

The Story – Act I

I just argued that you should read the Bible, but I said very little about what’s in it. That is about to change. In this chapter - and the one that follows it - we’re going up to 30,000 feet to look down on the narrative that unfolds across several thousand years.

If you’ve read the Bible, you know that it is more than just a story. The library of books it contains employs an array of genres to comment on hundreds of topics.¹ But while The Book is more than just a story, it is never less than one. And we need to understand the key story if we hope to understand ourselves or to rightly answer the Seven Life Questions.

In this chapter we will focus on the Old Testament, which I am presenting as Act One of a three-act play.²

The Prologue

If you told me you were heading to the theater to watch The Bible enacted as a play, I’d encourage you to get there early. My reasoning would be simple – when the Bible is presented as a play, the logical place to start is Genesis 12 (the call of Abraham). That means the events found in Genesis 1 – 11 are summarized in the Playbill.

The reason I’d encourage you to get to the theater early is so you had enough time to read the Playbill, because if you didn’t your ability to understand what was going on would be limited. Stories follow a basic pattern: Things are going well, something bad happens, and you keep reading to find out how everything is resolved.³ In the Bible, the first two parts of the arc happen in the early chapters of Genesis.

- In Genesis 1 and 2 we learn that a holy, loving and all-powerful Creator spoke the universe into existence, and that at the climax of his creative activity he formed beings in his image and placed them in charge.
- In Genesis 3 we read the “something bad happens” section. It’s here that we are told about a failed insurrection staged by those the Creator left in charge. We also learn that the results are calamitous. Not only are the people now estranged from each other and cut off from God, they have been forced from their home and are mortally wounded.

- And it is in the prologue that we learn several other important things: 1) That everyone and everything has been broken by the coup; 2) That the Creator has killed several animals to provide clothing for the people; and 3) That the Creator has pledged to send someone to rescue them and reestablish his kingdom.

If you arrive in time to read the Playbill before the curtain rises on Act I, you understand that chaos and suffering have been spreading throughout the land, but that the Creator has promised to send someone to defeat evil, rescue people and restore creation.⁴ The questions you are asking as the lights dim are: *Will God really send help? And if so, who and when?*

Scene One: The Patriarchs

As the play begins, the spotlight falls on Abraham, an unremarkable, idol-worshipping shepherd to whom God offers a deal:⁵

The LORD said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

Abraham is told that if he follows God, God will not only provide him with land and descendants, he will also bless him in such a profound way that the entire world will benefit. This enormously important event – which theologians refer to as the Abrahamic Covenant – sets up everything that follows.

In the first scene, Abraham takes God at his word and waits for an heir. To his dismay, though he secures the land and acquires considerable wealth, he and Sarai do not have a child. Their days are filled with bareness, foreign kings, natural disasters, and hostile neighbors.

On two occasions Abraham and Sarah take matters into their own hands – first by adopting a son and later through surrogate motherhood. But neither plan advances God's plan. It is not until Sarah is ninety years old - and all human hope for a child has been exhausted - that she becomes pregnant and gives birth to Isaac.⁶

We are told little of Isaac's early years other than a seminal event we must not overlook. While Isaac was still a young man, God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac on a distant mountain. The account is relayed in Genesis 22:

Sometime later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about."

This command must have struck Abraham and Sarah as unthinkable. Who is this God we are following? In good faith they had left everything to travel to a new land. After waiting twenty-five years for the birth of a son God was now requiring them to offer the boy as a sacrifice. Can you imagine their anguish?

What did Abraham do?

Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you."

Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?"

"Yes, my son?" Abraham replied.

"The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together.

When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

"Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."

Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided."

The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, "I swear by myself,⁷ declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."

What is going on here? Why did God put Abraham through such a horrible trial? Part of the answer is found in the words of the angel. Abraham was tested to see if he trusted God. But several other important things are occurring as well.

