

AN OVERVIEW OF THE BIBLE

By

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Introduction

My talk today is intended firstly to give you a view of the Bible as a unique book, secondly to give you a view as to how it was written and how it came to exist in its current form, thirdly to give you a solid view of its historical and textual reliability and finally to give you a brief overview of its contents from what I hope will be an unusual and interesting perspective.

The Bible as a Unique Book

This Bible should be all by itself on your bookshelf. It's a completely unique book.

Firstly It's Unique in its Continuity

1. Written over a 1,500 year period
2. Written by more than 40 authors
3. Written on 3 continents (Asia, Africa, Europe)
4. Written in three languages (Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek)
5. Written in a variety of literary styles
 - Poetry
 - Historical narrative
 - Song
 - Romance
 - Personal Correspondence
 - Memoirs
 - Biography
 - Law
 - Prophecy
 - Parable
 - Allegory
6. Finally and most importantly it is the inspired word of God. An important part of God's revelation of himself to his people.

Secondly its Unique in its Circulation

Its rare to find a best selling book that sells more than 10 million copies. The Bible has sold more than 20 million complete editions and more than half a billion testaments and selections.

The Bible is also unique in its translation. It has been translated into more than 2,200 languages of the 6,500 or so known languages. The Bible should be universally translated within the next 20 years.

Thirdly Unique in its Survival

Although the scriptures (especially the OT) have been copied and re-copied hundreds of times, the accuracy of the Bible manuscripts is unparalleled amongst ancient literature. We shall be returning to this issue later, but suffice it to say for the moment that the Bible has hugely more manuscript evidence to support it than any other ancient piece of literature.

Fourthly, Unique in its Teachings and Prophecy

The bible is full of exceptional moral teaching, which even its critics admit is unique, and sets the highest standards. At the same time it does not disguise the sins and failings even of its heroes (e.g. King David's adultery 2 Samuel 11-12).

Amongst ancient religious writings (including the Koran or the Hindu Veda), the bible is unique in containing much fulfilled prophecy. The time (Dan 9), city (Micah 5:2) and nature (Isaiah 7:14) of Christ's birth were foretold, as were dozens of other aspects of his life, death and resurrection (especially in the servant songs of Isaiah most notably in Isaiah 53). There were also many other fulfilled prophecies e.g. the destruction of the city of Tyre (Ezekiel 26) and of Nineveh (Nahum 1-3).

Unique in its influence on Modern Civilisation

As French philosopher, Rousseau said "Behold the works of our philosophers; with all their pompous diction, how mean and contemptible they are in comparison with the scriptures! Is it possible that a book at once so simple and sublime should be the work of man?"

Indeed our measure of the years, the calendar is measured from the birth of Jesus!

Conclusion

Whilst the foregoing does not prove that the Bible is the word of God, I think any reasonable man would agree that it does establish it as a completely unique and important book. For us Christians it is, of course, the inspired word of God. We are told that it is good for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16). We are also told that it is the sword, the only offensive weapon in our fight against evil, and in this context let us remember that it was the weapon which Christ used against the temptations of Satan (Matthew 4:1-11)

How was the Bible Written

Materials

The failure to recover many ancient manuscripts, including of the scriptures, is entirely due to the fact that they were written on papyrus. Early manuscripts of the OT would have been written on papyrus. Papyrus is made from the papyrus plant, which is really a reed, which grew in shallow lakes in the Middle East. This continued in common use until the 3rd century AD. However, it is a fragile material and only survives in exceptional circumstances. It is a miracle we have the Dead Sea Scrolls to which we shall return later.

Generally, these early manuscripts were produced in the form of long rolls or scrolls. Scrolls were made by gluing sheets of papyrus together and winding the resultant long strips round a stick – the length of the scroll being limited mainly by the difficulty in using it. Some scrolls were up to 144 feet long, but the average scroll was 20 to 30 feet long.

Later manuscripts were produced in Codex or Book form in order to make reading easier. Here papyrus sheets were assembled in leaf form and written on both sides. Many historians believe that the spread of Christianity was responsible for the development of the Codex.

Types of Writing

By the time of the NT longer literary works (including the scriptures) were written in a formal style of writing with carefully executed letters called ‘uncials’. The two oldest Codex manuscripts written in this style we have are the Codex Vaticanus (from around AD 325-350) and the Codex Sinaiticus (from around AD 340).

Greek manuscripts were written without any breaks between words ‘*scripto continua*’ while Hebrew text was written without vowels until the Massoretes added these between the 5th and 10th centuries AD.

Divisions

We believe that the first divisions in the OT were made a little prior to the exile to Babylon in 586 BC. The first five books of the OT (the Pentateuch) was divided into 154 groupings known as ‘*sedarim*’ each of which was deemed an appropriate length for one lesson (they obviously had pretty long lessons). During the Babylonian captivity the Pentateuch was divided into 54 sections called ‘*parashiyyoth*’ which were later divided into 669 sections.

Around 165 BC the OT books known as the prophets were sanctioned. Finally after the Protestant Reformation the Hebrew Bible followed more or less the same chapter divisions as the Protestant OT – these were first placed in the margin in 1330 for ease of reference.

After the Babylonian captivity, space stops were introduced within chapters and still later additional markings were added. These ‘verse’ markings were originally highly variant and were not standardised until around AD 900.

In the NT the Greeks made paragraph divisions before the Council of Nicea in AD 325 – perhaps as early as AD 250. The oldest chapter divisions in the NT originated in around AD 350 and appear in the margins of the Codex Vaticanus. However, these divisions are much smaller than our modern chapter divisions. Modern chapter divisions were produced by Stephen Langton a professor at the University of Paris (and later Archbishop of Canterbury) about 1227 AD.

Verse markings in the NT did not appear until the middle of the 16th century. They first appeared in the fourth edition of the Greek NT published by Robert Stephanus a Parisian printer in 1551 and were extended to the English NT by William Whittingham of Oxford in 1557.

How Were the Precise Contents Decided

Introducing the Idea of the Canon

In theological jargon, this is called the issue of ‘*canonicity*’. The word comes from the Greek root word ‘*kanon*’ or ‘reed’ in English, which was used as a measuring rod. This was first applied to scripture by Origen in the 3rd century AD. He used it to denote ‘the rule of faith’ –

the standard we use to evaluate Christian religious writings. Later the term came to mean a 'list' or 'index'. Now it has come to mean the officially accepted list of books which constitute the bible.

Tests for Inclusion in the Canon

The church did not create the canon, rather it recognised or discovered which books had the necessary quality of inspiration to be included as part of 'the word of God'. The church merely recognised the 'divine authority' which God had given to certain books. The main criteria used were as follows:

1. Was the book written by a prophet of God or a spokesman for God?
2. Was the writer confirmed by acts of God such as miracles?
3. Does the message tell the truth about God (for God cannot contradict himself) when compared with other books in the canon?
4. Does it come with the power of God? That is does it have a power to transform lives and change and convert people.
5. Is it generally accepted by the people of God?

The NT Canon

Here the basic criterion was divine inspiration and the main test for this was 'apostolicity'. For the church was built upon the foundation of the apostles. This does not necessarily mean apostolic authorship, but could extend to apostolic approval.

This apostolic authority derives from a commission from God to the apostles. Thus, for example Paul defends the authority of his teaching on the basis of his commission from the Lord. The importance of this authority was well recognised by the early church, so that Ignatius wrote "I do not wish to command you as Peter and Paul; they were apostles."

The early church had a great need to establish a 'canon' of approved books because of the prevalence of heresy. Some heretics such as Marcion even tried to establish their own competing canon. The first canon comprising all the 27 books currently included in the NT was published by Athanasius in AD 367 in a festal letter to the churches. Shortly after Athanasius, Jerome and Augustine also circulated their own lists.

This 27 book canon of the NT was confirmed by the Synod of Hippo in AD 393. This did not confer on these books any authority which they did not already possess – it merely confirmed that authority. Since that time there has not been any serious questioning of the canon of 27 books.

There were various Apocryphal books such as:

Epistle of Pseudo-Barnabas

Epistle to the Corinthians

Apocalypse of Peter

The Gospel According to the Hebrews

Second Epistle of Clement

The Acts of Paul and Thecla

Epistle to the Laodiceans

Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians

The Seven Epistles of Ignatius

but these never enjoyed more than temporary or local recognition and no major church council voted to include any of them in the NT.

The complete NT canon divided into its appropriate categories is as follows:

The Gospels	History	The Pauline Epistles	The General Epistles	Prophecy
Mathew Mark Luke John	Acts	Romans 1 Corinthians 2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Philippians Colossians 1 Thessalonians 2 Thessalonians 1 Timothy 2 Timothy Hebrews Titus Philemon	James 1 Peter 2 Peter 1 John 2 John 3 John Jude	Revelation

The OT Canon

Some scholars hold that the council of Rabbis held at Jamnia near Jaffa in AD 90 fixed the Hebrew canon, but in my view this is not strictly correct. That council merely 'raised questions about the presence of certain books in the canon' and none of the books which the council refused to admit to the canon had ever been there previously. The council did consider the right of certain OT books such as *Esther*, *Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes*, *Song of Songs* and *Ezekiel* to remain in the OT canon, but although questions were raised no serious wish to remove these books was voiced. Thus, no decisions regarding changes to the books of the OT canon were made at Jamnia.

The OT canon was established by tradition and long usage, certainly no later than 150 BC, and probably as early as the fourth century BC. From that time onwards the Jews were convinced that prophetic voices had been stilled and there was thus no new revelation from God until the advent of Jesus and the beginning of NT times. The last OT books recognised as canonical were Malachi (written between 450 and 430 BC) and Chronicles (written no later than 400 BC). These two books, along with all the other familiar books of the OT appear in the Greek translation of the Hebrew OT canon – which we call the Septuagint – made between 250 and 150 BC.

The Hebrew OT canon was traditionally divided into three parts: The Law (or the Torah), The Prophets (or the Nebhim) and The Writings (the Kethubhim), which in full were as follows:

The Law	The Prophets		The Writings		
	Former Prophets	Latter Prophets	Poetical Books	Five Rolls	Historical Books
Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy	Joshua Judges Samuel Kings	Isaiah Jeremiah Ezekiel The Twelve	Psalms Proverbs Job	Song of Songs Ruth Lamentations Esther Ecclesiastes	Daniel Ezra- Nehemiah Chronicles

This is the same as our OT canon, although the number of books differs because we divide each of Samuel, Kings, Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah into two books and we make separate books for each of the minor prophets which are combined into one (The Twelve) in the Hebrew canon. We have also altered the order of the books.

