

## Chapter One

# THE BIBLE'S LASTING IMPACT

Most people know that the Bible teaches about God. But its influence spreads far beyond religion. In fact, the Bible has shaped human values and culture more than any other book.

That seems like a bold claim, to be sure, but history bears it out. From the days of the Roman Empire to the present, the Bible has steadily transformed legal and social institutions everywhere. Before Christianity came along, Roman justice and social policy were harsh, often cruel. But Christianity, armed with the Bible, tempered that brutality and elevated respect for human life and dignity.

Medieval states continued this process. They took over Roman law, bound it more tightly to Biblical principles, and adopted it as their own. The Middle Ages moved criminal trials into church courts and schooled lawyers in Biblical precedents. In addition, the universities taught law and theology side by side.

As modern European nations emerged in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they adopted law codes that enforced Biblical standards of justice. Later, as these same governments raced to plant colonies around the globe, they took the Bible with them. And wherever they flew a colonial flag, they imposed European law, now thoroughly infused with values from the Bible.

This law proved so effective that former colonies tended to retain its basics, even after throwing off colonial rule. As a result, today's legal systems in Europe, the Americas, and Australia, as well as many parts of Africa and Asia, trace their roots to Biblical concepts.

Likewise, the quest for democracy owes much to the Bible. Democratic movements in the West first arose among people who turned to the Bible for moral guidance. They based their call for universal rights and personal freedom on Biblical ideals of individual worth and dignity. It was also people dedicated to the Bible who led worldwide efforts to eradicate slavery, improve the status of women, and secure the equal treatment of all races. Not only that, the earliest theories of international law often came from men like Hugo Grotius, a serious student of the Bible, as well as a great legal mind.

Thus, the Bible has molded human history for hundreds of years. We could fill volumes talking about its lasting imprint on art, literature, and social policy. But its most telling influence has been in the realm of faith and personal religion. Both Judaism and Christianity grew out of the Bible. The Bible also left a mark on Islamic culture, for Mohammed, the founder of Islam, held the Bible in high regard. He even considered Jesus a prophet from God.

It is only natural, then, to ask why the Bible has had such lasting impact. What accounts for its attractiveness over the centuries? How has it had such enduring influence? And why is it still the best selling book in the world?

The answer lies in the great ideas the Bible conveys, the great truths it unfolds. Prior to modern times, no other book offered such an exalted view of God and His love for mankind. In a word, the Bible stretches our sense of who we are.

### God and the Human Race

At the very outset the Bible declares that God created human beings in His own image. This does not mean that God resembles us physically, for the Bible is equally clear that God is a spirit-being. As such, He does not have a body. But as a spirit-being Himself, God imparted a spirit to each of us.

Thus, we are like him — created in His image — because we have a spirit-essence, like He does.

This inner spirit sets the human race apart from every other species. It gives us unique abilities, unknown to other creatures. We can reason abstractly. We can comprehend truth. We can create splendid works of art. We can make moral judgments. We can invent powerful technologies. In short, we can be distinctly human because we possess a spirit that makes creativity possible.

Unfortunately, we tend to behave in ways that pollute this spirit-nature. God as a spirit-being is loving, just, and truthful. But as spirit-beings ourselves, we are often unloving, unjust, and untruthful. When we act this way, we corrupt the spirit within us. If that corruption goes far enough, we become wicked, hateful people, and evil overruns society.

The Bible tells us that God foresaw this problem from the beginning. Fortunately, He did not give up on us and abandon us, despite the grip that evil exerts on mankind. Rather, God chose to stay in a relationship with us. Out of his love, He longed to see us escape from the effects of corrupt lives, corrupt governments, and corrupt societies. The Bible is the story of what God has done, over countless generations, to make that escape possible.

As this story unfolds, the Bible shows us a God who cares deeply for every individual. He also is a God who actively involves Himself with the events of our lives. The Bible details how He guided human destiny, including the rise and fall of civilizations, beginning with man's first steps on our planet.