By asking Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, only to substitute a ram at the last minute, God was doing three things: 1) He was re-establishing the two key principles from the prologue: sin is a capital offense, but guilty people can go free if an innocent third party dies in their place;⁸ 2) He was foreshadowing Christ's crucifixion for our sins; and 3) He was illustrating how unthinkable it is to ask a loving father to sacrifice his only son – which is what he will have to do later on.

Make no mistake, this passage points to Christ. Not only was Isaac Abraham's "only" son, but the mountain to which Abraham led Isaac for the sacrifice was the same location where Jesus would later be crucified.⁹

Scene One follows Abraham until his death, and then pivots to Isaac, with whom God reaffirms the promises he made to Abraham. In Genesis 24, Isaac marries and fathers twin boys. Jacob, the younger of the two, turns out to be a liar and a cheat, but God loves him and reaffirms the promises he made to Abraham and Isaac to him. God also blesses Jacob (whose name is eventually changed to Israel) with twelve sons, who become the founders of the twelve tribes of Israel.¹⁰

In the last part of Scene One we follow one of the sons, Joseph, after his older brothers sell him into slavery. What they meant for evil God redeems for good. Over time, Joseph rises to great power in Egypt and is able to rescue his father and brothers when a famine falls on the promised land.

Scene Two: The Exodus

Though Scene One ends well for Abraham's heirs – now called *Jews* or *Hebrews* - Scene Two opens poorly. Four hundred years have passed since Joseph welcomed his family to Egypt. Though they have now grown to nearly two million in number, they are living as slaves, have lost control of the Promised Land and have apparently lost favor with God.¹¹ When Scene Two opens, they are crying out to God for deliverance but receiving no response.

The situation changes almost immediately when God breaks the silence by speaking to Moses - an eighty-year-old shepherd living in the Sinai desert – and instructs him to liberate his people from Pharaoh.

Like Abraham before him, Moses had apparently been minding his own business when the Lord called upon him. The account is recorded in Exodus 3.

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up."

When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from the bush, "Moses! Moses!"

And Moses said, “Here I am.”

"Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God...

The LORD said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."

God recruited Moses to free the Jews from slavery so they could return to him and the Promised Land. Four significant events followed:

God Revealed His Name to Moses: Moses initially balks at the assignment. After finally agreeing to attempt it, he asks God for his name. “Moses said to God, 'Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' What shall I tell them?'"

This question – “What is your name?” – is a significant one. Moses is not asking, “What shall we call you?” but “Who are you? What are you like?”¹² God’s response is fittingly profound:

"I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.' God also said to Moses, 'Say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation.'"

Much has been written about this. I will note only two things:

- This is the first instance in which God reveals his name. Prior to this he had always shared only his titles.¹³
- The name God shares, “I AM WHO I AM,” is a declaration that he is in charge. By sharing it he is revealing that He is self-existent, self-sufficient, and all-powerful. His name is designed to say, “I will be who I am, and not who you try to make me. I depend upon nothing except my own will. The world is mine and I control it.”¹⁴

The Trail of Blood Continues. The second significant event in Scene Two returns our focus to the “Crimson Thread” that began in Genesis 3.

Though God charged Moses with securing the Jews’ release from Egyptian captivity, Pharaoh’s refusal to part with his labor force set up an epic showdown.¹⁵ After Pharaoh rebuffed Moses’s request to allow the Jews to retreat into the desert to rest, Moses announced that Egypt would be

wracked by plagues until Pharaoh relented. Ten plagues followed, beginning with the corruption of Egypt's water supply, and ending with the death of every first-born male. When the last plague hit - and Pharaoh's own son was killed - he finally agreed to let the Jews go free.

This tenth plague - which is commemorated in the Jewish Passover - is another place where God reinforces the theme from the Prologue: Sin is a capital offense, but a guilty party can go free if an innocent third party dies in its place. Indeed, the instructions God gave to the Jews were designed to make this clear.

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron... "Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household. The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect... Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the people of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight. Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they eat the lambs. On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn—both men and animals—and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt."