The canonicity of these books was upheld by no lesser an authority than Christ himself. In Luke 11:51 Jesus said “from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah”. Abel is referred to in Genesis (Genesis 4:8) whilst Zechariah’s death is referred to in Chronicles (2 Chronicles 24:21). Genesis is the first book of the Hebrew canon and Chronicles the last and thus Jesus was affirming the whole Hebrew canon. He also impliedly approves the canon in Luke 24:44 where he said that all things which were written in the Law, The Prophets and the Psalms concerning him must be fulfilled – thus affirming the three sections of the Hebrew canon.

The three-fold division of the Hebrew canon is also affirmed by a number of non-biblical writers such as Philo and Josephus.

There are also various Apocryphal books of the OT. They were excluded largely for three reasons:

- (i) They have many historical and geographical errors;
- (ii) They teach false doctrines that are at variance with the canonical scriptures;
- (iii) They lack prophetic power and religious feeling characteristic of the canonical scriptures.

A brief summary of these Apocryphal books is as follows:

First Esdras
Second Esdras
Tobit
Judith
Additions to Esther
The Wisdom of Solomon
Ecclesiasticus
Baruch
Susanna
Bel and the Dragon
The Song of Three Hebrew Children
The Prayer of Manasseh
First Maccabees
Second Maccabees

Reliability of the New Testament

Here we are speaking not of the inspired nature or canonicity of the NT, but of its historical and textual reliability. Clearly this should be measured in the same way and using the same standards as for other ancient literature. According to C Sanders in *Introduction to Research in English Literary History* there are three tests: (i) the bibliographical test, (ii) the internal evidence test and (iii) the external evidence test.

The Bibliographical Test

This really just means an examination of the textual transmission of the documents which have reached us. That is, because we normally do not have the original documents, how reliable are the copies we have. Here the tests are the number of manuscripts in existence, the variance between these different manuscripts and the time interval between the originals and existent copies.

The NT manuscripts were the most frequently copied and widely circulated books of antiquity. Thus, there is lots of manuscript evidence. All in all, there are 5,656 partial or complete copies in Greek dating from between the second to the fifteenth centuries AD, more than 10,000 Latin vulgate manuscripts and more than 9,300 other early manuscript versions. That makes a total of approximately 25,000 manuscripts of all or part of the NT in existence today.

No other document from antiquity even begins to approach these standards. Homer's Iliad is second with 643 surviving manuscripts and the first complete manuscript here dates from the thirteenth century. If you doubt the textual reliability of the NT then you must throw away all ancient literature as unreliable because no other ancient documents are remotely as well attested as the NT. Sir Frederick Kenyon who was the director and principal librarian to the British Museum stated:

Besides number, the manuscripts of the New Testament differ from those of the classical authors In no other case is the interval of time between the composition of the book and the date of the earliest existent manuscripts so short as that in the New Testament. The books of the New Testament were written in the latter part of the first century; the earliest extant manuscripts (trifling scraps excepted) are of the fourth century – say from 250 to 300 years later. This may sound a considerable interval, but it is nothing to that which parts most of the classical authors from their earliest manuscripts. We believe that we have in all essentials an accurate text of the seven extant plays of Sophocles; yet the earliest substantial manuscript upon which it is based was written more than 1,400 years after the poet's death.

And he also further stated:

The interval between the dates of original composition and the earliest existent evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.

The following table gives some idea of the superiority of the confirmation offered by the NT manuscripts when compared to other documents from ancient times.

AUTHOR	BOOK	DATE WRITTEN	EARLIEST COPIES	TIME GAP	NO. OF COPIES
Homer	Iliad	800 BC	c 400 BC	c 400 yrs	643
Herodotus	History	480-425 BC	c 900 AD	c 1,350 yrs	8
Thucydides	History	460-400 BC	c 900 AD	c 1,300 yrs	8
Plato		400 BC	c 900 AD	c 1,300 yrs	7
Demosthenes		300 BC	c 1,100 AD	c 1,400 yrs	200
Caesar	Gallic Wars	100-44 BC	c 900 AD	c 1,000 yrs	10
Livy	History of Rome	59 BC – 17 AD	4 th cent. (partial) mostly 11th cent.	c 400 yrs c 1,000 yrs	1 partial 19
Tacitus	Annals	100 AD	c 1,100 AD	c 1,000 yrs	20
Pliny Secundus	Natural History	61-113 AD	c 850 AD	c 750 yrs	7
New Testament		50-100 AD	c 114 (fragment) c 200 (books) c 250 (most of NT) c 325 (complete)	c 50 yrs c 100 yrs c 150 yrs c 225 yrs	5,366

Furthermore, there is very good agreement between the texts of the various manuscripts, so that there is little doubt that we have the correct wordings in almost all cases. Dockery, Mathews and Sloane write:

For most of the biblical text, a single reading has been transmitted. Elimination of scribal errors and intentional changes leaves only a small percentage of the text about which any questions occur.

They conclude:

Although there are certain differences in many of the New Testament manuscripts, not one fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith rests on a disputed reading.

Some of the important early NT manuscripts are:

- John Rylands MS (AD 130) – a portion of the gospel of John found in Egypt
- Bodmer Papyrus II (AD 150 –200) – most of John’s gospel
- Chester Beatty Papyri (AD 200) – major portions of the NT
- Codex Vaticanus (AD 325 –350) – nearly all of the Bible

The Test of Internal Evidence

In order to be convincing a document should be internally self consistent. Many have alleged that the Bible is not internally consistent and contains contradictions, but as Dr G Archer writes in his *Encyclopaedia of Bible Difficulties* “As I have dealt with one apparent discrepancy after another and studied the alleged contradictions between the biblical record and the evidence of linguistics, archaeology or science, my confidence in the trustworthiness of Scripture has been repeatedly verified and strengthened by the discovery that almost every

problem in Scripture that has ever been discovered by man, from ancient times until now, has been dealt with in a completely satisfactory manner by the biblical text itself – or else by objective archaeological information.” We must not jump to the conclusion that what has not yet been explained is inherently inexplicable. No scientist would give up so easily. Thus, it was once thought that Moses could not have written the first five books of the bible because writing did not exist in his time – we now know that writing existed 2,000 years before Moses. Further historians used to say that the bible had invented the Hittite people, because they were unknown to historians. Then we discovered a Hittite library in Turkey!

Furthermore, most of the NT writers wrote as eyewitnesses or from firsthand information. This is claimed over and over again:

Luke 1:1-3

“Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye-witnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,”

2 Peter 1:16

“ We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eye-witnesses of his majesty.”

1 John 1:3

“ We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.”

Acts 2:22

“Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know.”

Nor could these writers easily make false claims about such derivation. Many modern scholars now consider that all the books of the NT were written prior to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 and thus the events which they were writing about were within the lifetimes of others also involved. No we have every reason to take the claims of the NT authors at face value as eyewitness accounts of what actually happened.

Tests of External Evidence

There is much supporting evidence from other contemporary Christian non-biblical authors and characters.

Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History* says “[the apostle John] used to say this also, Mark having been the interpreter of Peter wrote down accurately all that he (Peter) mentioned, whether sayings or doings of Christ, not, however, in order

Igantius Bishop of Antioch, who personally knew all the apostles, was martyred for his faith. *Polycarp* was a disciple of John and again followed his faith to martyrdom.

Perhaps even more importantly, there is much confirmation from contemporary non-Christian sources.

Tacitus the first century Roman historian refers to the death of Christ and to accounts of Christ’s resurrection.

Josephus the Jewish historian working under Roman authority makes reference to the crucifixion of Christ and also refers to many other details which confirm the historical nature of many of the events of both the NT and the OT. *Josephus* supports the Protestant view of the OT canon as he lists the 39 books of the Protestant OT as being the Jewish canon. *Josephus* refers to James as the brother of Jesus and confirms his martyrdom at the instigation of the Sanhedrin. He also confirms the existence and martyrdom of John the Baptist. In a passage of disputed authenticity (although it appears in all extant texts) *Josephus* also confirms the resurrection of Jesus.

Julius Africanus (quoting *Thallus*) confirms the darkness which came over the earth at the time of the crucifixion.

The Talmud Sanhedrin 43a confirms the crucifixion of Jesus and the intent of the Jewish leaders to kill him.

Lucian of Samosa and *Mara Bar Serapion* also confirm the historicity and execution of Jesus.

Dr Geisler summarises this external source evidence as follows:

Greek, Roman and Jewish sources inform us that:

- (i) Jesus was from Nazareth;
- (ii) He lived a wise and virtuous life;
- (iii) He was crucified in Palestine under Pontius Pilate at Passover time, being considered the Jewish King;
- (iv) He was believed by his disciples to have been raised from the dead three days later;
- (v) Even his enemies acknowledge he performed unusual feats which they call sorcery
- (vi) His small band of disciples multiplied rapidly and spread widely;
- (vii) His disciples denied polytheism, lived moral lives and worshipped Christ as divine.

It is surely significant that we have confirmation of so much of the background to Jesus' life and the development of the early church from a number of secular sources. Archaeology has also confirmed many details of the NT and especially verified the accuracy of Luke as an historian.

I conclude that the NT we have in our Bibles today is both a textual reliable transmission of the original accounts written by the apostles shortly after the events they describe and an historically reliable account of the events recorded.

Reliability of the Old Testament

The OT has been shown to be reliable in three major fashions:

- (i) the accuracy of the textual copying over time;
- (ii) the discovery of archaeological remains;
- (iii) the discovery of other confirmatory historical documents

The Accuracy of the Copying Process

As with other literature of antiquity, we do not have the original documents, but the accuracy of the Hebrew copyists is astonishing when we compare the OT to other literature of antiquity. Dr G Archer states:

It should be clearly understood that in this respect [transmission], the Old Testament differs from all other pre-Christian works of literature of which we have any knowledge. To be sure, we do not possess so many different manuscripts of pagan productions, coming from such widely separated eras as we do in the case of the Old Testament. But where we do, for example, in the Egyptian Book of the Dead, the variations are of a far more extensive and serious nature.

The accuracy of the spelling of the names of foreign kings, for example, is quite remarkable. R D Wilson says:

The Hebrew Scriptures contain the names of 26 or more foreign kings whose names have been found on [other] documents contemporary with the kings. The names of almost all of these kings are found to be spelled on their monuments or in documents from the time in which they reigned in the same manner as they are spelled in manuscripts of the Old Testament.

As Wilson adds this is not at all usual. For example Manetho's record of the names of the Kings of Egypt made in around 280 BC gives some 140 names of kings of which 63 are so different from those recorded in other sources that they are completely unrecognisable – either due to errors in the transmission of Manetho's text or original errors in copying by him.

Wilson concludes:

The proof that the copies of the original [Old Testament] documents have been handed down with substantial correctness for more than 2,000 years cannot be denied.

This viewpoint is echoed by many other scholars: William Green says "it may be safely be said that no other work of antiquity has been so accurately transmitted." Atkinson (who was librarian at Cambridge University) says "the transmission of the Hebrew text is little short of miraculous."