## **The Old and New Testaments**

In relating this story, the Bible uses a variety of literary forms. Within its pages we find books of history and engrossing narrative. There are also great poems and songs, along with dozens of moving speeches and letters. These elements of the Bible were pulled together between 1500 BC and

100 AD in two great collections. We commonly refer to the first collection as the Old Testament. The other is called the New Testament.

The Old Testament is respected by Christians, Jews, and Moslems alike. It describes how God dealt with individuals and nations prior to the birth of Jesus. For Christians the most important part of the Bible is the New Testament. This is where we learn about Jesus and what He taught. The New Testament also tells us how Christianity started and what the earliest churches were like.

The Old and New Testaments are somewhat like small libraries, for they both contain dozens of books. There are 66 of these books in all, 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament. Some of them are relatively short, no longer than a tract or a pamphlet. Others are rather lengthy and require several hours to read.

## **The Lands and People of the Old Testament**

The pages of the Bible take us into renowned empires of the ancient world, places like Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. Most events in the Bible, however, occur in the narrow strip of land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. The people of antiquity called this area Canaan.

Strategically Canaan was far more important than its small size would indicate. Within its borders the major trade routes connecting Asia, Europe, and Africa came together. Thus, every rising empire wanted to control Canaan. The Bible tells of frequent wars as first one power, then another tried to seize this valued territory.

Early in the Bible we meet a man named Abraham who moved to Canaan at God's command. Abraham came from the Tigris-Euphrates Valley, home of a highly advanced civilization. God promised the entire sweep of Canaan to Abraham's family. But God made it clear that actual ownership of the land would take place in the distant future, long

after Abraham's death. In fact, almost 600 years passed before God carried out this promise.

During those years God created a special working relationship with one branch of Abraham's family. This branch descended from Jacob, Abraham's grandson. Jacob was a wanderer, living first in Canaan, then in Mesopotamia, and later in Egypt. In the course of those wanderings he also became known as "Israel."

Jacob had twelve sons each the head of a large household. In time these households grew into twelve huge clans, or tribes. Collectively they took the name Israel from Jacob and referred to themselves as Israelites or "the children of Israel." By the end of the Old Testament they were also called Jews.

The Bible is largely the account of how God used Abraham's family, especially the Israelites, to reveal His promises, hopes, and expectations for humanity. Eventually God brought Jesus into the world through the Israelites. Most writers of the Bible also came from Israel.

Near the close of Jacob's life the Israelites started an extensive sojourn in Egypt. They migrated there after Joseph, Jacob's favorite son, gained prominence in the Egyptian government. Things went well for the Israelites at first. But following Joseph's death, Egyptian rulers turned against the Israelites and reduced them to slavery.

This enslavement continued for four centuries under harsh conditions. During those years the Israelites grew into a vast nation. Then God raised up a man named Moses, who led them to freedom. With Moses at their head, the Israelites made their way from Egypt into the wilderness of the Sinai peninsula, where they lived as nomads for 40 years.

Shortly after Moses died, the Israelites marched into Canaan as a mighty military force. They subdued several Canaanite kingdoms and took possession of the land, just as God had promised Abraham. Israel's second king, a man named David, conquered Jerusalem and made it his national capital. Then Solomon, David's son, established a small empire that

took up most of the area between the Euphrates River and the northeastern border of Egypt. He also built a magnificent temple in Jerusalem.

All this success, according to the Bible, was a direct gift from God. Yet, despite God's kindness toward them, the Israelites drifted into indifference toward Him and His commands. As they turned against God, He tried to regain their allegiance through a special class of spokesmen called prophets. The prophets did their best to bring the nation back to God. But they had little success, even though they warned that God would drive Israel from Canaan if the pattern of disobedience continued.

After centuries of warnings, God finally carried through on His threat. First the Assyrians and then the Babylonians overran Canaan. Not only did the Israelites lose their independence, their enemies literally hauled them away and gave their land to other people. Several books of the Old Testament describe Israel's suffering at the hands of their conquerors. Suffering had the benefit, however, of turning the Israelites back to God.