God required the Jews to slaughter a lamb at Passover for the same reason he had animals killed in the Garden and instructed Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. These acts were done to highlight the gravity of sin and the moral beauty of a substitute.¹⁶

The Covenant is Renewed: The third noteworthy event in Scene Two happens when the people meet God, renew the Covenant, and receive the Law.

Following their remarkable escape from Egypt, Moses led the Jews through the desert to Mount Sinai, where God revealed his power in an awesome display of fire and light.¹⁷ He then explained the nature of their special assignment.

Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'"¹⁸

In other words, the Jews were given a job to do: They were to be God's show and tell. When they obeyed him, he would bless them and eventually bless the whole world through them.¹⁹ This calling - which is captured in what we refer to as the Mosaic Covenant - shaped Israel from this point forward.

Exactly what did God expect them to do? To answer this question, God gave Moses the Law - a set of religious, moral, and civil commands centered around the Ten Commandments. The Law was designed to serve the Jews in several ways:

- *It helped them establish a healthy society.* Most cultures are not healthy enough to last hundreds of years, let alone thousands. God’s law was designed to help the Jews craft a culture that would last.²⁰
- *It revealed God’s nature.* The Law is not an arbitrary collection of rules; it is a set of principles that emerge from God’s character. These principles help us understand His heart and reflect the way creation works. (Though we may think we can violate God’s law without “getting caught,” this is never ultimately true. Not only will we face a final judgment, but every sin malforms us. We do not break God’s laws so much as we break ourselves against them).
- The final thing the law does is help the Jews see their own sin. By establishing what holiness looks like, the Law helped them realize they were sinful. No matter how hard they tried, they could not perfectly keep the law. Indeed, they not only lacked the power to do so, they lacked the desire to try.

The Sacrificial System was Established: The last event of Scene Two that we need to be aware of is the introduction of the sacrificial system. In addition to giving His people the Law, God instructed them to build a tabernacle where the priests could conduct sacrifices.²¹ Those who violated the Law were required to take an unblemished animal to the priest, who would perform a ceremony during which the guilt of the person was transferred to the animal and the animal was killed.

While it can be easy to get lost in the details of this system – e.g., how often were sacrifices to occur, who was qualified to conduct these services, what type of animals were to be killed, etc.²² – the key is simple. The system was designed to reinforce the two points that have been surfacing since Genesis 3: Sin is a capital offense, but guilty people can go free if an innocent third party dies in their place.

For most of the next 1,000 years, the fire at the altar would never go out. Hundreds of sacrifices took place every day. Thousands took place every week. The two big ideas were being drilled into the hearts of the people.

Scenes Three and Four: The Conquest and Judges

After God had passed down the law, he commanded the Jews to return to the Promised Land, but they refused to go. In spite of securing their release from Egypt, parting the Red Sea and sustaining them in the desert, they doubted his ability to escort them to the Promised Land.²³

In response to their disobedience, God condemns them to spend the next forty years wandering in the desert. It was not until every adult who had refused his command had died, that the Jews were given another chance to re-enter the land God had given to Abraham.

Because Moses was among those who died during the wait, Joshua steps in to lead the people. Not long after assuming his responsibilities, he leads the people across the Jordan River and, through the battles they needed to fight to reclaim the Promised Land.²⁴

Scene III ends with Joshua's farewell address. In it he pleads with the Jews to honor God. But the opening of Scene Four makes it clear that they do not do that. For the next three hundred years, the Jews repeatedly cycle through five stages of rebellion and repentance.

- Step One: The people dishonor God by worshipping idols.
- Step Two: God withdraws his protection, and they are overrun by enemies.
- Step Three: They ask God for help, promising that this time they will remain faithful.
- Step Four: God answers their cries by sending a judge to overthrow their oppressors.²⁵
- Step Five: The people are briefly faithful, but then return to their previous patterns of sin, which is captured by the refrain of the Book of Judges: "every man did what was right in his own eyes."