Even though the OT does not boast the same quantity of manuscripts as the NT, the number of known manuscripts is still remarkable. There are a number of important collections of manuscripts:

Benjamin Kennicott Collection	615 manuscripts
Giovani de Rossi Collection	731 manuscripts
Cairo Geniza discovery	10,000 biblical manuscripts and fragments
Second Firkowitch Collection Leningrad	1,582 parchment and paper texts
Antonin Collection	1,200 manuscript fragments
Dead Sea Scrolls	1 complete OT book (Isaiah) and thousands of fragments from all OT books (except Esther) from 3 rd century BC to 1 st century AD.

The Dead Sea Scrolls are extremely important because they confirm the accuracy of many other manuscripts dated much later, such as the Cairo Codex from AD 895 and the Codex of the Prophets of Leningrad from AD 916. The oldest complete manuscript of the OT is the Codex Babylonicus Petropolitanus from AD 1008.

Between the 2nd Century AD and the earliest complete manuscripts now extant the Jewish copyists worked diligently under strict rules as to materials and methods to preserve the accuracy of the texts they were copying. There was great reverence for the Jewish scriptures, especially after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.

However, the accuracy of this copying process has been fully confirmed by the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. If any bible scholar had been asked before their discovery what would be the ideal verification of the reliability of the OT, he would have said “older witnesses to the original OT manuscripts we have”. Before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls the big question was how accurate are the copies we have today compared to those of the first century AD and earlier. We could not completely trust the text of the manuscripts we then had because they had been copied so many times. The Dead Sea Scrolls have provided an astounding answer for us.

They were discovered by a Bedouin shepherd boy in 1947 when he threw a stone into a cave and heard the sound of breaking pottery. On entering the cave he found numbers of large jars containing leather scrolls wrapped in linen, which we now know date from around 100 BC – the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The Dead Sea Scrolls consist of some 40,000 fragments. From these fragments more than 500 books – including many non-biblical works – have been reconstructed. These include copies of the entirety or the majority of most of the books of the OT dating from more than a century before the birth of Christ.

To see the astonishing accuracy of the Hebrew copyists, let’s consider the book of Isaiah, which has a complete copy amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls. In Isaiah chapter 53, there is only one word in question after 1,000 years of copying – and that does not change the meaning of the text. Gleason Archer says, “In the whole of Isaiah more than 95% of the text is identical with modern manuscripts and the 5% variation consists chiefly of obvious slips of the pen and variations in spelling” These variations do not generally change the meaning.

What an amazing confirmation of the reliability of the OT text in our Bible today.

Various translations of the Hebrew OT (called “Versions”), also confirm the accuracy of the modern text. The best known of these Versions is the Greek translation from the 3rd century BC called the Septuagint (or “LXX”) - so called because tradition has it that the translation was completed in 72 days. It is interesting that the LXX was the version usually quoted by Jesus in the NT and indeed the majority of the 250 citations of the OT in the NT are from the LXX.

These versions were produced because the Jews abandoned their native Hebrew tongue for Aramaic and later Greek. Because the Jews were widely scattered from their homeland, there was a need for scriptures in a commonly accessible language. The most common language amongst these groups was Greek.

The LXX differs from the Hebrew canon according to the quality of the translation and also contains a number of books which were never a part of the Hebrew canon. The quality of translation varies from slavishly literal translation of the Torah to free translation of the Writings. The text of Job in the LXX is one-sixth shorter than in the Hebrew text and there are also large variations in Joshua, 1 Samuel, 1 Kings, Proverbs, Esther and Jeremiah plus

smaller variations in other books. This is probably because the LXX was intended for use in worship services rather than for scholarly or scribal purposes. The Jewish people gradually lost interest in the LXX and it now has little or no significance for them.

To paraphrase Sir Frederick Kenyon: 'It must be stressed that the variations between the LXX and the Hebrew text are differences of translation and interpretation and not of text'.

The accuracy of the Hebrew text of the OT is also confirmed by a number of other ancient sources such as the Mishnah (Hebrew teaching texts from around AD 200), the Gemara (an expanded commentary on the Mishnah (from AD 200 to AD 500) and the Midrash (doctrinal studies of the OT Hebrew text from 100 BC to 300 AD).

Archaeology also supports the accuracy of the OT text, even down to the OT's use of obsolete names for foreign kings only rediscovered by modern archaeologists. Archaeologist Nelson Glueck says "It may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a biblical reference. Scores of archaeological findings have been made which confirm in clear outline or exact detail historical statements in the Bible."

The thousands of Hebrew manuscripts with their confirmation from the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Septuagint and numerous other sources we have touched on provide overwhelming support for the reliability of the OT text. So I conclude with a statement from Kenyon "The Christian can take the whole Bible in his hand and say without fear or hesitation that he holds in it the true word of God handed down without essential loss from generation to generation throughout the centuries."

Since the OT text is related in many important ways to the NT, its reliability supports the Christian faith. This is true not only in relation to establishing the nature and historicity of the predictions made in the OT about the coming of the Messiah, but also in supporting the accuracy of the OT that Jesus and the NT writers confirmed.

Archaeological and Historical Confirmation of the OT

First a word of caution. Even though archaeology has never contradicted the Bible, it cannot (as is sometimes asserted) prove the Bible, in the sense of establishing it as the inspired word of God. The most it can do is to verify some biblical event or fact.

Having said that, archaeology has done much to silence radical critics of the OT. To paraphrase the archaeologist Joseph Free: last century many critics argued that there never was a Sargon, that the Hittites either did not exist or were insignificant, that the accounts of the patriarchs had a late background, that the sevenfold lampstand of the tabernacle was a late concept, that the Davidic empire was never as large as the Bible implies and that Belshazzar never existed. Archaeological discoveries have shown that Sargon existed and lived in a palatial dwelling 12 miles north of Nineveh, that the Hittites existed and were a significant people, that the background of the patriarchs fits the time indicated in the Bible, that the concept of a sevenfold lampstand existed in the Iron Age, that a significant city given in the Bible record of David's empire did exist in the far north, that Belshazzar existed and ruled over Babylon and that a host of other supposed errors and contradictions are not errors at all.

Thus the account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was thought to be spurious until evidence has revealed that all five cities mentioned in the biblical account were in fact centres

of commerce in the area and were situated as the Bible describes. The account of the destruction also appears accurate. Evidence points to earthquake activity in which various layers of the earth were disrupted and flung high in the air and that in this process Brimstone (bituminous pitch) was hurled down on the cities. Evidence of such burning has been found on the top of Mount Sodom.

Upon King Saul's death Samuel tells us that his armour was put in the temple of Ashtaroah (a Canaanite fertility goddess) at Bet She'an, while Chronicles tells that his head was put in the temple of Dagon (the Philistine corn god). This was thought to be a contradiction because it seemed unlikely that enemy peoples would have temples in the same place and at the same time. However, excavations have revealed that there were two temples at this site separated by a hallway, one for Dagon and the other for Ashtoreth. It seems that the Philistines had adopted the Canaanite goddess.

David captured Jerusalem. The Bible says that the Israelites entered Jerusalem by way of a tunnel that led to the pool of Siloam. Archaeologists had thought that was outside the city walls at the time, but excavations have shown that the wall did extend past the pool.

Excavations at Gezer in 1969 ran across a massive layer of ash that covered much of the mound. Within that ash were Hebrew, Egyptian and Philistine artefacts, so apparently all three cultures were there at the same time. This puzzled archaeologists until they realised that this fitted with the biblical account in 1 Kings which says Pharaoh king of Egypt had attacked and captured Gezer. He had set it on fire. He had killed its Canaanite inhabitants and then gave it as a wedding gift to his daughter, Solomon's wife.

Thus as Henry Morris states: "While many have doubted the accuracy of the Bible, time and continued research have consistently demonstrated that the Word of God is better informed than its critics." And the great archaeologist Henry Albright asserts: "There can be no doubt that archaeology has confirmed the substantial historicity of Old Testament tradition."

Sir Frederick Kenyon writes "It is therefore legitimate to say that, in respect of that part of the Old Testament against which the disintegrating criticism of the last half of the nineteenth century was chiefly directed, the evidence of archaeology has been able to re-establish its authority.."

Thus, on the basis of this huge volume of evidence, I conclude that the OT which we have in our Bibles is a textually reliable rendition of the Hebrew scriptures and that it is an historically reliable account of the history of the Israelites.

Thus we see that both the OT and the NT in our Bibles today are reliable renditions of the writings of their original authors and that the accounts are historically reliable, certainly to an extent unparalleled in any other ancient literature. I would, of course also contend that they are the inspired word of God transmitted to us through the hand of the various biblical authors. I believe that the nature of the Bible is rather like the nature of Jesus – which is 100% Man but at the same time 100% God. Similarly, the Bible was 100% written by men but 100% inspired by God.

In general, the books themselves make this claim. As regards the OT – 18 out of twenty four books claim that they are God's words to men and most of the remainder are parts of sections for which this claim is made. Furthermore the writers of the books, Moses, Solomon and the

prophets were men accredited by God and frequently claim to be the bearers of God's word. As regards the NT, the message of Christ – the son of God – transmitted through his disciples is God's voice speaking to us.

I believe that there is much strong evidence that the Bible IS the inspired word of God, but today I just want to look at one piece of evidence – the amazing accuracy of OT prophecy. I am only going to quote two examples of fulfilled prophecy, that of the destruction of Tyre in Ezekiel 26 and that of the coming, suffering and death of Jesus in Isaiah.

Ezekiel predicted that:

1. Nebuchadnezzar would destroy Tyre (Ezekiel 26:8)
2. Many nations would take part (Ezekiel 26:3)
3. Tyre would be made flat like the top of a bare rock (Ezekiel 26:4)
4. Fishermen would spread nets over the site (Ezekiel 26:5)
5. The debris from the destruction would be thrown into the water (Ezekiel 26:12)
6. Tyre would never be rebuilt (Ezekiel 26:14)

All of these prophecies were fulfilled in the conquest of Nebuchadnezzar and the subsequent throwing of the debris into the water by Alexander the Great to make a causeway to conquer an island off the coast to which the citizens of Tyre had withdrawn. It is now an anchoring site for small fishing vessels that spread their nets there. When we remember that Ezekiel was writing some 100-200 years before the events the detail and accuracy of the prophecy is quite astonishing.

The prophecies concerning Jesus contained in the so-called servant songs of Isaiah 53 are quite remarkable. I suggest that you read these for yourselves. However, other OT prophecies in Zechariah, Malachi, the Psalms and other books are also remarkable.

I submit that prophecies of this accuracy and detail would not have been possible **unless** the writers were inspired by God. If the claims of these authors to divine inspiration are upheld, then why should we not accept the claims of the other authors as well?

