come” ( *Isa. 46:9–10* ). When we add to this the internal consistency of the Bible, despite its many writers who lived at different times and places, and the testimony of millions whose lives have been transformed by this Book of books, the truth is utterly clear. The Bible is the Word of God. It is completely reliable, and is vitally relevant to our lives.

And so, again, we see why it is so important to have a grasp of every chapter of the Bible, rather than simply know more familiar parts. The Scripture in its entirety is the Word of God, and in every part God speaks to us as His people.

## What's in the Bible?

The Bible is a rich, complex book. It reflects the personalities of the writers and the literary styles of their times. It contains historical narrative, poetry, philosophy, pithy proverbs, prophetic denunciation, instruction and teaching, sermons and exhortations, predictions concerning the future, and grand apocalyptic visions. The Bible reports God's momentous interventions in history, introduces us to saints and sinners, and provides instruction in godly living. The Bible explains the origin of the universe, affirms the uniqueness of mankind, accounts for the presence of evil and suffering in our world, unveils the future, and in its exalted revelation of God calls us to faith. In Scripture we are confronted with our own imperfection, our sins, and the fleeting nature of our days on earth. Yet through Scripture we come in contact with a God of power and wisdom, of love and justice. Through Scripture we sense His overwhelming compassion for the lost, His awesome and costly commitment to our salvation, and the wonder of His invitation to us to become children of God through faith in Christ. No more wonderful, no more important volume has ever been produced.

No wonder we want to read the Bible with understanding. No wonder we want to know the message of every chapter of the wonderful Word of God!

## **THE BIBLE: A LIBRARY OF BOOKS ABOUT GOD**

### **THE OLD TESTAMENT BOOKS**

#### **Narrative:** Books that Relate Israel's History

- Genesis (Creation story: ?)  
(Abraham's family: 2165–1885 B.C.)
- Exodus (Deliverance: 1446 B.C.)
- Leviticus (Worship instruction: 1445 B.C.)
- Numbers (Wilderness wandering: 1445–1406 B.C.)
- Deuteronomy (Moses' last sermons: 1406 B.C.)
- Joshua (Conquest of Canaan: 1406–1385? B.C.)
- Judges (Years of Apostasy: 1375?-1043 B.C.)
- 1–2 Samuel (The monarchy established: 1043–970 B.C.)
- 1–2 Kings (Monarchy to Babylonian Captivity: 970–586 B.C.)
- 1–2 Chronicles (Monarchy to Babylonian Captivity: 970–586 B.C.)
- Ezra (Return from Captivity: 538–455 B.C.)
- Nehemiah (Rebuilding Jerusalem: 446–430 B.C.)

#### **Wisdom Literature:** Practical Advice for Godly Living

- Proverbs = Principles learned from experience (O.T. period)

#### **Worship Literature:** Guidance for Public and Private Worship

- Psalms Personal experience with God (O.T. period)

#### **Prophets:** Call to Repentance and Visions of the Future

- Isaiah (Early 8th century B.C.)
- Jeremiah (Early 6th century B.C.)
- Lamentations (Early 6th century B.C.)
- Ezekiel (Early 6th century B.C.)
- Daniel (Mid 6th century B.C.)
- Hosea (Mid 8th century B.C.)
- Joel (Late 9th century B.C.)
- Amos (Early 8th century B.C.)
- Obadiah (Date unknown)
- Jonah (Early 8th century B.C.)
- Micah (Mid 8th century B.C.)
- Nahum (Late 7th century B.C.)
- Habakkuk (Late 7th century B.C.)
- Zephaniah (Late 7th century B.C.)
- Haggai (Late 6th century B.C.)
- Zechariah (Late 6th century B.C.)
- Malachi (Early 5th century B.C.)

#### **Biography:** Stories of Bible People

- Ruth (1100 B.C. ?)
- Esther (477 B.C. ?)

#### **Philosophy:** Examining Life's Ultimate Concerns

- Job Why do the godly suffer? (2100 B.C. ?)
- Ecclesiastes What gives life meaning? (935 B.C. ?)
- Song of Songs Celebrating sexuality (925 B.C. ?)

### **THE NEW TESTAMENT BOOKS**

#### **The Gospels:** Four Portraits of Jesus Christ's Life on Earth (A.D. 4–33)

- Matthew Jesus as the promised Messiah of the O.T.
- Mark Jesus as the One busy doing God's work.
- Luke Jesus as an ideal human being.
- John Jesus as the eternal Son of God, become man.