These five stages play on a continual loop throughout Scene Four.²⁶

Scene Five: The United Kingdom

Around 1000 B.C., the Jews decide they want a king. This outrages Samuel, who argues that God is their king, but God instructs him to give them what they want.

The first person to ascend the throne is Saul, a tall, good-looking, young warrior. He starts well but quickly grows proud, loses favor with God and disappoints everyone.²⁷

The second king is David, who is everything Saul was not. During his tenure, David unites the kingdom, defeats Israel's enemies, establishes Jerusalem as the capital, expands the country's borders and fills their treasury with gold. Though he will make sinful choices later in life, David finds favor with God and renews the Abrahamic covenant with him.²⁸

After David's death, Solomon becomes king, and like his father, initially serves with distinction. Among his many accomplishments is the construction of a spectacular temple. Unfortunately, Solomon adopts his father's practice of having multiple wives, which leads him to worship foreign gods and weakens the kingdom.²⁹

After Solomon's death, his kingdom briefly passes to Rehoboam, one of his sons. But after Rehoboam raises taxes, Jeroboam – another of Solomon's sons - leads a coup against him and takes ten of the twelve tribes with him.

Scene Six: The Divided Kingdom

The ten tribes under Jeroboam's leadership immediately turn from God and begin a slide into oblivion. Over the next 300 years, a series of prophets will warn, threaten and beg the people to

return to God, but they refuse. In 722 BC they are overrun by the Assyrians and never heard from again.

The two tribes that remain with Rehoboam – which operate under the name Judah - fair marginally better. Several of Judah's kings honor God, but over time the people spiritually drift, God withdraws his protection and in 586 BC they are overrun by the Babylonians. At this point, the temple is destroyed, Jerusalem is sacked and the people are marched to Babylon. They will spend the next seventy years living there as exiles.

Scene Seven: The Exile

The books of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Jeremiah tell the story of the Jew's next seven decades, which are among their very worst.

Under God's favor they had grown from a man to a family to a tribe and then to a nation. The path had not been straight up, but under David and Solomon they had reached superpower status. At that point most Jews thought it was clear, they were God's chosen people and his blessing was on them. But in Babylon they were slaves once again. They had lost their land, their freedom, and even lost the altar they needed to atone for their sins.

The prophets Ezekiel and Daniel assured the people that God would keep his promises and carry out the plan. But not everyone was so sure.

Scene Eight: The Return

In the final scene of Act One, the Jews situation improves a bit. In 539 BC, the Babylonians were over-thrown by the Persians, and the Persians allowed most of the Jews to return home. And under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah a modest restoration of Jerusalem took place.

Israel was not the world power she once was, but a remnant had returned home and begun to rebuild.

It is at this moment that the curtain falls and Act One ends. In eight scenes – covering nearly 1,600 years - we have watched the rise, fall and modest restoration of Abraham's descendants.

As we stand up for the intermission, one of the questions we are asking is, "How much longer is this story going to go on? God made promises to the Jews, but He seems slow to act on them.

Meanwhile, they keep messing up." You find yourself growing exhausted by how long this is going on and wonder, "How will it end?"

The answer must await Act II.

¹ The Bible is more than just a story. The 66 books that make up the Bible – 39 in the Old Testament (also called the Hebrew Bible) and the 27 in the New Testament – use proverbs, prophecy, poetry and more to comment on marriage, war, finance, love, sex, morality and more.

² I am indebted to others who have outlined the Bible along these lines, including Michael Goheen and Craig Bartholomew (*The Storyline of the Bible*), and Kevin VanHoozer (*The Drama of Scripture*).

³ This formula is stated several ways: 1) Creation, Fall, Redemption; 2) Paradise, Paradise Lost. In many ways, every good story follows this same pattern. J.R.R. Tolkien persuaded C.S. Lewis that the reason Lewis was drawn to this formula was because it was the one that was animating the universe.