An Overview of the Bible

Having then looked at the nature and reliability of the scriptural writings, let's now move on to an overview of our Bible, dividing it into a number of different sections according to the kind of literature the various books constitute. As you would expect we shall only have time for a brief aerial overview of each section and indeed our overview of each section will not attempt to be a balanced one. I shall concentrate on particular issues and themes, which I think, are either of particular importance and interest or are often neglected. Perhaps we can cover other issues on another occasion. Let's start with the OT. The OT is very important to us as Christians because Christianity (uniquely amongst all major religions) is rooted in historical fact – the history of God's revelation of Himself to the Jewish people and the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. The OT gives us the background to this final revelation in Jesus and this historical background is essential to a correct and balanced understanding of our Christian faith.

An Overview of the Old Testament

We can divide the OT into a number of different sections according to the kind of literature they constitute. The main headings we shall be using today are:

- Deuteronomical History (including Chronicles)
- Prophetic Writings
- Wisdom Literature
- Other Writings
- Worship

Deuteronomical History

In this section, we can group the following books:

- Genesis
- Exodus
- Leviticus
- Numbers
- Deuteronomy
- Joshua
- Judges
- 1 Samuel
- 2 Samuel
- 1 Kings
- 2 Kings
- 1 Chronicles
- 2 Chronicles

Genesis chapters 1-11 deal with the origins of the universe and the origins of mankind and their focus is universal. This focus changes for Genesis 12 to the end of Deuteronomy where the focus is on God's promises to, his covenants with and election of the Israelites. However, these first five books of the Bible – The Pentateuch – have a great unity. Although it was some time ago fashionable to ascribe their authorship to a number of individuals or groups – the JEPD theory, scholars are now coming back to the view that they were written by a single author and subjected to some editing later. I see no reason to doubt Christ's statement (Mark 12:26 and many other references) that that author was Moses. Indeed fracturing the Pentateuch into separate units greatly dilutes the power of its message.

The Pentateuch takes us to the borders of the promised land. Joshua and Judges then deal with the conquest and subjugation of the promised land. We then see the forging of the Israelite people into a nation, a monarchical state in 1 Samuel and the first part of 2 Samuel, and the golden age of Israel and the gradual collapse of the monarchic ideal through the remainder of 2 Samuel and the first part of 1 Kings. Finally we see the decline of the Israelite nation through the period of the divided monarchy (during which the Israelite people were divided into two nations Israel and Judah), culminating in the conquest and exile of first Israel and then Judah, a story told in the second part of 1 Kings and 2 Kings. Finally, Chronicles gives us a restatement of the Deuteronomic history (especially the events of Samuel and Kings) from a different perspective with much emphasis on the spiritual and theological lessons to be learnt from it.

However, the overwhelming theme of the Deuteronomic history is that of God's fundamental relationship to the creation in the prologue of Genesis 1-11 – is God's patient endurance exhausted? The remainder of the Deuteronomic history has the theme of promise (of a special relationship with God), election (as God's special people), deliverance (from slavery in Egypt), covenant (made freely with God with solemn promises to God) and rebellion (failure to obey the covenant promises) followed by repentance and forgiveness.

Genesis 1-11

Lets go back to the beginning, the primeval prologue of Genesis 1-11.

I don't believe that the first two chapters of Genesis should be read as a scientific account of creation, but I *do* strongly believe that they should be read as affirming God as the creator of everything which exists in our universe (including mankind). Apart from any scriptural affirmation, the necessity for a creator and designer God is expressed in so many aspects of our universe, particularly in the nature of life and indeed the existence of life itself – those who were present at my "Scientific Evidence for God" talk will remember some of the evidence for that.

The first eleven chapters of Genesis tell us a great deal about mankind from the moral and spiritual viewpoint and also tell us something of our origins. Perhaps the single most important thing we are taught is contained in the creation account in Chapter 1 where we are told that mankind was created by God and that we were created in God's own image (Genesis 1:26). I consider that the image referred to here is not a physical image, but rather an intellectual and spiritual image. Our mind was made in the image of God's mind and the soul which He breathed into us (Genesis 2:7) is also in His image. Here 'mind' encompasses our ability to think and reason and is the seat of our will; 'soul' is the seat of our feelings and emotions (God has feelings and emotions which is why he placed them in us). God has also placed His spirit within us, so that we are tripartite beings – comprising mind (which is contained within our body), together with soul and spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

Interestingly enough, man is not specifically affirmed as 'good' in the account of his own creation (Genesis 1:26) - perhaps such affirmation was considered unnecessary as we were made in God's image. Our affirmation as 'good' only comes to us as a part of creation generally "every thing that he had made ... *was* very good" (Genesis 1:31).

The fact that mankind was created by God in His image effectively places us at the apex of creation. Indeed the words "Let us make man" used by God as He contemplates our creation - which differ from the words used in connection with all the rest of His creation - (Genesis 1:26), make that abundantly clear. We are the only life form made in the image of God. Although I think this is made clear by the text itself, it is also emphasised by the form of the text (Genesis 1:26-28), where the previous repetitive formula used for the rest of creation breaks out in powerful Hebrew poetry.

God also assigns mankind a high role - to rule over other created life forms (Genesis 1:26) and to multiply and subdue the earth (Genesis 1:28). These verses have sometimes been used to justify the unrestrained exploitation of our planet and its life forms by mankind, but I consider that to be an unbiblical interpretation. Other OT passages (such as Micah 6:8), make it clear that mankind was and is to rule over creation as God's helper in accordance with God's nature – that is with justice, righteousness and mercy. Additionally, mankind's

rule is now subject to the ultimate authority of Christ, who has been appointed to rule over us (Revelations 19:15). We should feel amazed, and also humbled, that God, in His mighty power, has seen fit to produce such a huge and magnificent creation for us and that He has placed us at its head. What an awesome responsibility! However, let us not be too proud of this high calling as we remember that we were created out of the dust of the earth (Genesis 2:7).

We are also told that we are social beings and that fellowship between man and woman is God's ordained pattern for human life. God saw that it was not good for his first human creation Adam to be alone (Genesis 2:18), so he showed Adam all the animals that He had created. However, Adam found that none was suitable as a partner for him. Thus God fashioned woman (Eve) from out of Adam's body and Adam immediately recognised Eve as his ideal partner made from his flesh and bones (Genesis 2:23). This intimate, indeed God created, bond between a man and a woman explains why a man severs the close tie with his parents to become "one flesh" with his wife (Genesis 2:24). In my view, these texts clearly define monogamous marriage between one man and one woman as being God's intended plan for our lives. I also believe that equality between the sexes is strongly implied by the intimacy between man and woman and by the modality of creation of woman. At the time of their creation Adam and Eve also lived in intimate fellowship with God, as is made clear by the accounts of open and intimate communication with God (Genesis 2:15-16,19).

Throughout Genesis 1 and 2 we are continually told that the whole of creation (including mankind by way of global affirmation (Genesis 1:31)) was 'good'. However, we also know that much of mankind today behaves in an inhuman, and indeed positively evil, fashion, and we are each aware of our own sinful nature. We also know that the vast majority of mankind no longer lives in open and intimate communication with God.

The solution to this apparent paradox is provided by the events of Genesis 3. This Chapter tells us that Adam and Eve rebelled against God, by disobeying His direct commandment - even though they had only been given one commandment, one single rule to obey. The excuse of having been beguiled by Satan was neither justifiable nor accepted (although we ourselves easily fall into similar error to this day). As a result, the whole of creation (except mankind) was judged, blighted and cursed by God, whilst mankind itself was judged and penalised in what is usually referred to as the 'Fall'. The rebellion of Adam and Eve marred and stained God's good work and mankind was alienated from God as a result of that sin.

The penalty imposed on mankind involved, firstly an age long relentless struggle against evil (characterised by the serpent of the Genesis story) (Genesis 3:14-15) - at least until we were released by Christ's victory over sin and death (Luke 10:17-20), secondly, the infliction of the threatened death penalty for disobedience (even though this was postponed) (Genesis 3:19,22) and thirdly difficulties with our basic sources of survival - childbearing and food production (Genesis 3:16, 18-19).

Following the Fall, the intimate relationship between man and God was broken, the orderly relationship between mankind and the rest of creation was broken, and sin was set loose in the world.

This release of sin into the world did not take long to produce widespread and serious results. One of Adam's children, Cain, killed his brother, Abel (Genesis 4:8), and the world's first murder was enacted. God's plan for the union of one man with one woman was also broken as polygamy was introduced by Lamech (Genesis 4:19). Vengeance and revenge rather than

God's mercy were espoused – also by Lamech (Genesis 4:23-24). Indeed man's evil soon became so great that “every inclination of the thoughts of [their] hearts was only evil all the time” (Genesis 6:5) and thus God decided to wipe out mankind entirely (Genesis 6:7), apart from a few righteous persons - Noah and his family (Genesis 6:8-9,18). God brought his judgement in the form of a flood, from which only Noah and his family escaped. However, God's judgement came to its end with words of grace as He promised that the earth's seasons and harvests shall always endure (Genesis 8:22) and established a covenant with Noah (Genesis 9:1,8-9). However, it didn't take long for sin to creep back in, as Noah became drunk! (Genesis 9:21).

Certainly, the attempted cleansing of mankind by the Flood was ineffective. God's judgement on the sins of corporate humanity was visited yet again at the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:4-7), as mankind, full of pride, sought to claim equality with God and reach up to heaven. On this occasion, the judgement was that of alienation between various elements of mankind – an extension of God's earlier judgement of alienation from Him – and it was executed without any concluding words of grace.

The remainder of the OT ‘testifies’ to the fact that mankind was (and is) utterly unable to recover from the effects of the Fall and to overcome sin by our own efforts. Time and time again the Israelites sinned and broke their solemn covenants with God. Indeed when the OT ends Israel is still looking for the final consummation of their covenant hopes – when hope would be fulfilled and promise would become fact. Those hopes were only realised in the incarnation of Christ. Only God's grace in sending His son, Jesus Christ, to pay the price for the sins of all mankind, to justify us, redeem us and reconcile us to God, has enabled us to recover from the alienation from God brought about in the Fall. By this grace we are fully spiritually regenerated and restored to bearing the image of God (Ephesians 4:23, Colossians 3:10).

Genesis 11:27 – 50:26

Let's now move on to the next phase – the Patriarchal history (“PH”) contained in the remainder of Genesis.

The last line of the Primeval prologue names Abram and his brothers. Abram now takes over as the central figure and his personal and family story saturates the remainder of this section of the Bible and indeed forms a stream that carries on through the whole of the Bible. The call of Abram initiates a radical new development – God acts in history to set in motion a series of events that will eventually heal the breach that sin has caused between God and His creation.

At one time most scholars wanted to relegate the PH to a role of myth invented much later by Israelite writers, perhaps in the 5th or 6th centuries BC. However, archaeologists have now discovered that the background related in the PH corresponds very closely to what has now been discovered of life in those times. W F Albright has concluded that there is no reason to doubt the biographical details of the PH. It would now seem most likely that the Patriarchal era ended around 1700 BC.

