



Introducing THE OLD TESTAMENT

Not a book but a little library -
a collection of documents
written by a wide variety of different authors
over hundreds of years,
many different kinds of literature
including narratives, poems, laws,
speeches, announcements.

Together they present a picture of
The LORD, Yahweh, the God of Israel,
and his relationship with the world He has created
and the people He has called to serve Him.

Their importance for us
is that these are the Scriptures
which Jesus knew and loved,
by which his faith in God was nourished,
and on which he based
his Good News of the Kingdom of God.

The **prophets** (or *Nevi'im*) – in two sections :
The former prophets, Joshua, Judges, Samuel & Kings are
narratives of the people of Israel from their arrival
in Canaan to the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE.
The latter prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and
the Scroll of the Twelve, ie Hosea to Malachi, were written
before, during and after the exile in Babylon (587-538)
calling the people of Israel to return to the Lord and to
be faithful to Him.

The **writings** (or *Ketuvim*) – three books of poetry –
Psalms, Proverbs and Job; ‘the five scrolls’ read at
Jewish festivals – Songs of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations,
Ecclesiastes and Esther; and three books of late
authorship – Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, & Chronicles.

These books make up our English Old Testament,
although they appear in a different order.

Reading ideas:

Samuel Wells

The Heart of it All -The Bible's Big Picture Canterbury Press 2019
Central themes of the Bible are set out in a simple narrative
structure- ideal for those who want short chapters, easy to read
with theological depth. Approx. 100 pages long.

Trevor Dennis

Looking God in the Eye – Encountering God in Genesis SPCK 1998
Face to Face with God—Moses, Eluma and Job SPCK 1999
Sarah Laughed- Women's Voices in the Old Testament SPCK 1994
Well worthwhile reading if you have more time.

The Old Testament scriptures are works of creative imagination – wonderful stories, beautiful poetry, sharp social analysis. In beautiful language and powerful rhetoric these writings present a world which owes its being to the LORD, Yahweh, a world and a history in which the LORD is always active.

But they are old. They reflect the time and circumstances in which they were written. They need to be read with this in mind.

For Christians these writings form the Old Testament. (But remember : not for Jews, they aren't. For Jews they are the Scriptures.) For Christians the New Testament is based on the Old, but develops it. As Jesus said “You have heard that it was said.....but I say to you”. The New Testament updates the Old, but also affirms it.

The writers of the Old Testament were inspired in producing works of artistic and literary creativity; the term inspired is used similarly in the way we speak of Mozart's music or Shakespeare's plays as inspired.

But when Christians say the writings of the Old Testament were inspired they mean more than that. One New Testament writer describes them as *theopneustos* – “God-breathed”. That does not mean God dictated them into the writer's ear. Nor does it mean they are perfect. They include stories of horrible massacres which people thought were ordered by the Lord, but when we see them in the light of Jesus' life and teaching we can see how horrible they were.

What it means is that read together as a whole, the Old and the New Testament, they contain God's message to everyone. Together they form the Canon of Scripture. This implies they are normative for the community of the people of God. Together they give an authoritative picture of what God is like and how God is calling us to live.

The Jewish Scriptures, our Old Testament, were written in classical Hebrew (except a small part written in Aramaic). The New Testament was written in first-century Greek. In both Jewish and Christian communities there was some debate about a few writings, whether or not they should be included in the Canon, although there was always agreement about the great majority of the writings. (There are still minor differences between Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant versions of the Bible.) They have been translated into English many times over the past 700 years.

The Contents of our English Old Testament

The Old Testament in our English Bibles is a translation based on two earlier documents, the Hebrew Scriptures, and the Septuagint, a translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek made in the centuries before Christ.

The Hebrew scriptures are divided into three sections: **Torah, Prophets and Writings**.

The **Torah**, or “Teaching”, the “Five books of Moses”, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, with narratives of the patriarchs and of the formation of the people of Israel, together with laws and instructions.