⁴ It is hard to overstate how important theologians consider the backstory – i.e., Genesis 1-11. I will limit myself to three comments:

- The death of the animals – “The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.” (Genesis 3:21) - begins a trail of blood that will eventually lead to Christ’s crucifixion thousands of years later. It is the first instance of the idea that an innocent third party can die in the place of a guilty person, so that the guilty person can go free;
- The promise God makes to send a rescuer is found in Genesis 3:14, where it is made while cursing the serpent, “I [God] will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers. He will crush your head and you will strike his heel.” In other words, God promised that one day he would send someone to destroy Satan (crush his head), rescue mankind, and restore creation. This rescuer will succeed even though he will be wounded (struck in the heel) in the process. (Note: because this is the first time this good news is shared, theologians refer to it as the proto-evangelion – the first Gospel);
- The prologue also contains more of what theologians refer to as Universal History. Gen. 3-11 contain the story of “two interwoven developments: the increasing darkness of sin and God’s faithfulness to His promise to banish that darkness. The tide of wrongdoing continues to rise. It reaches a peak in Noah’s time, and God decides to destroy the earth with a great flood and start over again with one family. God saves Noah from the great flood on a large boat. After the flood, Noah’s descendants turn out to be no different from their predecessors (cf. Gen. 6:5 and 8:21). Like the previous generation, they ignore God and go their own way. This continued rebellion climaxes in the building of the tower at Babel, a monument to humanity’s treasonous revolt (Gen. 9:18-11:1-9). But amidst sin’s forward march, God has remained faithful to His promise. When the righteous Abel was killed God raised up Seth and a godly line that would remain faithful to Himself (Gen.4:25-5:32). When the whole world became wicked, God preserved Noah through His judgment (Gen.6:8). After the flood, when Noah set foot on dry ground, God promised that He would protect the world from disaster and recover it again from the ravages of human rebellion. Yet this long period of human sinfulness and God’s faithfulness ends on a sour note. In the story of Babel the whole world turns against God.” See Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen, *The Storyline of the Bible*.

⁵ Because the Bible unfolds in a series of covenants – i.e., “relationships of love and obligation between parties” – and because there are several different types of covenants, two points need to be made right away: 1) covenants are divided between those that are made between equal and unequal parties. (All of the covenants made between God and mankind reflect God’s position of superiority. They are also all initiated by God. He alone determines the nature of our relationship with Him as well as the time and duration of the covenants; 2) Covenants may also be divided between those that are conditional – i.e., if one side breaks their promise the other side is released from its obligations – and those that are unconditional. The Bible contains both. In fact, God enters into both.

⁶ Isaac means “laughter”. He is named laughter because this was Sarah’s response when she was told that she would become pregnant. (See Genesis 18:13-15)

⁷ Here we see that God can not swear by anything higher than himself – and so when he makes a promise he says, “I swear by myself.”

⁸ Some theologians include the account of Abel’s death at the hand of his brother, Cain, as the second stop along this *Trail of Blood*. As you may remember, in Genesis 6 both were asked to offer a sacrifice to God. Cain, a farmer, brought fruit. Abel, a shepherd, brought blood. Cain’s offering was not accepted. Abel’s was. As a result of Cain’s corresponding jealousy he struck and killed his brother. The argument – which I appreciate – is that the blood sacrifice was worth more because, “without the shedding of blood there can be no forgiveness” (Heb. 9:22). However, there is more to this story than the difference between the nature of the sacrifices (i.e., Cain’s heart was not right), as grain sacrifices are accepted in other settings. I believe that the crescendo leading up to the cross of Christ is powerfully made without the Genesis 6 account and so chose to leave it out.