This section of the Bible does not enable us to develop a complete view of the religious life of the Patriarchs. However, it is clear that Abraham was a polytheist at the time of his call by God (Joshua 24:2). This same God appeared to each of the Patriarchs, chose them

individually, and promised to be with them. Each Patriarch chose this God as his family's patron and identified God in relation to the family – “the God of Abraham”, “the God of Jacob” etc. This close personal tie was emphasised by the use of phrases like “the God of my/your father” (Genesis 26:24; 31:42 etc).

God sealed these personal relationships by making a covenant with the one elected. He first made a covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15). It is interesting to note that these covenants only involved a promise by God with no reciprocal obligations from the human covenantee. This is in contrast with the later covenants God made with the whole nation of Israel. It is also in contrast with the NT covenant where God's new covenant promise is only made effective in our lives by our acceptance of that promise through faith in Jesus Christ. The distinctiveness of the Patriarchs' faith lay in their conception of God and their close personal relationship with Him.

Patriarchal history begins with the election of Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3). His call is both dramatic and specific, and the sudden new beginning it gives him provides a model for the rest of PH. Furthermore the universal nature of the promised blessing in Genesis 12:3 “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” gives us preview of the universal salvation that God was to provide. It also makes it clear that although the Israelites were to be special, God's chosen people, his salvation was always to be universal – for all mankind.

The PH is characterised by the failure of the Patriarchs to fully live up to God's standards and to fully obey his call. Thus Abraham invents his own stratagem of producing a son (Ishmael) through Hagar rather than obeying God's call to produce descendants through his wife Sarah. However, God is not to be thwarted and in the words of Genesis 21:1 “did for Sarah what He had promised”.

This pattern of behaviour followed by God's deliverance is repeated with each of the other Patriarchs and eventually God's overarching promise finds fulfilment in the deliverance of Israel out of Egypt.

The highest test of Abraham's faith was in God's command to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham meets the test with complete faith, which is upheld by God, as he provides him with a ram to sacrifice. Thus, this story becomes the model of the faith that God demands from His people and of God's provision for those who have faith in Him. This is not faith in an abstract moral code, but faith in a relationship – each one of us must have a relationship with God and have faith in that relationship (see Romans 1:16 and Galatians 3:6-9).

In Joseph we see the start of the transition from Patriarchal family to a nation – in fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham and this section of the Bible ends with the death of Joseph.

Exodus

The Exodus of the Israelite nation from Israel (from which this book draws its name) is the primary redemptive event of the OT. God delivers his people from slavery in Egypt, makes a covenant with them (for the first time) as a people and eventually brings them into the promised land.

Although the Exodus is the central event of Israel's history it is very difficult to define where and when it took place. The most likely period is the first half of the 13th century BC because

(i) the Israel stele of Pharaoh Merneptah claims that he subdued Israel in Canaan in around 1209 BC, thus the Exodus must have taken place at least some fifty or sixty years before that, and (ii) the store city of Raamses referred to in Exodus 1:11 is most likely Pi-Rameses built by Rameses II just after 1300 BC and the Exodus must have taken place after that.

The place and exact route of the Exodus are also difficult to identify because the presence of the Israeli people was so transient in historical terms and I'm not going to deal with that issue today.

In the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt God revealed himself mightily in power through ten plagues visited on the Egyptians culminating in the death of the first born sons of the Egyptians, from which the Israelites were spared by the blood of the Passover lamb (Exodus 12:1 – 13:16). The number and nature of the ten plagues is actually significant as each was designed to deal with one of the ten major gods the Egyptians worshipped, but that's too detailed for us to go into today. Again, when the Israelites were pursued by the Egyptian army as they departed, God acted mightily to deliver them by parting the Sea of Reeds and then allowing it to engulf the Egyptians (Exodus 14:13-21).

Clearly, these miracles were a series of powerful graphic events, which had an enormous influence in cementing the faith of the people of Israel in their God. Remembrance of the miracle of the tenth plague was perpetuated by the annual "feast of the Passover" an important feast which would serve to perpetuate the memory of the deliverance of the Israelites from Israel by their God (Exodus 13:7-10) as did the annual "feast of the unleavened bread" to celebrate the Exodus generally (Exodus 23:15).

Later during the Exodus, God performed many further miracles. He fed the people with manna from heaven when they were hungry (Exodus 16:4) and even sent them meat in the form of quails when they tired of manna (Exodus 16:13). He purified water for them (Exodus 15:22-25) and even produced water from the rocks of the desert (Exodus 17:6).

The number, power and extent of these miracles alone would surely be sufficient to make the events of the exodus central to Israel's faith, but God also used this time to enter into a new covenant with his people (Exodus 19:3-15) giving them the ten commandments (Exodus 20:1-17). This summoned Israel to a special relationship with God, which is described by three phrases in Exodus 19, a special possession among all peoples, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. This covenant formed the basis of their religion, their relationship with God and made the events of the Exodus the foundation of their faith.

Of course, we Christians today can see in the events of the tenth plague a prophetic image of that which is the foundation of our own faith – the Lord Jesus and his atoning death.

Leviticus

In English, the title of this book means 'the book pertaining to the Levites'. I think the Hebrew title which when translated means 'and the Lord called' better describes the flavour of the book. It closes with the words "These are the commandments that the Lord gave to Moses for the people of Israel on Mount Sinai". The book contains a number of sections setting out the manner in which the Israelites were to worship God.

Numbers

At first sight, the purpose of the book appears to be to record the period from the encounter with God at Sinai to the preparations in Moab to enter the promised land. This journey would normally have taken around 11 days. The 38 years it actually occupied was a punishment for lack of faith, for none of the unbelieving generation was to be allowed to enter the land (Numbers 14:20-45). Numbers is thus also another story of the relationship of the Israelites with their God and especially their apostasy, rebellion and unfaithfulness contrasted with God's faithfulness, provision and forbearance.

Deuteronomy

When the old generation had died off, the Israelites were permitted to resume their journey into the promised land. As they camped waiting to cross the Jordan, Moses, mindful that he was barred from entering the promised land, gave three farewell speeches. Once again, it would seem that Hebrew name for Deuteronomy – "these are the words" – is more appropriate than the English translation.

In general the book re-iterates the terms of the Israelite covenant with the Lord, some of the requirements of the Law and ends with the death of Moses. The traditions safeguarded in this book certainly contributed in Israel's monarchic period to the reforms of Josiah begun in 621 BC and may have contributed to Hezekiah's purge of pagan practices as noted in 2 Kings 15. The traditions guarded in the book may have also played a part in the post-exilic period under Ezra and Nehemiah.

This book also contains the creed of basic Israelite worship of the Lord: "Hear O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

The book also recites God's acts on behalf of his people: how he led them out of Egypt, gave them the law at Sinai, patiently endured their stubborn unbelief in the wilderness and brought them to the verge of the Jordan.

Joshua

This book tells the story of the settlement of Israel in Canaan. However, it does not give a continuous historical account. The crossing of the Jordan, the religious rites at Gilgal and the capture of Jericho and Ai are told in some detail, but the rest of the account is hardly even a summary with even the names of peoples and cities omitted.

Judges

This account is even more fragmentary than Joshua, consisting of a series of separate stories from various regions and times. It is clear that main purpose of the narrative is theological rather than historic – it seeks to set out the pattern of the rebellion of God's people, his judgement upon them and his eventual grace. It is also quite significant in that it prefigures much of the Acts of the Apostles and also has much to say to us about the involvement of the Holy Spirit with individuals and what the gift of the Spirit will bring to a person's life. We don't have time to deal with this issue today, so I'll just cite a few examples – Othniel

(Judges 3:10), Gideon (Judges 6:34), Jephthah (Judges 11:29) and Samson (Judges 13:25; 14:6)

1 and 2 Samuel

These books give quite a detailed account of the establishment of the monarchy in Israel and its working out with the first kings, although the focus is generally centred on the theological rather than the political and historical implications. The greatest question raised is that of the theological implications of the establishment of Israel's monarchy

Of course the phrase 'Israel's monarchy' is somewhat ambiguous, since apart from a relatively short time in the early phases of the monarchy during which the Israelite people were more or less united in a single kingdom (the reign of Saul, part of the reign of David, the reign of Solomon and the commencement of Rehoboam's reign) there were two Israelite kingdoms, the Northern kingdom of Israel and the Southern kingdom of Judah.

The exact chronology of the period of the Israelite monarchy is a matter of some doubt and contention as the dates which can be deduced from scriptural statements are somewhat in conflict, both internally and in comparison with external evidence. I don't propose to deal with that complex issue today and have adopted a traditional view of the chronology. This places the beginning of the monarchy in 1020 BC with the accession of Saul, the end of the united kingdom with the division of the kingdom under Rehoboam in around 931 BC, the end of the monarchy in the kingdom of Israel with the fall of Samaria to the Assyrians in 722 BC and the end of the monarchy in the kingdom of Judah with the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 587 BC. Thus, Israel's Monarchy spanned a period of some 433 years.

Whilst the desire of the Israelite people to be united under a human king in the manner of the surrounding nations is readily understandable, the whole idea of the Israelite Monarchy was clearly a disaster in spiritual terms from its very inception and later turned out to be a disaster in material terms also.

The monarchy had its beginnings with the prophet Samuel who was the last of Israel's Judges and probably (on the balance of the evidence) the first personality since Joshua to be a national rather than a local figure. Feeling disunited and oppressed by their neighbours, the Israelite people asked Samuel to appoint a King over them (1 Samuel 8:5, 12:12), even though they ought to have been well aware that such an action was incompatible with the nature of their covenant relationship with God, since it was a clear rejection of God as king over them (1 Samuel 8:7) and would lead to them becoming increasingly distanced from God. Earlier Judges such as Gideon had rejected the call of the people to rule over them (Judges 8:22-23) on the basis that God (rather than any human) was king over Israel.

However, God now told Samuel to grant the peoples request for a king, but to warn them severely of the error of this course (1 Samuel 8:9) and to explain exactly what they would suffer under a human king (1 Samuel 8:11-17). The people completely rejected Samuel's warnings and God again told Samuel to grant their request for a king (1 Samuel 8:19). God revealed his choice of Saul as King to Samuel (1 Samuel 9:17) and Samuel duly anointed Saul as the first king over Israel (1 Samuel 10:1). This anointing of Saul was later ceremonially confirmed to the Israelite people at Gilgal (1 Samuel 11:15) where Samuel again warned the people that if they allowed this appointment of a human king to cause them to forget God and his laws they would suffer (1 Samuel 12:12-15). I do not see a great

difference in attitude towards the monarchy in different sections of Samuel Chapters 8-10, rather I consider that these should be read as a consistent account of Samuel acquiescing in God's instruction to appoint a human king over the Israelites, even though he knew (and God had confirmed) that it was not the right thing for the Israelites. This is a good example to illustrate the difference between the perfect will of God and God's permissive will towards mankind.