#### **Narrative History:** The Early Years of Christ's Church

- Acts The spread of the church through the Roman Empire (A.D. 33–60)

#### **Epistles:** Letters Instructing Young Churches in Christian Faith and Life, Written between A.D. 40–90

##### **Letters by Paul**

- Romans The Gospel and righteousness.
- 1 Corinthians Solving relationship problems.
- 2 Corinthians Principles of spiritual leadership.
- Galatians Salvation by faith alone.
- Ephesians The church as Christ's living body.
- Philippians Keys to joy in the Christian life.
- Colossians Dynamic spirituality explained.

##### **More Letters by Paul**

- 1 Thessalonians Missionary ministry and our hope.
- 2 Thessalonians Christ's second coming.
- 1 Timothy Guidance for a young minister.
- 2 Timothy Guidance for dealing with false teachers.
- Titus Guidance for another young leader.
- Philemon An appeal for a runaway slave.

##### **Letters by Other Leaders of the Early Church that**

###### **Explain Christian Faith and Life**

- Hebrews Christ fulfills the Old Testament faith.
- James Living the life of faith every day.
- 1 Peter Christian suffering and submission.
- 2 Peter Scoffers and Christ's second coming.
- 1 John Love and obedience in Christian life.
- 2–3 John Personal letters of encouragement.
- Jude A warning against false teachers.

##### **Prophecy:** An Apocalyptic Vision of History's End and God's Final Judgment of Sinful Humanity

- Revelation Final judgment and eternity described.

### **Preserved, for Us to Read**

The earliest parts of the Bible were written some 3,400 years ago! And it is certain that traditions and possibly documents included in Scripture go back another 400 or 500 years. How can we have confidence in such an old book? Wouldn't corruptions have distorted the original text? However wonderful it might be to have a Word from God today, what basis is there for assuming that what we read in our English versions accurately relates God's message?

The story of the transmission and translation of the Bible is an exciting one, and confirms our confidence in Scripture. The people of Israel from the first looked on the first books of the Bible as God's inspired Word, and were careful to preserve it. Scribes took pains to copy the text accurately, even counting the letters in each line, on each page, and in each book, to make sure that the middle letter was the same as in the original. For hundreds of years the earliest text of the Old Testament available was copied in about A.D. 1100. Then, with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, texts of Old Testament books dating as early

as 200 B.C. —some 1,300 years older!—were found. When compared, scholars discovered that these texts were virtually identical. And none of the changes that did creep in over that awesome span of years made any material difference in the meaning or message of the books! Similarly one well-respected New Testament scholar has estimated that all the truly disputed words found in the Greek New Testament could be printed on one half of one page in a Greek New Testament. And not one Christian doctrine would be called into question.

Thus the preservation of the text of the Bible confirms our conviction that Scripture is the Word of God. God not only gave us His Word, but has guarded it, so that today we too can read the Bible, and hear His living voice.

And so read the Bible we must! And what better way is there to read than to read each chapter with understanding. And to apply what God has to say in each chapter to our own lives, so that we might respond to Him in faith and love.

This is the whole purpose of this *Bible Reader's Companion*. Whatever chapter you may turn to in the Scripture, you'll find information to help you better understand what you read, and insights to help you apply what you read to yourself. Ultimately, this is the reason God had for giving us His Word. He wants us to know Him. He wants us to respond to Him—first by exercising a saving faith in Christ, and then by setting out daily to do those things His Word tells us please Him best.

### **The World of the Old Testament**

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Old Testament events are set in the cradle of ancient civilizations, the broad area known as the “Fertile Crescent.” That crescent is anchored in the north in Mesopotamia. It sweeps upward, following the courses of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, and then bends to follow the shoreline of the Mediterranean southward. There it encompasses Canaan, an area archeologists today call Syria/Palestine. The Fertile Crescent continues southward along the Mediterranean into Egypt, and there finds its southern anchor in the rich farmlands that lie along the River Nile (see map on Genesis ).

