**GOSPEL AND KINGDOM SERIES**

**Part 1 WHAT IS THE OLD TESTAMENT?**

From the *literary* perspective, the Old Testament is a book, or rather, a collection of books. A common feature of these books is their association with a *history* that embraces a single part of human history. The Old Testament presents a *theological* dimension in that the history, which is the subject of the literature, is represented as a single history of God’s dealings with the world and with humanity.

**The Old Testament as Literature**

The Old Testament is a collection of 39 books written by a variety of authors over a period of around 1,000 years or more. Nearly all of the Old testament was written in Hebrew, an ancient language in the Northwest Semitic group, which was closely related to the language of the Canaanites. Some parts of the Old Testament were written in Aramaic, another Semitic language which was spoken throughout the Babylonian empire from where it was adopted by the Jews in the sixth century BCE.

It has been customary to divide the individual books into four groups: law, history, prophecy and poetry. Different literary forms function in different ways and some understanding of the various forms in Hebrew literature is needed to avoid misinterpreting the authors’ intentions. The Hebrew authors were not bound by the same rules of literary expression of our day. The Old Testament is an ancient collection, using ancient languages, to express thought forms which frequently differ from our own.

An Old Testament book can contain many different literary types. Each type needs to be recognised for what it is before it can be properly interpreted. Some of the literary types are familiar to us and present few difficulties as literary expressions. Others may not be as clear until we discover the nature and function of the type.

**The Old Testament as History**

The overall conviction of the biblical writers was the activity of God in history. God does not act in a fragmented, unrelated way. His acts are in a single, purposeful progression of salvation-history.

This history begins with the creation of the universe, our world and humanity. The history then focusses on man (Adam) and his relationship with God. After being ejected from paradise in Eden because of his rebellion against the Creator, man’s history is one of increasing and widespread sinfulness. This leads to destruction through the flood and to the preservation of one family. From this family of Noah, the lineage of humanity is shown to divide among the nations, although the biblical focus is on one line of Noah’s family, through Shem and leading to Abraham.

Abraham was called by God to leave Mesopotamia and to go to Canaan where he received promises from God concerning his descendants (of which there were none as yet). These promises were passed on to his son, Isaac, and to Isaac’s son, Jacob. The descendants of Jacob eventually migrated to Egypt and in time became a large nation. When they were subject to cruel slavery by the Egyptians, God sent Moses to lead them back into the land of Canaan which He had promised to give to Abraham’s descendants. This process was involved and included the making of a covenant at Mount Sinai in which the nation of Israel was bound to God as His people with all that implied.

The dispossession of the inhabitants of Canaan and the settlement in the land led to the development of the need for some form of government (administration) of the covenant. After a false start under king Saul, Israel received a great leader in the person of David. He united the tribes, established a capital city in Jerusalem, secured the borders and set up a proper administration. Unfortunately, David’s successor, his son, Solomon, became ambitious and unwise policies led to eventual dissatisfaction. When Solomon’s son, Rehoboam, came to the throne, there was a rebellion and the ten tribes of the north seceded to become the kingdom of Israel while the dynasty of David continued to rule over the southern kingdom of Judah and Benjamin.

The secession led to a general decline in both northern and southern kingdoms, although the prophets continued to call the people back to faithfulness to the covenant God. The north finally suffered defeat at the hands of the Assyrians (722BCE) and ceased to be an independent state. More than a century later the southern kingdom fell to the Babylonians with the final destruction of Jerusalem in 587BCE. Most of the people were taken to Babylon and Judah as a political entity ceased to be.

The exile in Babylon came to an end for the Jews when Cyrus the Persian overcame the power of Babylon and allowed the captive peoples to return home (538BCE). Many of the Jews chose to remain in Babylon. Those who returned faced a real struggle to reconstruct the state of Judah. With Persian help, some stability was reached and Jerusalem and the Temple were reconstructed. The glory of the golden age under David and Solomon, however, never returned.

Some three and a half centuries intervened between the last Old Testament era prophet and New Testament times. But this epoch was not without political developments. The Persian Empire crumbled when Alexander the Great pushed into Asia Minor and advanced to Egypt in the west and beyond Babylon to India in the east. Hellenistic culture was imposed upon Alexander’s empire by his successors and the Jews could not escape the fearful results of the conflict between the pagan Greek philosophies and way of life and the Hebrew devotion to the Law and the religion of the one true God. In the middle of the first century BCE, the Romans entered the Middle East region and the Jews found themselves a province of the greater Roman Empire.

**What Old Testament history is and is not**

TheOld Testament is not just a history of Israel or of the Jews. Part of it obviously deals with a period before the birth of the nation as a significant part of the overall story. Insofar as the Old Testament is history, it is theological history. It is the record of God’s dealings with the world and with humanity. The Bible does not record events as if they were determined by chance or by prior events. The history of the Bible is purposeful. The biblical historians relate events as the deeds of God, or as the deeds of men which are to be judged by the character of God. It is God who calls Abraham from Ur, who brings Israel out of Egypt, who raises up Cyrus to free Israel from Babylon, and who judges human action according to whether they are right or wrong in His sight.

The biblical story is therefore part of God’s word to humanity. God’s own interpretation of the events of biblical history makes known to us the purposes He is pursuing within this history. It is this interpretation of the events as God’s events which give the Bible its character of divine revelation. This is the consistent testimony of the Bible as it records how God speaks to humanity, declaring His purposes and intentions, how He acts on the basis of His word, and how He then interprets the events by His word.

This purposive history not only reveals the mind of God but also affects the way in which those thoughts are communicated. The selection of events and the recording of details is governed by the theological meaning rather than by any military or political significance. The fact that God acts in history and interprets His acts means that these historical events will form a pattern that relates the purposes of God. Biblical history is theological history.

**What is theology?**

Theology means the knowledge of God as God Himself reveals it. Biblical theology is the study of the revelation of God as He acts in this world, in the history of humanity. The most important concern in the study of the Bible is the revelation of God: what is God saying to us in the revelation of His acts? What did God do in entering in a special way into the history of humanity? What above all else creates the Bible’s unity is its theology? It is the one God who acts and speaks throughout the history in the Bible. God acts and speaks with a unity of purpose. God’s message to us is one unified discourse and not a series of isolated and disconnected messages.

We must be careful not to separate what God says and does from the context in which He says it and does it (the history), nor from the way He says and does it (the literary record). Seeing the essential unity of the Bible does not mean ignoring its diversity and complexity.

This study is essentially a summary of ‘What is the Old Testament?’ by Graeme Goldsworthy in ‘*Gospel and Kingdom’* (The Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1987)