God responded by granting them a return to Jerusalem, which Babylon had demolished in 586 BC. During the next century the Israelites rebuilt the city and reconstructed the temple. Later they regained their independence, although they lost it again rather quickly to the Romans.

With the rebuilding of Jerusalem, the Old Testament comes to a close. About 400 years then pass before the events of the New Testament begin. During that interval Alexander the Great marched through Canaan en route to his conquest of Egypt and the Middle East. Then the Romans came in and subjugated Israel, as well as her neighbors.

## **Jesus and the Earliest Christians**

When the New Testament opens, the Romans are still in control. But they have granted the Israelites considerable

freedom to maintain their temple worship and to have their own courts and laws. This is the setting in which Jesus lived.

As He began His teaching career, He surrounded Himself with twelve special students. The New Testament calls them “apostles,” from a Greek word that means “one sent out.” Jesus planned to train these men and send them out with His message.

He worked with them for only three years before the Romans crucified Him. At first His death sent the apostles into despair. But then, in a series of striking events, He appeared among them, alive. He announced that God had raised Him from the dead. (The Biblical term for this is “resurrection.”) He also said that God was preparing a resurrection for every person who accepts the teachings of Jesus and follows them.

Armed with this message, the apostles went out and immediately began telling the story of Jesus. Within 30 years they had established communities of Christians from Jerusalem to Rome and beyond. As these communities matured, they occasionally needed fuller guidance on how a Christian should live. To provide that guidance, the apostles and others around them wrote a group of books called Gospels. These are detailed accounts of what Jesus did and taught.

In addition, the apostles often sent personal letters to various Christian communities. These letters usually addressed moral and spiritual questions that followers of Jesus commonly face. As you might imagine, the early Christians treasured these letters highly. As a result, the letters were carefully copied and circulated. Eventually 21 of these letters — along with four Gospels, a history of the early church, and a book of prophecy — were pulled together in a single collection to form the New Testament.

The last book in the New Testament is named Revelation. Written about 95 AD, it anticipates a great persecution of Christians that broke out a short time later. The highest levels of the Roman government sponsored this persecution.

The book of Revelation urges Christians to remain faithful to God, even in the face of official repression. By staying faithful, Revelation assures them, they will secure their own resurrection — a life beyond death in the presence of God.

With this assurance the Bible comes to an end. But the principles and ideals in its pages are as relevant today as ever. Throughout the Bible, God upholds an exalted standard of moral excellence for every man and woman. He call calls on us to live extraordinary, upright lives. While the people of the Bible lived in a world vastly different from ours, we still struggle with the same moral and spiritual issues that they did. The Bible thus speaks to us as meaningfully as it did to them.

## **Names for God**

In the chapters ahead you will become familiar with the Biblical themes that have sustained God’s people for ages. Beginning with the first books of the Old Testament, we will examine the Bible section by section, highlighting vital insights and central truths. You will learn what the Bible says about the nature of God, the nature of mankind, the nature of the universe. You will discover what God tells us about building strong families, loving homes, and healthy communities. You will become familiar with Jesus, who He was, and what He taught. And through it all, you will ask fresh questions about yourself and the meaning of your life.

In short, you are about to embark on a rewarding journey. But one note before we begin. On this journey we will encounter different names for God. Since no one name can fully describe Him, the Bible relies on a variety of terms to refer to Him. Often it speaks of Him simply as the Lord, or as the Lord God. In the Old Testament (which was originally written in Hebrew) the name “Lord” is usually a translation of the Hebrew word “Yahweh.” The Jews considered this the most holy name for God, so holy that they hesitated even to

pronounce it. Consequently, they eventually forgot how to pronounce it at all.