Saul ruled over Israel for 20 years, although he seems to have been more of a military leader and tribal chief than a true king. For example, there is little evidence that he played a significant administrative or judicial role. After his early period of military success he went into a period of sad decline as he sinned by disobeying God's instructions given him through Samuel (1 Samuel 15:24) and was rejected by God as king (1 Samuel 15:26). Samuel anointed David as king during Saul's reign and Saul's decline continued, as he became depressed and insanely jealous of David. Even though Saul pursued David and tried to kill him (1 Samuel 19:9-11), David refused to raise his hand against Saul, although he had opportunity to do so (1 Samuel 24:4). Saul eventually committed suicide when wounded in battle (1 Samuel 31:4).

Following the death of Saul, David became king of Judah, the Southern part of Israel (2 Samuel 2:4), but he was not accepted in the Northern regions where Ish-Bosheth was eventually appointed king. This continued for about 7 years until David's men defeated those of Ish-Bosheth and David became king over the re-united kingdom of all Israel which he ruled for a further 33 years.

David was the first 'real' king over Israel. He not only displayed great military prowess adding security and territory to the kingdom (defeating the Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites and Syrians), but he also displayed great administrative skill and united the nation around the strategically chosen (because it was near to border between the Northern and Southern kingdoms) capital of Jerusalem. This together with his establishment of a 'personal' army cemented his power over Israel independently of any popular acclaim. However, later in his reign, David fell into sinful ways (for example his adultery with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:3-4) and the later murder of her husband (2 Samuel 11:15)) and the kingdom also fell into some disarray. On the one hand the people became discontented with newly instituted taxation to support David's court and on the other hand there were revolts from within the court against his rule, principally that led by his son Absalom (2 Samuel 13-19).

Given this atmosphere of court intrigue it is no surprise that at the time of David's death there was a struggle for succession to the throne between his sons Adonijah and Solomon. Solomon had the more influential connections and prevailed, eliminating Adonijah and almost all his supporters. Solomon was an administrative and judicial ruler rather than a military leader and thus his reign was largely a time of consolidation.

1 and 2 Kings

Whilst Solomon may have lost some territory to the Edomites and the Syrians, his reign marked Israel's time of greatest material prosperity with an ambitious building programme in Jerusalem (including the famous temple) and a vast expansion of his personal army (1 Kings 4:26).

However, the cost of this was enormous discontent amongst the Israelites, particularly the northern tribes. The modest system of taxation started by David was vastly increased and expanded to fund the ambitious building and military programmes and this was supplemented by the introduction of 'forced' or slave labour amongst the people of the land (1 Kings 4:6, 1 Kings 5:13) – although apparently Israelites were not enslaved (1 Kings 9:22). This discontent was undoubtedly increased in the Northern part of Israel by the fact that taxation appears to have been levied unevenly across the nation, more lightly (if at all) in the South (1 Kings 4:7-19). The latter period of his rule was also marked by personal discontent, a significant turning away from the morality of the covenant relationship with God (perhaps commencing with marrying foreign women from forbidden races (1 Kings 11:2)) and even a return to the worship of foreign gods (1 Kings 11:4).

Solomon's grip on the kingdom was too strong for open revolt during his lifetime (he generally killed or exiled potential opposition figures such as Jeroboam who fled to Egypt (1 Kings 11:40)) and on his death he was succeeded by his son Rehoboam. Rehoboam went to Shechem to secure the support of the Northern tribes, but, against the counsel of his advisers, he refused to accept the terms on which they would acknowledge him as their king (1 Kings 12:1-7). Indeed, he threatened to increase the severity of their burdens (1 Kings 12:14). This was a great error as Jeroboam now returned from Egypt and was acclaimed king of the ten Northern tribes.

As noted above, this splitting of the kingdom in approximately 931 BC was in fact irreversible and separate kings ruled over the ten Northern tribes of Israel and the two Southern tribes of Judah until the respective ends of these states. From the time of the splitting of the kingdom the decline in religious and moral standards amongst the kings and their subjects which had already commenced (and indeed led to the split) also proved irreversible.

The two kingdoms were unable to maintain the empire, which had been established under David and consolidated by Solomon. However, the Northern kingdom of Israel was materially prosperous for a time, as it was larger than the Southern kingdom, more fertile and more favourably situated with respect to trade routes between the adjacent super-powers. However, this also made it an attractive target for conquest. The Northern kingdom was ruled by a succession of morally evil and relatively ineffective kings until it was conquered by the Assyrians in 722 BC.

The Southern kingdom was smaller and less materially prosperous than the Northern kingdom. Although the kings of the Southern kingdom were generally evil, there were one or two good kings (e.g. Asa (1 Kings 15:9-11) and Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 17:3)). However, once the Northern kingdom fell the military position of the Southern Kingdom was extremely insecure as the capital, Jerusalem, was very close to enemy territory. The Southern kingdom did manage to survive for some 135 years after the fall of the Northern kingdom before it was conquered by the Babylonians in 587 BC.

It is quite clear that the monarchy only achieved its 'worldly' objectives of uniting the Israelites as a single nation and ensuring their security and prosperity for the relatively brief period of 89 years – even ignoring the 7 year division of the kingdom on David's accession to the throne and the general discontent with taxation and oppression under Solomon. In spiritual terms, the monarchy proved to be a disaster from the beginning, as it amounted to a rejection of the covenant relationship with God which the Israelites had entered into. Not

surprisingly, none of the kings was able to uphold the standards of that covenant relationship, not even King David – the man who was perhaps closest to God’s heart. This is not surprising because the covenant had one major weakness: there was no provision in it to change the human heart. That would have to wait until sin was done away with when Jesus Christ was slain as the sacrificial lamb of God and the people of God became empowered through the Holy Spirit. Thus, Israel’s Monarchy was not a great idea that went sadly wrong but rather a bad idea that went wrong just as was originally anticipated by Samuel under God’s guidance. However, God can always bring good out from bad, and God took King David, a man after his own heart in spite of his sin and failure, and, according to His promise, from this man’s seed raised up a saviour for Israel (and indeed all mankind) – Jesus Christ our Lord.

Prophetic oracles are also interwoven with the history of the monarchy, notably the long stories of Elijah and Elisha. Again this is a subject which merits a more detailed treatment as Elijah in particular is a most significant figure in scripture. He is one of only two people in scripture who did not die but were translated directly into heaven, he appeared in Jesus’ days at the transfiguration (Matthew 17:3) and has significant lessons for prophetic ministry in the church today. Unfortunately, that’s all I have time to say about him today.

1 and 2 Chronicles

At first sight, the material here seems to repeat that of the books we have already been looking at. However, the Chronicler (or the writer or writers of Chronicles) approaches things from a rather different perspective, and it is this different viewpoint that justifies the inclusion of Chronicles in the canon of Scripture. It would seem that the Chroniclers main sources of information were the books of Samuel and Kings, but the writer is not so much concerned with the historical events as with their meaning and spiritual implications. His writing is selective and interpretative. This was probably one of the last books of the bible to have been written in around 400 BC.

Prophetic Writings

In this section, we can group the following books:

- Isaiah
- Jeremiah
- Ezekiel
- Hosea
- Joel
- Amos
- Obadiah
- Jonah
- Micah
- Nahum
- Habakkuk
- Zephania
- Haggai
- Zecharia
- Malachi

In general, usage the word 'prophet' means someone who can foretell the future and 'prophecy' means the prediction of things to come. However, these definitions are not completely adequate for our purposes. In biblical terms, a prophet is a man called by God to speak for God – to forth-tell His word.

At this point, it may be interesting to list all the figures biblically acclaimed as prophets:

Prior to Samuel

Enoch (Jude 14)
Abraham (Genesis 20:7)
Moses (Numbers 12:1)
Miriam (Exodus 15:20)
Eldad, Medad and the seventy (Numbers 11:24-29)
Deborah (Judges 4:4)

Period of the United Monarchy

Samuel (1 Samuel 3:1)
Gad (2 Samuel 22:5)
Nathan (2 Samuel 12:1)
Ahijah (1 Kings 12:22)
Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun (1 Chronicles 25:1)
Iddo (2 Chronicles 9:29)

Period of the Divided Monarchy to the Assyrian Period

Shemaiah (1 Kings 12:22)
Ahijah (2 Chronicles 9:29)
Hanani (2 Chronicles 16:7)
Jehu son of Hanani (1 Kings 16:1)
Elijah (1 Kings 17:1)
Elisha (1 Kings 19:16)
Micaiah ben Imlah (1 Kings 22:4)
Jehaziel and Eliezer (2 Chronicles 20:14, 37)
Zechariah (2 Chronicles 24:19)
Unnamed prophet who anointed Jehu (2 Kings 9:4)
Sons of the prophets (1 Kings 19:10)

Eighth Century BC

Jonah son of Amittai (2 Kings 14:25)
Amos
Hosea
Micah
Isaiah 1 (Writer of Chapters 1-39)
Oded (2 Chronicles 28:9)

Seventh Century BC

Zephaniah (Josiah)
Nahum
Huldah (2 Kings 22:14-20)
Habakkuk
Jeremiah

Sixth Century BC

Obadiah
Ezekiel
Daniel

Isaiah 2 (Writer of Chapters 40-66)
Post Exilic
Haggai
Zechariah
Joel
Malachi
Jonah

Note: there are disputes about the dates and authorship of Jonah, Joel, Zechariah and portions of Isaiah, some of which are discussed in more detail later.

The early prophets and the prophets of the monarchy and the early part of the divided kingdom are sometimes called the 'oral' or 'non-writing' prophets. That just means that the Bible has no books which are solely the products of individual prophets from those periods.

Prophets from the divided kingdom period generally spoke of God's impending judgement, that the kings and leaders were so emeshed in sin that there was no hope of rescue. The prophets tried to sound clear warnings and urge the people to repentance.

After the conquest of Israel, the prophets spoke a more urgent sense of judgement and reinforced their pleas for repentance. At the same time, they also gave out messages of hope for the remnant who would be spared from God's judgement.

In the post exilic period the nations of Israel and Judah had come to an end and so had the old way of life. Many Israelites were in captivity and needed messages of hope and encouragement and also reminders that the Lord's covenant still applied and that He would redeem. Post-exilic prophets encouraged rebuilding the temple, re-establishing the kingdom and throne of David and resuming formal worship.

However, it soon became clear that these would not fulfil God's redemptive programme. The rebuilt temple was nothing like the old and the nation was an insignificant subject people. This was not the glory filled latter days which had been foretold. Accordingly, prophetic hope looked to still future blessings, claiming that God himself would intervene and establish His king on Zion. There would be a time of judgement followed by an age of prosperity and peace. Having proclaimed these messages the prophets fell silent.

