The Old Testament in Seven Sentences: A Small Introduction to a Vast Topic

INTRODUCTION

Jesus got it down to two. Love God and love your neighbor — “all the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:40).

Micah got it down to three. “To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

Even Moses got it down to five. Fear, walk, love, serve, obey . . . that’s it (Deuteronomy 10:12-13).

So getting it down to seven should not be too hard.

That’s what I thought, anyway. But then I wondered, as you might also, is it really right to condense the Scriptures in this way? After all, God gave us a pretty big library of books in the Bible, most of them in the Old Testament part. Paul insists that “all Scripture [meaning the Old Testament in his day] is God-breathed and useful” (2 Timothy 3:16). Ought we to be shortening it all into bite-size sentences and small chapters of explanation? Is a book about the Bible like this one biblically appropriate?

In addition to those three extreme examples above, there are quite a number of other places in the Bible itself where the whole message is trimmed down to a very condensed version, in order to make some of the crucial points crystal clear. Typically this is done by telling the story, or whatever part of it had happened by that time. For example:

- Moses summarizes the story so far in Deuteronomy 1-3 to urge greater obedience to God in the future.
- Israelite farmers are to recite the story as a way of affirming God’s blessing and their own commitment to obey him (Deuteronomy 26:1-11).
- Joshua does it again with the next generation to urge them to go on choosing to serve their covenant God (Joshua 24).
- Two lengthy psalms, Psalms 105 and 106, tell the story again, showing how unfaithful Israel had been over the centuries & how much they owed, then and still, to the patience and grace of God.
- Nehemiah tells the whole story from creation to his own day as the basis for pleading with God for forgiveness and restoration of the people (Nehemiah 9:1-37).
- Jesus tells the story in the form of a parable about a vineyard and wicked tenants in a way that is very recognizable by those who oppose him (Matthew 21:33-46).
- Stephen tells the story, from Abraham to the crucifixion of Jesus, in a way that shows God’s impatience with the constant rebellion of his people and enrages Stephen’s listeners so much that they execute him for blasphemy (Acts 7:1-60).
- Paul tells the story (in almost seven sentences) in a rapid sequence that probably reflects his regular preaching and teaching: Abraham, exodus, land, judges, kings, David . . . and then straight to Jesus, Messiah and King (Acts 13:16-41).

What all these examples have in common, as I said, is that they do this summarizing work in narrative form. For that is essentially what the Old Testament (and indeed the whole Bible) is — the great story of the universe. All that the Old Testament has to teach us falls within the structure of that great story.

THE OLD TESTAMENT AS A LIBRARY

However, just before we fill out that story a little more, in relation to our seven sentences we should take note of the structure of the Old Testament as we have it in our English Bibles. It comes to us as a library of books, divided into several fairly clear sections or categories.

- The Pentateuch (a Greek word that means “five books”). These are the books from Genesis to Deuteronomy. The Bible calls this section the Torah. This word is often translated “the Law,” but that is somewhat misleading. The word actually means “guidance” or “teaching,” and although these books do contain laws that God gave to Israel, they also contain important narratives and a few songs and poems.
- Historical books. The books from Joshua to Esther give us the story of Israel, from the conquest of Canaan to the time after the Jews return from exile in Babylon — a period stretching from roughly 1200 to 450 BC.
- Poetic books. The books from Job to Song of Songs are a mixture of worship songs, wisdom texts, and a beautiful love poem.
- Prophets. Finally, the whole section from Isaiah to Malachi are books compiled from the preaching of those God raised up as prophets over a period of approximately three hundred years.

That is the order of the books in most modern Bibles. However, the order of books in the original Hebrew Scriptures, known as the canon, which Jews still use today and which would have been the order at the time of Jesus, is a little different. The whole library is divided into just three sections: the Law or Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings (or, as Jesus refers to the three sections, “the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” [Luke 24:44]).

The Torah

- The Pentateuch (as above).

The Prophets

- The Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, and 1-2 Kings (Jews regarded these as prophetic — that is, history told from God’s point of view).

The Writings

- Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1-2 Chronicles.
You can see from the table of contents that three of my seven sentences come from the Torah, one from the Former Prophets, two from the Latter Prophets, and one from the Writings.