In the 2,000 years before Christ that are reflected in the Old Testament's story of the Jewish people, a series of great empires flourished in the north and in the south. Abraham was born in the north, when Ur was a rich and powerful city-state. In the centuries that followed, other Mesopotamian city-states extended their power across the north and along the Mediterranean. Among the ancient Mesopotamian world powers that play a vital role in sacred history are the Assyrian Empire of the 700s B.C. , the Babylonian Empire of the 600s B.C. , and the Persian Empire of the 500s B.C. Meanwhile, in Egypt, a series of great dynasties flourished, their power and influence in the Middle East alternately waxing and waning.

Syria/Palestine served as a land bridge between the great powers of the north and south. All too frequently it served also as their battleground. At nearly all times, the smaller states of the area were forced to deal with one or the other of the great powers as they sought to establish their influence in the Middle East, or to dominate the area.

Yet when Abraham came into Canaan around the year 2100 B.C. , the land was at peace. Pioneers from many different areas—the Hittites of the far north, the Philistines from the upper Mediterranean, Hivites, Jebusites, Amorites, and others—had established smaller city-states in fertile Canaan. Each city-state was independent, controlling only a local area. In Abraham's time the populated areas were largely limited to valley lands: the hill country was unsettled, and it was there that Abraham, his son Isaac, and his grandson Jacob lived nomadic lives. They farmed some of the lowlands in season, and as summer's heat dried the grasses there they led their flocks and herds up into the verdant highlands.

Canaan, now known as Palestine, or Israel, is a land of great geographic and climatic contrasts. A belt of low-lying, fertile land lies along its border with the Mediterranean. This meets a range of wooded hills that soar upward to become rounded mountains, dotted with meadow-like valleys that lie below rocky ridges. Farther to the east the mountains fall sharply away into the deep Jordan rift valley. Set like a jewel in the upper end of this valley is the Sea of Galilee, which empties into the Jordan River. That river drops rapidly into a broad valley opposite the heights of Jerusalem and Jericho, which controls the passes leading into the highlands.

This varied topography makes Palestine a land of varied climates and crops. Grain can be grown in the lowlands and mountain meadows. Oranges, figs, olives, and other fruit trees flourish in their own ranges. Grapes thrive, and on terraced hillsides every kind of vegetable and melon can be grown. Truly the land when visited by Abraham was a land of “milk and honey”: a rich, fertile, beautiful, and varied land. It was this land that God promised to give to Abraham and to his descendants. It was in this land that God did plant His people. And it is this land, once so rich and beautiful, that was devastated by centuries of warfare as the descendants of Abraham so persistently turned away from God.

### **A Brief History of Israel**

The Old Testament has two major divisions. The first 11 chapters of Genesis deal with the whole human race, and with questions of origin. There we are told that God created this universe, and that human beings are special within it. There we learn of the Fall which introduced sin into the world, of judgment, and of the hope of redemption. Once these basic themes are established, the Book of Genesis introduces us to Abraham—and the rest of the Old Testament tells the story of this one man and his descendants. Yet the story is important to all of us. It was through this man and his descendants that God chose to reveal Himself to all mankind. And it was through this man and his descendants, the Jewish people, that Christ came to win redemption for us all.

For some 200 years, between about 2090 and 1875 B.C. , the children and grandchildren of Abraham lived a nomadic life in Palestine. Then they moved to Egypt, where the Israelites remained for over 400 years. Originally welcomed, in time the descendants of Abraham were enslaved. As their bondage became more and more bitter, they cried out to the God of their forefathers for deliverance. That deliverance came in the person of Moses, a Jewish child who had been brought up as

Pharaoh's daughter's foster son. Around 1450 B.C. Moses confronted a new Pharaoh, and by a series of devastating miraculous judgments forced the Egyptians to release his people. The Israelites, whose numbers had grown to between 2 and 3 million while in Egypt, were led into the Sinai peninsula. There God gave Moses a Law that called Israel to become a worshipping and just moral community.

Moses and the Exodus generation died before Abraham's offspring returned to Canaan. But their children did return. Under Joshua the Israelites invaded Canaan around 1400 B.C. , defeated the combined Canaanite forces, and established a dominant presence in that land. Yet the story of the next 400 years is dark. The Israelites fell into a pattern of apostasy, followed by domination by foreign enemies, followed by repentance and then relief won by charismatic leaders called Judges. The "dark days of the judges" demonstrate a principle stated when the Law was originally given. Obedience to God's Law would bring Israel blessing; disobedience would ensure defeat.