However, Yahweh is the name God uses for Himself in the Bible when He wants to emphasize His personal involvement in human existence; when He is revealing His laws for us to follow; or when He is making promises to us. The name Yahweh frequently appears in combination with some other word to highlight a particular quality of God's existence. For instance, He is referred to by the name "Yahweh Shalom," Hebrew for "Yahweh Is Peace." Or in another place as "Yahweh Jireh," which means "Yahweh Who Sees," affirming that God sees the plight of people who are afflicted.

The Hebrew word that we normally translate as "God" is "Elohim," or in its shortened form, "El." This points to God's great power and majesty. In general this is the name God uses when He speaks of His ultimate control over the universe, nature, and mankind. Many people in the Old Testament have names that include a shortened form of Yahweh or Elohim, or sometimes both. We will point out several names like this as we work through the Bible.

In this study we will restrict ourselves to the terms "God" and "Lord," with occasional references to "Yahweh." Moreover, we will use "God" and "Lord" interchangeably, since modern languages do not make the distinction between these names the way the Hebrews did. God reveals Himself under different names, but He is the same God wherever we encounter Him.

## Chapter Two

# FINDING YOUR WAY AROUND IN THE BIBLE

As you know from chapter one, the Bible has two major sections. One is the Old Testament, the other the New Testament. The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew, the New Testament in Greek. Modern Bibles are therefore translations of ancient Hebrew and Greek manuscripts.

In terms of length, the Old Testament is three times the size of the New Testament. Several factors account for this.

- First, there are 39 books in the Old Testament, only 27 in the New Testament.
- Second, Old Testament books are typically much longer than those in the New Testament.
- And third, the Old Testament covers a far broader span of time. More than 1600 years separate Abraham from the final events of the Old Testament. By contrast, the events in the New Testament all unfold in the first century AD, most of them within less than 50 years.

### How the Bible Is Organized

Whatever its length, each book of the Bible is divided into chapters and verses. These divisions did not appear in the original writings. They have been added to make it easier to study the Bible. Before book-binding was invented, the Bible was copied on long scrolls of parchment or papyrus. Since a single copy of the Old Testament required several scrolls,

reading the Bible was a tedious process of constantly rolling and unrolling scrolls. This was cumbersome, to say the least.

Once the Bible began to appear in book form (about the third century), moving from one section to another became as simple as turning a few pages. But it still might take several minutes of searching to locate a specific passage. To solve this problem the Middle Ages added chapter divisions to each book. The number of chapters in a book varied widely. A few short books were assigned only one chapter. Longer books were given as many as 40 or 50 chapters, even more.

Chapter divisions now made it easier to find a precise location. This innovation proved so helpful that chapters were later divided into verses. A verse contains the general equivalent of a sentence, although complex sentences may spread across several verses. The number of verses in a chapter follows no set pattern. Chapters range in length from as few as two verses to as many as 176.

In modern editions of the Bible, a chapter usually covers no more than one or two printed pages. The numbering of chapters starts anew in each book, so that every book begins with chapter one. Verse numbers also start over with each new chapter.

As a result of this arrangement, we can identify the exact location of any statement in the Bible by referring to a specific book, chapter, and verse. We call this “citing” a passage. Printed citations follow a generally accepted convention of placing the name of the book first, followed by the chapter number, a colon, and the verse number.

Thus, Genesis 3:15 refers to the fifteenth verse of the third chapter of the book named Genesis. To cite several consecutive verses, we use a hyphen to separate the beginning and ending verse number. For example, Genesis 3:15-18 refers to verses fifteen through eighteen of the third chapter of Genesis.

In some citations a number *precedes* the name of the book. This allows us to distinguish between books that other-

wise have identical names. There are three reasons why two or more books may have the same name.

- First, there are three books in the Old Testament that are so long that they have been split into two volumes apiece. The resulting six books are 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel, 1 Kings and 2 Kings, and 1 Chronicles and 2 Chronicles.
- Second, some books of the New Testament are named for their author. If the same writer gave us two or three books, they may all bear his name, as with 1 Peter and 2 Peter.
- And third, New Testament books that were originally written as letters commonly take the name of the people to whom they were addressed. Where the same individual or Christian community received two different letters, we can end up with a duplication of names. For instance, 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians are both letters to Christians in the city of Corinth.

