

Old Testament Survey 01 - How to Read the Old Testament for the Bible Institute at Gulf Coast Baptist Church **Spring 2026** by Steve Thomas

Introduction

When Paul told Timothy that All Scripture was given by inspiration and is profitable multiple ways to the man of God, at that time, he was speaking of the Old Testament. As the days went on, it came to include the revelation that Paul was bringing to man, as well as that of Peter, James, John, Luke, Matthew, John Mark, and Jude. It is easy to consider the Old Testament as a collection of children's stories and the occasional prophecy and word of wisdom in Proverbs. But the Word of God is powerful and necessary for the believer, and this includes the Old Testament. One of the most crippling practices of the believer is the mistreatment of the Word of God. How should the Old Testament be read and applied properly? That is the main purpose of this course. Equipping students with a map for reading the Old Testament will be valuable in the Christian Life. Each additional class will be like "plugging books into the map" that we provide today. The Old Testament is not just a collection of disconnected facts and stories.

What is the Old Testament?

39 books (24 in the TaNaK) in 5 groupings: The Law (books of Moses), History, Poetry and Wisdom, and the Major and Minor Prophets. The OT is the foundation of God's covenant program, setting up the Messiah and kingdom hope. Genesis provides an account of the origins of man and the reason why redemption is necessary, as well as the people who God elected to use to reveal himself to the ancient world. He made covenants with those people, promising them a kingdom with rule from the heavens. In order to bring this kingdom to power, the Messiah, the first begotten One - totally unique to human history - would come to offer God's righteousness to man. The failure of God's people to fulfill their side of the covenants resulted in them being set aside in judgement. The restoration of God's people was prophesied along with the Redeemer who would come to bring it to pass.

How Did God Reveal the Truth? Dispensationalism

Understanding progressive revelation is vital to keep the believer from falling into the trap of uniformitarianism. God did not reveal Himself all at once. He used differing economies to teach His creation about themselves. The Old Testament chronicles 5 different types of stewardship (economies) and even predicted a 6th. In each of these, God chose a manager (steward) who He revealed truth and gave a rule of life. Included in this revelation was the judgement for failure. God is unfolding His plan through time. Ephesians 1:10; 3:2 give us the framework of these dispensations that we apply to the writings of the Old Testament.

The 7 Dispensations

Another major failure of our churches has been a lack of accurate teaching on the economies that God set up. The 6th dispensation, Grace/Church, was a mystery in the Old Testament. This causes confusion each time an attempt is made to read the Church into the OT. The OT is basically Promise + Law, with a lead-in to the Kingdom. Then bam! Hard stop! The kingdom that is offered in the gospels is rejected... This leads into the setting aside of Israel, and the

establishment of the Church, the Body of Christ, and all the revelation that comes with that. God does a new thing, He puts His quality of life into the “earthen vessels” of those that believe. He also puts those individuals into a new creation (word “creature” is used in 2 Cor 5:17). He baptizes (immerses) the believer into the Body of Christ. This is what we call Eternal Life and Resurrection Life. Not understanding these “new” things, and seeking to read them into the OT causes confusion. Equally as confusing is the attempt to find doctrine for the believer’s practice into the OT. The OT scriptures are there for the Grace Believer’s learning to give him hope (Romans 15:4).

The Backbone of the Old Testament - the Covenants

In order to establish a relationship with His chosen people, God put up a framework that governs expectations and accountability. These agreements are called covenants. Some major covenants of the OT are the Noahic, Abrahamic, Davidic, and then the New Covenant (with Israel, not to be confused with the New Testament Jesus outlined in the Upper room for the Grace Believer). These agreements provide a consistent framework to view God’s progressive revelation of Himself that is unfolding. The covenants explain why OT history moves the way it does (land, kingdom, restoration). There are conditional as well as unconditional covenants. Deuteronomy 28 is an example of how the Mosaic covenant is conditional. God chose how He was going to dispense His property in each economy. What is shown through these covenants is that God is faithful, never breaking a covenant, even though man failed each time to uphold their side of the agreement. In the end all of the covenants will be brought to pass. Each of these covenants “stack” narrowing towards the coming of the Messiah and the offer of the Kingdom from the Heavens. These keep the OT from being random stories that make our life better. There is a momentum and a purpose to what is revealed.

How to Read the Old Testament

- Observe (what does the text say?)
- Interpret (what did it mean then—grammar, history, genre?)
- Correlate (how does it fit the whole Bible storyline?)
- Apply (what should we believe/do today?)

The Dispensationalist holds to a literal interpretation of scripture. The Reformed theologian cannot use the normal interpretation, he must fall to an allegorical interpretation. This robs the text of its power (dry bones from Ezekiel). The literal hermeneutic is not a wooden literalism, but a grammatical-historical and genre-sensitive approach to dividing the Word in the manner in which God intended. The lens of the three existing individual groups is an excellent example. God is dealing with Israel, the Gentile Nations (unbelieving mankind), and the Church. Some of those in the Gentile Nations might be saved during the tribulation through the witness of the 2 Witnesses and the 144,000. The covenants were made with specific individuals. It is not proper to “rewrite” those agreements, inserting other beneficiaries into the original forms.

Conclusion

Looking closely at how the Covenants structure the OT is helpful to understanding the connections of the narratives, while keeping in mind the Dispensations with changing administrations is the correct way to read and study the Old Testament. Applying the principle of how God used progressive revelation in scripture will keep the believer from the many pitfalls that exist. Israel is a major focus of the OT storyline and keeping those prophecies attached and anchored to the original referents will enable the believer to rightly divide the Word of Truth. The Dispensations and Covenants will be our constant companions as we study the books of the Old Testament.