The era of the Judges ended at last as Israel adopted a monarchic form of government, about 1040 B.C. The first king, Saul, was severely flawed, and failed to honor the Lord. He was replaced by David, a military and political genius who was wholly devoted to God. Under David the territory controlled by Israel was expanded 10 times over. Nearly all the land promised to Abraham was occupied by this generation! David also established an effective bureaucracy, established Jerusalem as the political and religious capital of Israel, and led a spiritual reformation. And God promised David that history's ultimate Ruler, destined to lead God's people to ultimate victory and establish an everlasting kingdom, would come from his line.

The era of David and Solomon was Israel's Golden Age. The great powers in both north and south were weak during the tenth century B.C. Israel not only extended its territory, but dominated nearby nations and controlled trade routes that brought the nation vast wealth. For the first time, under Solomon, Israel set out to sea, in a joint trading venture with the maritime city-state of Tyre, exporting grain and copper smelted for Israel's ore. At home Solomon engaged in ambitious building projects. He constructed a stunning temple to the Lord in Jerusalem, a magnificent palace for himself, and fortified a number of strategic cities. These decades were a golden literary age as well. David reformed worship, and added dozens of psalms to Israel's worship liturgy. Solomon collected proverbs, and wrote the penetrating philosophical analysis of life's meaning found in Ecclesiastes, as well as the delicately erotic Song of Songs.

Solomon, David's son, successfully maintained the kingdom David built. But on Solomon's death in 930 B.C. , the nation was divided into two rival kingdoms: Israel in the north, and Judah in the south. The Northern Kingdom, where a corrupt religious system was established by its first king, was ruled by an unbroken succession of godless rulers. Despite the efforts of prophets God sent to His people in Israel, the apostate nation was ultimately invaded by Assyria and its people taken into captivity in 722 B.C.

*A relief in the palace of Sennacherib shows Assyrian forces attacking the fortress of Lachish in Judah during the campaign which marked the end of the Northern Kingdom's separate existence.*

Judah, ruled by descendants of David, fared better. Several of its kings were truly godly individuals, who struggled against the tendency to idolatry that troubled the Southern as well as Northern Kingdom. Ultimately, however, Judah too descended into apostasy, again despite the powerful preaching of a series of prophets whose messages are preserved in the Old Testament. The end came as Babylon, which supplanted Assyria as the dominant world power at the end of the seventh century B.C. , razed Jerusalem in 586 B.C. and burned the beautiful temple erected there by Solomon.

After the destruction of Jerusalem the remaining population of Judah was deported to Babylon. This period, known as the Exile, or the Captivity, led to radical changes in Jewish faith and life. Prior to the Babylonian Captivity Jewish religion had honored the Old Testament Law, but had emphasized temple worship and sacrifice. Life in Babylon was not hard, but separation from the Promised Land had a traumatic effect on the Jewish people. Intense self-examination led to the conviction that God's people had strayed from His Law. Out of this grew a strong popular movement that emphasized the study of the Old Testament and application of its laws to every aspect of Jewish life. The synagogue was developed as a house of worship and study, and scribes—men like Ezra (cf. Ezra 7:10 ), who dedicated themselves to study and to teach God's Law—began to play an increasingly significant role in Jewish religion.

When the Persian Cyrus overcame the Babylonian Empire in 539 B.C. , and replaced it with the Medo-Persian, he reversed the Babylonian policy of deporting conquered peoples from their homeland. The Jewish people were permitted to return home, and were even encouraged to rebuild the Jerusalem temple! Not many did. Many had settled into a comfortable and prosperous life in Babylon, even as many of the Israelites deported in 722 B.C. had found homes in major cities dominated by Assyria. Thus while the Old Testament's focus is on Judea and Jerusalem, many times more Jews lived in the cities of the East than in the Jewish homeland! It has been estimated that by the time of the New Testament 1 in 5 of the population of Babylon and other Eastern cities may have been Jewish! And 1 in 10 of the population of the Roman Empire in the time of Christ may well have been Jews!

Back in the homeland, however, the little group of some 50,000 struggled to survive. Settled within just a few miles of Jerusalem, in the now tiny district of Judea, the returned exiles succeeded only in laying the foundation of a new temple. Then, 18 years later, exhorted by the Prophets Haggai and Zechariah, temple building was resumed, and the house of worship finished. Jerusalem itself still lay in ruins, until Nehemiah, who had achieved high status in the Persian court, came as its governor to rebuild the city walls. The last historical books of the Old Testament tell of his and Ezra the scribe's struggle to

move God's people to keep His Law. The last book of Old Testament prophecy, Malachi, written about 435 B.C., suggests that those efforts too fell short.