Let's just comment quickly on one or two notable points from the prophetic books.

Isaiah

From our point of view today, I believe that the most wonderful and meaningful prophecies are the so-called 'servant songs' of Isaiah. Indeed, in many ways the book of Isaiah is *the* theological textbook of the OT. In fact it is likely that the book we have as Isaiah was the product of two prophets, a 'first' Isaiah who wrote Isaiah 1-39 before 550 BC and a 'second' Isaiah who wrote Isaiah 40-66 between 550 and 538 BC. However, we must remember that a single author – God's spirit – was at work through these two human authors (if indeed this view of dual authorship is correct). Furthermore, the very clear prophecies of the coming, nature and suffering of Jesus Christ in the 'servant songs', especially in Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12, were certainly written many hundreds of years before the birth of Christ. An astounding confirmation of the inspired nature of biblical prophecy.

Ezekiel

Ezekiel is a prophet from the early period of the exile and thus differs from the messages of impending judgement proclaimed by the earlier writing prophets. The style is highly allegorical. This was a period of testing ideas about God – was he impotent against the gods of Babylon?, could the Lord be worshipped in a strange land? This and his own personality made the theology of Ezekiel apparently somewhat heretical, indeed Hebrew theologians have struggled greatly with the difficulties of reconciling Ezekiel with the Torah. Reading of Ezekiel 1 was forbidden in the synagogue and private reading of Ezekiel was only for those over 30.

Jonah

Jonah is unique amongst the prophetic books in that it is an account of what happened to a prophet and not a collection of his messages to Israel. Thus, the story of Jonah *is* the message. That is not so much being swallowed by a fish, but rather about divine commands and their consequences and results. Further we can reflect on Jonah 3:9 “Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger so that we do not perish.”

Zechariah

Zechariah is perhaps the greatest of the post-exilic prophets, probably a contemporary of Haggai. The return from Babylon brought both joy and anxiety to the hearts of the Israelites and God raised up Zechariah to bring answers.

Wisdom Literature

Within this section we include:

- Proverbs
- Ecclesiastes
- Job

Biblical wisdom literature is a vast body of written and oral sayings with their roots deep in antiquity. It specialises in rules for success and happiness and sage observations about life. This literature, especially the book of Proverbs, had its formal beginnings in the 10th century BC when oral sayings that had been passed from generation to generation began to be organised and codified.

Proverbs

This book consists largely of short pithy sayings, which give both negative and positive rules for personal happiness and welfare and make acute observations about life. Given that the origins of most of these sayings are more than 3,000 years in our past, it is surprising how relevant they are to our circumstances today..

Ecclesiastes

The meaning of this book has always been a matter of some controversy. Like Job, the author protests against easy and superficial generalisations, which oversimplify life and

theology. The author speaks of our human inability to grasp life's mysteries and our impotence to change life's realities. The author insists on the inscrutability of God's ways yet concludes that we have no other purpose in life but to worship and obey Him. I believe that both this book and Proverbs were probably written by Solomon, although this is difficult to establish beyond reasonable doubt. I think Solomon probably wrote Proverbs whilst he was still moving in the wisdom of God early in his reign and wrote Ecclesiastes later when he was no longer able to reconcile what he saw around him in the wisdom he had previously possessed.

Job

Our views of divine sovereignty, human free will, human suffering, our arrogance and integrity are all addressed and challenged in this book. This is certainly a very old book, with an unknown literary genius as its author, but a book which speaks loudly to our situation today. Although the book speaks at great length of human suffering, no solution to this problem is ultimately offered. God merely breaks his silence to affirm His overarching wisdom and sovereignty and Job accepts this. Nevertheless, it is a great book, which merits significant study in much more depth than we have time for today.

Other Writings

Within this section we include:

- Ruth
- Esther
- Song of Songs
- Lamentations
- Ezra
- Nehemiah
- Daniel

This is rather a strange collection of books, basically the parts of the canon that don't fit into our other categories.

Ruth

This delightful little book shows us how God can work through ordinary people and gives us a picture of His providence in the life of one Israelite family.

The book is named after its chief character, Ruth the Moabite. Because of famine, Elimelech takes his family to live in Moab. He and his two sons die there, leaving his wife, Naomi, and the sons' Moabite wives, Ruth and Orpah. When the famine ends, Naomi plans to return home. She persuades Orpah to stay, but Ruth absolutely refuses. The two widows return to Bethlehem just as the harvest begins. Ruth goes out to glean grain and finds herself in the fields of Boaz a kinsman of Elimelech. Boaz has a duty to marry a widowed in law and Naomi sends Ruth, in effect, to propose. Boaz is willing and after some manoeuvring marries Ruth and they have a son, Obed. This child not only preserves Naomi's family line, but more importantly re-emerges as the grandfather of king David.

Theologically perhaps the most interesting part of the story is that Ruth's nationality as a Moabite makes it clear that God welcomes non-Israelites into His covenant. This message is reinforced by the fact that Ruth's son Obed is part of the crucial Davidic line.

Esther

This is an interesting book. Its text contains no mention of God or Yahweh and its Jewish heroine marries an unbelieving Gentile king.

The plot of the story is ingenious but too long for us to consider in detail today. The main thrust of the story is that God's hand guides the events of history and that he works in this through His ordinary people. From the Jewish point of view, one might also call it the story of Purim, since it ends with the establishment of that festival and is clearly intended to encourage its celebration.

Song of Songs

In Hebrew, the name of this book means 'the finest song' and its importance to the Jews is shown by the fact that it is assigned to be read at the feast of Passover. However, its place in the Hebrew canon was much questioned by the Jews, for much the same reasons that many Christians struggle with it today – its highly erotic themes and nature. I have classified it amongst writings rather than wisdom literature, as its form is that of love poetry not instruction.

Though Solomon himself was probably not the author of this book, the settings and tone reflect the age of his rule. It was probably transmitted orally from Solomon's time and reduced to writing around the time of the exile.

Most of the song is a poetic conversation between the lover and beloved and apart from these the other participants can only be identified with great difficulty. The main impact of the book is in the intensity of the love described and in the rich and graphic imagery. There are detailed descriptions of the lover's bodies and their passionate desire which are vivid but never lurid.

Scholars have found it hard to agree the origins and purposes of this book. The Jews see an allegorical theme of God's love for the Israelite nation – which accounts for its use at Passover. Christians have seen it as an allegory of Christ's love for the church or individual believers. Clearly, the possibilities for such allegorical interpretations are endless. Other scholars have suggested that it represents Nuptial songs, Liturgical rites or even funeral rituals. No doubt all of these have a measure of validity, but it seems hard to deny the validity of an interpretation of a simple celebration of human love – a balance between asceticism and sexual excess. After all God Himself has ordained the rightness of physical sexual love within the divinely prescribed framework of marriage.

Lamentations

Lamentations is the fruit of the disastrous defeat and painful exile of Judah, the last remaining Israelite kingdom. It has for 25 centuries voiced the anguish of God's people in times of suffering and so its title aptly describes its contents.

The destruction of Jerusalem prophesied by Jeremiah is portrayed in its actuality by Lamentations. It appears to accept the rightness of God's judgement and yet there is a struggle and a crisis of faith which speaks to us today.

Ezra and Nehemiah

English bibles place these books with the historical books after Chronicles, but in the Hebrew canon they are part of the writings, and that is where I have placed them.

The return of the Israelites from exile did not proceed as they had expected. They had anticipated a national resurrection as predicted by Ezekiel, but instead they faced a crisis, which threatened to snuff out the newly emerging nation. Thus, the books deal with the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem after the return from exile and the re-establishment of the religious life of the community. The rebuilding of the walls and gates of Jerusalem had great spiritual significance for the Israelites. As Isaiah says walls equate to salvation and gates signify praise (Isaiah 60:18). Theologically the books subtly nurture expectations of future divine intervention in Israel, but this would have to await the birth of Christ.

Daniel

This is essentially apocalyptic literature. It communicates the message that the kingdoms of this world are under God's control and will one day be replaced by God's own kingdom. The book has lots of narrative accounts and themes along the above lines, which are too long for us to cover in detail today. Let me just say that perhaps its greatest significance for me is that it tells us how to live as Christians in a secular world and a secular workplace.

Worship

Psalms

Here we join the multitude who have for nearly 30 centuries grounded their praises and prayers in the contents of this book. A better translation of the Hebrew title to the book is 'songs of praise'. Again understanding the nature of this book is a vast subject, much too large for today, but such is the importance of this book that I do just want to touch upon its nature.

To correctly understand the nature of each of the Psalms we need to begin by asking a number of questions:

1. what is happening? Is it praise, complaint, thanksgiving or instruction – or a blend of several of these?
2. Who is speaking: an individual or the community? If an individual is he a spokesperson for a group or purely and individual complaining or giving thanks? Or are both an individual and the community/congregation involved?
3. Is the king mentioned? If so do words like 'anointed' or 'son' denote his relation to God or Israel?

Although the Psalms can be loosely categorised along the lines of the following list we must emphasise their individuality. Some useful categories are:

Hymns – often containing a call to worship, a description of God’s acts or attributes and a conclusion calling for praise or obedience.

Processional Hymns – describing the longings and expectations of worshippers on their way to the temple.

Songs of Zion – praising the Lord for His majestic presence in Zion.

Enthronement Songs – celebrating the reign of God as Lord of the nations.

Wisdom Psalms

More than anything the Psalms were declarations of the relationship between the people and their God, their unique relationship to the one true God.

An Overview of the New Testament

Most of you will be much more familiar with the NT than the OT, the NT is also shorter than the OT – about half its length, therefore I am going to make this session briefer than my overview of the OT.

The word ‘Testament’ means covenant and thus this is the account of the ‘New Covenant’ made by God with humankind by and through Christ as opposed to His Old Covenant with the Israelites in the OT.

As we have already seen the canon of the NT consists of 27 books. Their ordering in our modern bible is logical rather than chronological, as we have seen is also the case with the OT. We can usefully divide the books of the NT into four sections:

- **Historical Books**

- Gospels:

- Matthew

- Mark

- Luke

- John

- Acts of the Apostles

- **Pauline Epistles**

- Romans

- 1 Corinthians

- 2 Corinthians

- Galatians

- Ephesians

- Philippians

- Colossians

- 1 Thessalonians

- 2 Thessalonians

- 1 Timothy

- 2 Timothy

- Titus

- Philemon

- Hebrews

- **Catholic or General Epistles**

- James

- 1 Peter

- 2 Peter

- 1 John
- 2 John
- 3 John
- Jude
- **Prophecy**
 - Revelation

Historical Books

This section consists of the three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), the gospel of John and the Acts of the Apostles. The term 'synoptic' really means 'at one look' and these gospels are so called because they each tell a similar story differing only as to some additions and emphases according to the special interests of each of the authors and the message they were trying to convey. The gospel of John is classified separately because its style and emphasis are so different and it was probably written later than the synoptic gospels.