⁹ This is an important point and worthy of reflection. I expand on it here to make three additions: 1) In 2 Chronicles 3:1 we see that Mount Moriah, which is located in southern Palestine, would later be renamed Mount Zion, which is the mountain upon which Jerusalem was built and Jesus Christ was crucified; 2) it is important to note the biggest difference between Isaac being on the altar and Jesus. When Jesus is on the altar, no angel yells “stop”. As one writer stated, “God so loved Abraham that He spared Isaac’s life. But God so loved the world the he gave up his only begotten Son;” and 3) it’s not just that this story points to Jesus, the entire Bible does. As Tim Keller writes: Jesus is the true and better Adam who passed the test in the garden and whose obedience is imputed to us; Jesus is the true and better Abel who, though innocently slain, has blood now that cries out, not for our condemnation, but for acquittal; Jesus is the true and better Abraham who answered the call of God to leave all the comfortable and familiar and go out into the void not knowing wither he went to create a new people of God; Jesus is the true and better Isaac who was not just offered up by his father on the mount but was truly sacrificed for us. And when God said to Abraham, “Now I know you love me because you did not withhold your son, your only son whom you love from me,” now we can look at God taking his son up the mountain and sacrificing him and say, “Now we know that you love us because you did not withhold your son, your only son, whom you love from us;” Jesus is the true and better Jacob who wrestled and took the blow of justice we deserved, so we, like Jacob, only receive the wounds of grace to wake us up and discipline us; Jesus is the true and better Joseph who, at the right hand of the king, forgives those who betrayed and sold him and uses his new power to save them; Jesus is the true and better Moses who stands in the gap between the people and the Lord and who mediates a new covenant; Jesus is the true and better Rock of Moses who, struck with the rod of God’s justice, now gives us water in the desert; Jesus is the true and better Job, the truly innocent sufferer, who then intercedes for and saves his stupid friends; Jesus is the true and better David whose victory becomes his people’s victory, though they never lifted a stone to accomplish it themselves; Jesus is the true and better Esther who didn’t just risk leaving an earthly palace but lost the ultimate and heavenly one, who didn’t just risk his life, but gave his life to save his people; Jesus is the true and better Jonah who was cast out into the storm so that we could be brought in; Jesus is the real Rock of Moses, the real Passover Lamb, innocent, perfect, helpless, slain so the angel of death will pass over us. He’s the true temple, the true prophet, the true priest, the true king, the true sacrifice, the true lamb, the true light, the true bread. The Bible’s really not about you—it’s about him.

¹⁰ In Genesis 32:22ff, God changes Jacob’s name to Israel.

¹¹ Not long after Joseph’s death a Pharaoh arose who “knew not Joseph.” This new leader grew concerned about the strength of the Jews and, as a result, the Jews fell out of favor with their Egyptian hosts and were forced into slavery.

¹² They were descriptive of the person's character as well. This is why God often changed the name of people after some change had taken place in their life – e.g., Abram became Abraham after the birth of Isaac, Jacob became Israel after he wrestled with God, and Simon became Peter in the New Testament.

¹³ The titles of God – Hebrew words such as El, Elohim, El Shaddi, El Elyon – are generally translated into English as simply God. But they are not proper names as much as they are descriptions.

¹⁴ From this point forward, most English Bibles translate God's name as *LORD*. The use of all capital letters is meant to distinguish it from the word *Lord*, which is the translation of one of the Hebrew titles for God. Occasionally some versions translate the word as "Yahweh." Also, *Yahweh* is derived from the four consonants used in Hebrew to spell the third person form of the verb "to be" (I am). YHWH is generally pronounced Yahweh. (An older English form, "Jehovah", was derived from a mispronunciation of these four consonants).

¹⁵ The text in Exodus 4:21 actually states that God "hardened Pharaoh's heart", suggesting that what unfolds occurs so God can show himself to the Jews – both his power and his superiority over Egyptian gods.

¹⁶ One of the knocks against the Bible is that it talks too much about blood. For what it's worth, that seemed only marginally less weird in ancient times than it does today. In fact, when the residents of Roman heard that the early Christians were gathering to "eat the body" and "drink the blood" of Jesus, they accused Christians of cannibalism. In spite of that fact that this charge fueled opposition against the church, the disciples did not stop speaking about blood, because the symbolism was central to the message.