And so the Old Testament closes on a dark note, and yet one of hope. God, who had acted in history past to rescue His people from Egyptian bondage, to bring them into the Promised Land, to judge them when they sinned, and to preserve generations that trusted in Him, must surely act again. Surely God would keep His ancient promises. He would send the Deliverer, the Descendant promised to David, who would not only restore Israel's ancient glory, but would restore all her people to a vibrant and holy relationship with Israel's God.

Through the next 400 years God's people preserved this ancient hope. A hope that suddenly flowered and bore fruit when an angel appeared to a young country woman named Mary, and announced that she would bear a Son whose name would be Jesus. This Son would save His people from their sins and raise up again the fallen royal house of David, Israel's greatest king.

### **Major Themes of the Old Testament**

The history of God's Old Testament people is significant, for in many ways the history of Israel is the record of God's revelation of Himself to humanity. In God's promises to Abraham we meet a God who chooses to commit Himself unconditionally to bless human beings, and who will accept our faith in place of a righteousness we do not have. In the Exodus miracles we see a God who not only can but also will act in history, to break the bonds that hold man captive. In the Law given Moses we see God's moral character, and hear His call to us to live holy and righteous lives. In the sacrificial system that Moses initiated we sense the terrible fact that sinners deserve death—and discover with relief that God in grace will accept a substitute. In the history of Israel we see underlined again and again the truth that obedience leads to divine blessing, while disobedience brings judgment and misery. Yet even in the most corrupt of times God refreshes with reminders of His firm intention to do man good. The prophets who warned of imminent judgment still concluded with bright visions of the future. Jeremiah encourages a people about to be led into Captivity with the message that God has not deserted them, even though they have abandoned God. The day is coming, Jeremiah proclaims, when God will make a New Covenant with the people of Israel (Jer. 31–32). Under the gracious provisions of that New Covenant God's people will no longer stray, for God will give each of His own a new heart: a heart that responds joyfully to Him.

Thus in every way the themes that we can trace through the Old Testament harmonize perfectly with the themes developed in the New. In each Testament we meet a God of love, of faithfulness, of grace. In each we see His deep concern for humankind, expressed in provisions He has made for our salvation and our blessing. And in each we find emphasized the importance of a responsive faith: a faith which relies on God completely, takes Him at His word, and expresses itself in a committed effort to do that which pleases the One we have come to know and to love.

In all these ways, as well as in the Old Testament's promise of a coming Saviour and Lord, whom we recognize in Jesus Christ, the Old Testament is a rich resource for Christian as well as Jew, a foundation document on which we rest our understanding of God, and our faith in Him.

### **Life in Old Testament Times**

Our brief survey of Israel's history reminds us that life in any age is hazardous. Our present generation has lived with terrorism and the threat of atomic war. But each generation of Israelites lived with a similar threat of devastation by hostile nations whose armies lay just over the horizon. Even so, life for most of God's Old Testament people fell into a familiar pattern. Israel was an agricultural nation, a people of the land. There were artisans and small shopkeepers in large cities, like Jerusalem and Samaria. There were potters, leatherworkers, stonemasons, and builders. But there was no merchant class: no venturesome travelers who led caravans to far-off lands, or set out in little ships to engage in trade along the Mediterranean or Gulf coasts. Most of the people in Israel farmed. They built cisterns to catch and hold water on rocky, terraced hillsides, where they grew vegetables and tended vineyards. Or they raised grain or flax on the plains, olives in the highlands, and watched the flocks of sheep and goats that ranged the open lands. Life fell into a repeated cycle governed by the agricultural year: planting and harvest, rainy and dry seasons, a time to reap barley, and a time to reap wheat. A time to press the juice of grapes, a time to press the oil from olives. And, at regular intervals, times to go up to Jerusalem to offer thanks to God, who had given Israel the land, and who in His goodness sent the rains that sustained life.