The gospels really tell the story of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, His life, His work on earth and His sacrificial, atoning and redeeming death.

The Synoptic Gospels

"Gospel" (from the Old English "Godspel") means "good news," namely that God has provided salvation through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ

Mark was probably the earliest of the synoptic gospels, written we believe in around AD 50-55 and it may well have served as a model for the gospels of Matthew and Luke. The author was probably John Mark, a close associate of Peter who accompanied Paul and Barnabus to Antioch. Tradition has it that this gospel was written in Italy, possibly in Rome. It was certainly written for gentile readers as Mark explains Jewish customs and practices. He emphasises persecution, martyrdom and suffering, the cross, discipleship, and Jesus' teachings. Thus if this gospel was written in Rome a part of the purpose may have been to prepare Roman Christians for persecution.

Luke was probably the second of the synoptic gospels, probably written in the late 50's or early 60's AD (although some scholars would date it in the late 60's or early 70's). We infer from Colossians 4:14 that Luke also wrote Acts. Luke was a well-educated gentile physician who was with Paul, perhaps originating from Antioch of Syria or Philippi. It was written to strengthen the faith of believers and answer the attacks of unbelievers, which were prevalent at this time. It was clearly addressed to a wide range of recipients as it assumes its readers are unfamiliar with Palestine. . It emphasises salvation, the place of Gentiles as well as Jews in God's kingdom, prayer, the joy of announcing the gospel, the poor, sinners, family, "Son of Man", and the Holy Spirit.

Mathew was most likely the last of the synoptic gospels written in the late 50's or early 60's AD. The author is believed to be Matthew (who was called Levi by Luke and Mark), one of the twelve apostles. It was probably written in Palestine or Antioch for Greek speaking Jews familiar with Jewish tradition and customs, to prove to them that Jesus is their Messiah by showing them how Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of the OT.

John's Gospel

It is generally believed that the author of this gospel was the apostle John, writing possibly as early as the late 60's AD and certainly no later than AD 85, probably from Ephesus. Later dates are favoured by some scholars because of the well-developed theology of this gospel, but I personally believe that this gospel was written before the fall of Jerusalem. His primary intention was evangelistic but he may also have intended to correct or supplement the synoptic gospels, combat heresies and oppose the followers of John the Baptist.

Acts of the Apostles

This book was probably written by Luke around 61-63 AD. As with the gospel of Luke it is addressed to Theophilus, who was probably a Roman noble or official.

It presents the history of the founding of the Christian church (including the beginnings of the church in Europe at Philippi), the spread of the gospel, the beginnings of congregations, evangelism, and many other acts of the apostles (and of the Holy Spirit). It records defences made against accusations by Jews as well as gentiles and serves as a guide to future Christians experiencing particular situations and persecutions.

It also records the ascension of Jesus and emphasises that the work of the apostles was a continuation of Jesus' teaching..

Initially, the apostles are said to be:

Peter (Simon, Cephas, author of 1/2 Peter)

John (son of Zebedee; author of his gospel, Revelation, 1/2/3 John, etc.)

James (brother of John)

Andrew (brother of Peter)

Philip

Thomas

Bartholomew (Nathanael)

Matthew (Levi; gospel author)

James (the younger, son of Alphaeus)

Simon the Zealot

Judas son of James (Thaddeus)

Matthias replaces Judas Iscariot, who has killed himself in his Field of Blood.

The Pauline Epistles

Romans

Romans was written by Paul on his third missionary journey in the spring of 57 AD and is addressed to the church at Rome, perhaps from Corinth. It outlines God's plan of salvation and righteousness for all mankind. He is trying to prepare the way for his intended visit, delayed because of his need to deliver donations to Jerusalem Christians. From the theological point of view this epistle gives us perhaps the clearest presentation of the doctrine of salvation by faith in the whole NT.

1 Corinthians

Paul writes from Ephesus to Corinth in around 55 AD. Corinth was a crossroads port city on the Corinthian isthmus noted for its immorality and Aphrodite worship. He is concerned with moral laxness and other problems experienced in the immature church there.

The book also has much to teach us about the gifts of the Holy Spirit (especially 1 Corinthians 12) and about the place of love as a glue which helps us to serve God's purposes (1 Corinthians 13).

2 Corinthians

Paul again writes to Corinth in around 55 AD, this time from Macedonia. Here his purpose is to defend against attacks on his integrity and his authority as an apostle. He has changed his itinerary but insists that the collection of funds be completed as planned.

Galatians

Paul writes to the 'foolish' Christians in the Gallatin region sometime between 48 and 57 AD (I personally favour an earlier rather than a later date for the writing of this epistle on the basis of its content). Paul defends his authority as an apostle and argues that, since that man is justified by his faith in Jesus rather than by legalistic works, the Galatians should not adhere to the requirements of the Jewish OT law.

Ephesians

Paul writes, probably in 60 AD, from prison in Rome, to Ephesus in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). We really need to consider this book in conjunction with Acts 19 and Revelation 2 in order to feel the true nature of Ephesus. Paul's main message is that we have been saved to bring praise and glory to God, and that individuals have been united in the church.

Philippians

Again Paul writes from prison in Rome, probably in AD 61, to Philippi which was a Roman colony in Macedonia – see Acts 16 for more background on Philippi. He writes to thank the Philippians for a gift, to report his circumstances, and to encourage them to stand firm.

Colossians

Yet again Paul writes from prison in Rome, probably in AD 60. Colosse was located in Asia Minor and church there had been founded by Epaphras. It is important when considering this book to remember that Paul had never visited this city and also that he says that this letter is also to be read to the church in Laodicea (Colossians 4:16). Paul attacks false and heretical teaching, including ceremonialism, asceticism, deprecation of Christ, angel worship, secret knowledge, and reliance on human wisdom (these last two being early examples of the emerging heresy of Gnosticism). Gnostics taught that man's body (indeed the whole material world) is inherently evil, that salvation is achieved through special knowledge rather than by faith in Christ, that Christ was not human, and that the body is to be treated harshly. Gnostics also generally condoned licentious sexual behaviour.

1 Thessalonians

This is one of Paul's earliest canonical letters and was probably written from Corinth around 51 AD to Thessalonica, a port in Macedonia. Here, Paul encourages the new converts, gives instruction concerning Godly living, and offers assurance concerning the future of believers who die before Christ returns. Like 2 Thessalonians it also deals with eschatology (the end times).

2 Thessalonians

Paul's second pastoral letter to Thessalonica, probably written in 51 or 52 AD.

1 Timothy

The Pastoral Letters of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus and were probably written by Paul to instruct these workers as his apostolic representatives. 1 Timothy was written between 62 and 65 AD from Philippi, and instructs Timothy in Ephesus in church affairs and in how to refute false teachings.

2 Timothy

2 Timothy was written by Paul to Timothy in Ephesus around 64-68 AD, whilst Paul was imprisoned in a cold dungeon in Rome. Paul tells of his loneliness and his concern for the welfare of the churches.

Titus

Titus was written by Paul from Corinth or Philippi between 62 and 65 AD to Titus in Crete. Titus had been left behind in Crete to continue the organisation of the new Christian converts there.

Philemon

Paul wrote this short letter around 60 AD, either from prison in Rome or from Ephesus, to Philemon in Colosse. The letter concerns Philemon's slave, who had converted to Christianity and had been assisting Paul.

Hebrews

Although I have included this book amongst the Pauline epistles, it is probable that it was not written by Paul, but by an intellectual Jewish Christian, perhaps Barnabus or Apollos, almost certainly before 70 AD. It was written for Jewish converts to Christianity. Its theme is the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ, who is said not only to be superior to the OT prophets, but to fulfil a "new covenant." This book emphasises that there can be no turning back to the old Jewish system.

The General Epistles

James

James was probably the oldest brother of Jesus, not the apostle James. James was written between 46 AD and the early 60's AD – I personally favour an earlier date because of the

content. It is distinctively Jewish, refers to synagogues, and may be the earliest of the NT writings. It is written to "the twelve tribes," perhaps to early Christian Jews from Jerusalem after Stephen's death.

1 Peter

1 Peter is written in polished and idiomatic Greek, probably in the early 60's AD. It is claimed to have been written by Peter, although the quality of the writing makes that questionable. I personally believe that the basis of the book comes from Peter with Silas serving as an intermediary writer. He writes from "Babylon" (more probably Rome, being likened to Babylon) and the book deals mainly with the persecution of Christians.

2 Peter

Again this book claims to be by Peter (but note the comments concerning 1 Peter), probably written probably toward the end of Peter's life between 65 and 68 AD. The book has clear parallels with Jude. The purpose of the book is to deal with false teachers and evildoers who have come into the church.

1 John

It is thought that the apostle John wrote this book between 70 and 85 AD after the writing of the gospel. The letter is addressed to unspecified believers, probably from Ephesus. It describes heretics as antichrists and attacks early Gnostic teaching. He also gives believers assurance of salvation

2 John

2 John was written by John between 70 and 85 AD, just after 1 John. The letter discourages Christians from offering hospitality to Gnostic teachers.

3 John

3 John was again written by John between 70 and 85 AD about the same time as 1 and 2 John. Here John encourages support for the itinerant teachers he sends out.

Jude

This letter was written between 65 and 80 AD – I favour an earlier date as it would seem that 2 Peter makes use of Jude. The author is Jude (Judas in Greek) very probably Jesus' brother. Jude refers to Apocryphal literature and has similarities to 2 Peter. Its unstated recipients are warned against the false teachings of early Gnosticism.

Prophecy

Revelation

The author identifies himself as John, possibly John the Presbyter, but I believe it was almost certainly John the apostle. Revelation was written as Christians were entering a time of persecution, perhaps between 54 and 68 AD, but more likely between 81 and 96 AD. He

warns the believers at Smyrna and Philadelphia about coming persecutions and emperor worship, and states that the final showdown between God and Satan is imminent. It is apocalyptic literature, highly symbolic, and full of visions. It has been interpreted to apply to the first century, to all of history, to the end times, or to an idealised time – although I believe it is clearly intended to apply to the end times.

CONCLUSION

So I hope you are all going to leave here today with a clear view of the bible as a unique book which is textually and historically reliable and also the inspired word of God. I hope you have also gathered something of the broad sweep of the many books of the Bible, the different kinds of literature that they are and the way in which they fit together. That means that when we are interpreting any particular Bible passage we have to look at it in its historical context (something I've tried to give particular emphasis today) and in the light of its place in the Bible as a whole. The Bible is a record of God's revelation of himself to humankind, the handbook of our Christian faith. As Christians we need to have confidence in it and to study it diligently in order to grow in our faith.