THE OLD TESTAMENT AS A DRAMA

Let’s come back to the point that the Old Testament fundamentally tells a story. To be more precise, it tells the essential first part of the great story that the whole Bible tells. To change the picture a bit, the Bible is not just story; it is like a great drama — an enormous play with a huge cast of actors, all playing their part in a vast narrative whose author and director is God himself. Here’s the thing: we are not mere spectators, an audience in the theater of the Bible. No, we get to be part of the story; we become actors on stage. Indeed, we are called and commissioned to join the cast of God’s drama and play our part in our own generation. We are in the Bible. Let me explain further.

Like most great dramas, the drama of the Bible is divided into several acts — that is, major sections of the story in which distinct and significant things take place as the drama moves forward. We can picture the whole Bible as a drama with seven acts.¹

• **Act 1: Creation.** The whole drama begins when the one living and eternal God chooses to create what we call the universe — heaven and earth. He creates it “good,” and he creates human beings in God’s own image, to rule and serve his good creation.

• **Act 2: Rebellion.** Humans choose to distrust God’s goodness, disbelieve God’s word, and disobey God’s instructions. As a result, sin and evil enter into every dimension of human life, personal and social, and also corrupt all cultures and bring damage and frustration to creation.

• **Act 3: Promise.** The story of the rest of the Old Testament begins with God’s promise to Abraham that not only will he become a great nation (Israel), but also that through them God will bring blessing to all nations on earth. That promise and hope drives the story forward through the history of Israel in the Old Testament era, as we shall survey.

• **Act 4: Gospel.** The promise of the Old Testament comes to fulfillment when Jesus of Nazareth is born. The great central act of the drama of Scripture includes all that we read in the four Gospels: the conception, birth, life, teaching, atoning death, victorious resurrection, and ascension of Messiah Jesus.

• **Act 5: Mission.** The promise to Abraham must be fulfilled. The good news of what God has accomplished through his Son Jesus must go to all nations. This is launched at the end of the Gospels and the beginning of Acts, after the outpouring of the Spirit of God on the followers of Jesus.

• **Act 6: Final judgment.** The good news is that evil will not have the last word and God will ultimately put all things right (which is what judgment means in the Bible) by dealing with and destroying all that is wrong and evil. Act 6 is the completion of God’s answer to act 2 and of the accomplishment of act 4.

• **Act 7: New creation.** The Bible drama ends with a dramatic new beginning! After putting all things right, God will make all things new and will come to dwell with redeemed humanity in his restored creation forever.

Seeing the whole Bible story in this way has many benefits.

First of all, it keeps us attached to the way God has chosen to give us the Bible itself — not merely as a book full of promises, rules, or doctrines (there are plenty of these in the Bible, but these are not what the Bible actually is), but in the form of a grand narrative with a beginning and an ending (actually a new beginning) and the whole redemptive plot in the middle.

Second, it reminds us that this is our story. For if we have come to be followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, then we are participants in act five of the drama of Scripture. That’s where we are — somewhere between the resurrection of Christ and the return of Christ. In that place we have a role, a part to play, and a mission to accomplish, with God and for God.

Third, it shows us just how important the Old Testament is and how utterly wrong, misleading, and dangerous are those who tell Christians that they can happily ditch the Old Testament. This idea, which has become popular again (partly through sheer ignorance of the Bible and partly because of some high-profile preachers saying so), is not at all new. Less than a hundred years after Christ’s resurrection, a man named Marcion tried to persuade the church that the God of the Old Testament was a completely different god from the God and Father of Jesus (that’s where you heard it before, folks), and that the church should jettison the Old Testament and some parts of the New as well because they were too Jewish. The church rejected his teaching as wrong and heretical, and held on to the Old Testament Scriptures as a vital part of God’s full revelation and therefore of the Christian canon of the Bible.