The men of Israel worked the fields, joined by the women at harvest time. The women carried out the necessary household tasks. They ground the grain to be mixed with a bit of olive oil and formed into flat cakes of bread. They dried the flax, pounded out its fibers, and fashioned them into thread. Or they carded the wool of sheep, twisted it into thread, and from these two materials made clothing for the family. The women cared for the young children, prepared the family food, and in these ways were partners with their men in the family farm or the cottage industry that provided them with a living, with enough extra to bring God a thank offering, and a bit more to set aside for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger in their land.

*Most Old Testament men and women lived in a "four-room house" like the one shown here. Cooking and much of the work was done outdoors.*

The typical Israelite lived in what archeologists today call a "four-room house" (see *The World of the Old Testament*). This small dwelling was typically home for some 6 to 8 persons. Through much of the Old Testament era many Israelites lived in small mini-villages, clusters of 8 to 10 of these dwellings set in the hills around larger towns. Water was collected during the rainy season in a series of cisterns, hollowed out of the ground and sealed with plaster, with the last and largest of the cisterns

dug out under the floor of the house itself. The typical size of the family that lived in such a house has been computed by calculating the amount of water the cistern system holds, and the amount of water needed to sustain an individual through the dry season. Based on the height of the ceilings of these houses, it has been suggested that the typical Israelite man in the time of the Judges or of David was probably about 5 foot 2 inches tall.

It was thus that most of the men and women of the Old Testament lived, far from the center of political and religious activity in Jerusalem, as the centuries flowed. The majority of men and women of that time had as little influence on the great events that shaped their times as you and I do today. Jerusalem was as far away from them as Washington, D.C. is from us, even though men in each capital make decisions that shape all citizens' lives. Yet the ordinary people of old, like us today, were involved in the greatest issues of all. Then, as now, the individual was called to live a godly life: to bring up a family, to do justice, and to seek to influence his society for good.

Old Testament Law distributed responsibility for the society throughout Israel. There was no national police force, and no system of national courts. Local elders heard disputes and criminal cases. Individuals with relevant information were responsible to testify, and elders pronounced the penalties established in God's Law. As long as the majority in a community were faithful to God and to His Law, justice would be done in the land. The Prophet Micah reflects this theme, as he cries out in God's name, "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" ( Micah 6:8 ).

God's Old Testament people often did walk humbly with God. Many an individual resisted the lure of pagan worship to remain faithful to the Lord. They lived humbly, seeking to follow the precepts God had laid down in His Word. They lived in faith, depending on God for the rains that made their land fertile, and for protection from foreign enemies and from natural disasters such as earthquakes and locust invasions. They brought up their children to know and honor God, and they faithfully brought their offerings to Jerusalem, to take part in the great festivals of worship that recalled His past faithfulness, and celebrated His continuing commitment to His people.

As we study the Old Testament we are often impressed with the flaws that corrupted the Israelites, and brought divine judgment on so many generations. But we must never forget that even in the darkest of times, men and women of faith lived out quiet lives, honoring God, and keeping the flame of faith alive. History—even sacred history—reports the great events that shape national experience, and tends to neglect the individual. So even when the text of Scripture draws our attention to these great events, and reveals the dark stain of sin that mars the history of Israel, we must not be misled, or overlook the godly Jews. At all times God has maintained a people for His name. In every era the Old Testament describes there were godly Jews, whose lives of quiet faith testify to God's wisdom and His grace in choosing Israel as a people for His name.

### **Reading the Old Testament**

In reading the Old Testament we need to remember that we hold a very human document as well as the living Word of God. The Old Testament is the story of a people, and of God's work in the history of a chosen nation. Yet it is also the story of men and women of faith. It is the story of heroes and heroines, like Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Deborah, Gideon, David, Esther, and a host of others. As fascinating as that history and its heroes may be, the Old Testament is also a witness to the primacy of faith in God. Looking back we can appreciate the course of sacred history, and understand how God was working through its flow. No single generation of Old Testament believers understood God's overall purposes as we do today. And yet in each generation thousands of individuals never mentioned on the sacred page lived and died in faith, secure in the hope that God was at work, and that He would do His work well.

What an example they are for you and me today. We too are unnoticed by the world, yet vitally important to the Lord. We too can live in faith and hope, and seek to honor God in all we do. And the great truths revealed in the Old Testament, and taken to heart by many of His Old Testament people, will help us to do just this.

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<sup>1</sup>Richards, L. 1991. *The Bible reader's companion*. Includes index. Victor Books: Wheaton, Ill.