¹⁷ The Book of Exodus is full of miracles. Not only is the parting of the Red Sea a significant event that will be referenced again and again as a sign of just how powerful God is – there were likely two million Jews plus livestock who needed to cross the river bed, so much more than a small path was needed. But even after that God supernaturally cared for them. He led them in the form of a cloud by day (shade) and a fire by night (light and warmth) and provided them with food and water while in the desert.

¹⁸ Exodus 19

¹⁹ The Mosaic Covenant has another aspect as well. When the Jews disobey God he will curse them. When you distill the covenant down in this way it sounds quite awful. In fact, the actual reading and meditation on the Old Covenant is very uplifting because it is based on principles of truth, justice, and goodness.

²⁰ Having lived in slavery for 400 years, the Jews needed help setting up a society now that they were free. And it was imperative that it be a healthy one because it was through the Jews that the Savior would be born. This society needed to last.

²¹ The tabernacle would later be replaced by the temple. The first would be built by Solomon. It was destroyed in 587 B.C. by the Babylonian. A second temple, smaller in scale, was rebuilt in Jerusalem after a remnant returned from exile. This second temple was later expanded by Herod the Great.

²² The sacrificial system is a big theme about which much could be said. Please note: 1) God designated the men of the tribe of Levi to serve as the priests; 2) the book of Leviticus was directed to them. The reason many find it so hard to read (and so off-putting because of all the blood) is because it is filled with the rules governing the priests; 3) not all sacrifices were of animals. (In the Old Testament there are sacrifices of grains and liquids, but these do not play prominently in the New Testament); 4) once a year all twelve tribes gathered together for a time of national confession. During this annual rite – called the Day of Atonement - after offering sacrifices for his own sins (Lev. 16), the High Priest would lead the nation in a time of corporate repentance. This would involve using two goats. The high priest would lay his hands on one, thereby transferring the sins of the people to it, at which point it would be driven into the wilderness –

visually demonstrating the removal of sin. He would then take the second and sacrifice it to show that blood must be shed for sins to be forgiven. (It is from the events of the Day of Atonement that the term “scapegoat” was developed.)

²³ The Book of Exodus is filled with displays of God’s power. The parting of the Red Sea is well known – thanks in part to Cecil B. DeMille. What is less appreciated is the way God provided food and water for up to two million disorganized former slaves – and their animals – as they trekked through the desert.

²⁴ Why was the land so important? For starters, God promised it to Abraham. Perhaps at a deeper level the land is important because it is so clearly designed to build faith. It is a rather inhospitable piece of real estate that does not support life easily. It keeps those living there dependent upon God.

²⁵ These judges were not legal scholars but military leaders who helped govern the twelve tribes.

²⁶ There are three points worth noting here: 1) This pattern is summarized in Judges 2:11-23; 2) The exception to the rule is Ruth – both the book and the character; 3) Many who are casually acquainted with the Bible believe that the God of the Old Testament is impatient. However, those who read through the Old Testament realize that he is patient to the point of appearing to be taken advantage of. The Jews repeatedly violate the covenant and yet he restores them each time they repent and cry out for help.

²⁷ I Samuel 9 and following

²⁸ 1) In addition to being prominently featured in both I Samuel and I Kings, David wrote many of the Psalms; 2) his selection as king is noteworthy in part because he did not fit Jewish expectations. Not only was he the youngest son (when the oldest was always favored), but his father was not distinguished in any way and David’s family was a member of the smallest of the twelve tribes; 3) the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam. 7, 1 Chr, 17:11-14 and 2 Chr. 6:16) was an unconditional promise made by God to David. It declared that the Messiah (Jesus Christ) would be a direct descendant of David’s. 4) No conditions were placed on the covenant God made with David, which is a good thing, because like every other prominent figure in the Hebrew Bible, David proved to be very flawed. Though he pursued God with vigor in his youth, he later disobeyed the prohibition against having more than one wife, which proved disastrous. The account of his later years reads like the headlines from a grocery store tabloid.

²⁹ One of the themes developed in the Bible – which is relatively easy to see in a broad survey such as this – is that the sins of the fathers are often repeated by sons.