And as we survey the seven acts of the drama of Scripture, we can see how important it is that they did so. Without the first three acts, Jesus becomes just another human savior of some kind. The story would lose its essential beginning (creation), its profound problem (sin), and the governing theme of God’s promise of blessing to all nations. If anyone suggests to you that you don’t need the Old Testament (and probably shouldn’t be reading this book), remind them that Jesus never read the New Testament, and the first Jesus followers (including the apostle Paul) went out into the world to evangelize, teach, and transform with only the Old Testament Scriptures at first — and did pretty well at it — until Paul started writing his letters and Mark produced his Gospel. Acts four through seven of the drama of Scripture all presuppose, build on, refer to, and quote the Scriptures that constitute acts one, two, and three. The whole story only makes sense as a whole story.

WHY THESE SEVEN SENTENCES?

Let me offer a word about how I came to choose my seven sentences. The first three more or less chose themselves. We have to begin with creation, as the whole Bible does, and think about what the stories of Genesis 1–11 tell us about the world, God, ourselves, and our terrible plight as rebels against our Creator.

And then we have to move on to that triggering moment when God calls and chooses Abraham and gives him that promise that really governs the rest of the Bible — through the story of Israel, onward and outward to
all nations in the whole earth. Paul calls our second sentence “the gospel” (Galatians 3:8).

From there we have to see the exodus as the greatest event of redemption in the Bible until the cross of Christ. In the same book we read about the covenant that God makes with Israel and the way of life that he calls the Israelites to observe (the law) in response to God’s saving grace. But it is all based on what God has done for them — hence our third sentence. The fourth was more difficult, since there is a huge chunk of history after the exodus. We can’t ignore it, but we can’t tell it in full — just a summary. However, in the middle of it comes the next most important covenant in the Bible — the one God makes with King David, since that points us eventually to King Jesus (as the apostle Paul was fond of saying). David grabbed the fourth sentence.

Having come that far, it seemed that we must tackle the great block of the books of the prophets. That seemed to split into two parts. Much of what the prophets have to say is challenging the people to turn back to God, to live in the way he wants, and warning them that if they do not do so, they will face horrendous judgment and destruction. Thus, for our fifth sentence I chose a well-known verse from Micah, one of those prophets who exposes the social depravity and injustice of the nation in contrast to what God truly wants from them. It is a verse that influenced Jesus also (Matthew 23:23) and inspires a lot of Christian ministry and mission today.

But the prophets also bring a message of hope beyond judgment. They have good news to share as they look into God’s future, for Israel and for the world, as God will keep his promise through Israel for all the nations on earth. The New Testament word for “gospel” actually comes from the Old Testament (in the Greek translation that was often used in the days of Jesus and the other disciples, especially Paul). My sixth sentence is a gospel word about God’s salvation, both for the exiles of Israel and also for “all the ends of the earth.” It is a sentence that Paul quotes (Romans 10:15) and has inspired various hymns and songs.

The book of Psalms is probably still the favorite part of the Old Testament for many people, even those who never read much else in the rest of it. As I mentioned above, it is the primary book in the third section of the Hebrew canon, the Writings. It wasn’t hard to choose as our seventh sentence what is also probably many people’s favorite verse from their favorite psalm. And that provided a way to access both the book of Psalms itself and the Wisdom books in the same part of our Bible.

Finally, two small points before we plunge in. First, this is a short book, so although I do quote some essential texts, it isn’t possible to lay out lengthy quotations of the biblical text. I hope you will enjoy just reading the book itself, but for best results, it really will be helpful, whenever convenient, to read the book with your Bible close at hand so that you can check out some of the references that I have scattered in to support the points being made. After all, the whole point of choosing these seven sentences is to encourage you to read a lot more of them in the Bible itself.

Second, after many years of teaching and writing on the Old Testament, it is not likely that what I think or write for a new book like this will be entirely new. I have taken the liberty of referring in the notes to bigger books by myself and others that can take you deeper and further if you want to. I am also particularly grateful to Zondervan Publishers and Langham Partnership for permission to condense and adapt in a few places in this book some material that was first published in my book How to Preach and Teach the Old Testament for All It’s Worth (Zondervan, 2016), also published as Sweeter than Honey: Preaching the Old Testament (Langham Preaching Resources, 2016).

1. This idea as a way of laying out the story and message of the whole Bible comes from Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014). They propose a six act sequence in the Biblical drama by including the final judgment in their Act 6. I prefer the way my Act 6 balances Act 2, and makes the gospel the central part of the whole drama.