When a number precedes the name of book, the numeral represents the words “first,” “second,” or “third,” as in “First Samuel” or “Second Corinthians.”

### **Abbreviations and Cross-References**

To conserve space when citing a passage, publishers often abbreviate the names of books. The most common way to do this is to drop all but the first two or three letters in the book’s name. Instead of Genesis 3:15, we would have Gen. 3:15. A reference to 1 Samuel 2:2 would become 1 Sam. 2:2. Until you are familiar with all the books of the Bible, these abbreviations can prove confusing. For that reason, we have avoided them in this introductory study.

You will see these abbreviations quite often in a Bible that includes cross-references. A cross-reference is a type of

footnote. It points the reader to other places in the Bible where we find phrases or ideas similar to the ones in the current verse. Cross-references are not part of the Bible itself. They are simply a helpful aid for study.

Because it is costly to print cross-references, not all Bibles contain them. You can quickly determine if you are using a Bible that includes these special notes. They usually appear in a narrow vertical column, set in a small typeface and running the length of the page. This column may be in the middle of the page or along the outer margin. Some publishers prefer another approach and put cross-references at the bottom of the text, much like a conventional footnote. If you are fortunate enough to have a Bible with cross-references, you will find them highly beneficial.

### **The Arrangement of Books**

Now that you understand books, chapters, verses, and cross-references, you can move effortlessly from one part of the Bible to another. You will soon discover, however, that its books are not in strict historical sequence. Instead, they are grouped according to literary style. The Old Testament begins with

- five books by Moses, followed by
- twelve books of history, then
- five books of songs, poetry, and writings about wisdom, and finally
- seventeen books by prophets.

The prophets were men (and occasionally women) through whom God communicated specific messages to mankind. The message from a prophet was called “prophecy.” Often these messages included a prediction of future events, so the word “prophecy” can also mean “a foretelling of the future.”

In the New Testament the grouping of books follows this pattern:

- four books on the life of Jesus (the Gospels),
- one book about early Christian history,
- twenty-one letters written mostly by apostles, and
- one book of prophecy about widespread persecution that would befall Christian communities.

By keeping these groupings in mind, you will quickly learn to find a book of the Bible by simply remembering the general section it is in.

But what if you wanted to locate a specific story? How would you know where to look for it? One way is to learn a basic timeline of Biblical events. Nor is it difficult to do so. The Bible falls naturally into 14 periods of history. By the time you complete this study, you will know these periods by heart. Not only that, you will be able to identify the books and major developments that go with each period. With those skills in place, you will be able to find key sections of the Bible with little difficulty.

### **Periods of Bible History**

As a preview of what you soon will learn, permit us a moment to briefly identify each of the 14 historical periods in the Bible. Do not be concerned with remembering all the details in this outline right now. You will master them naturally as our study continues.

*The Period of Beginnings* — This covers all the events leading up to the story of Abraham. The Period of Beginnings tells about God creating the earth, its creatures, and the first human family. This period also relates how a great flood once destroyed the earth, how life reemerged after the flood, and how various nations got their start.

*The Period of Abraham's Family* — In this period the Bible introduces us to Abraham, tells his life story, and then follows his family for three more generations as the Lord works with them. By the end of this period Abraham's grandson Jacob and his twelve sons have moved their households to Egypt.

*The Period of Egyptian Bondage* — During these 400 years the descendants of Jacob undergo harsh treatment. The Egyptians force them into slavery, then intensify that slavery as time goes by. This enslavement comes to an end when Moses leads his people to freedom after God uses a series of powerful disasters to cripple Egypt.

*The Period of Wilderness Wanderings* — Once they gain their freedom, the Israelites leave Egypt for the wilderness region of the Sinai peninsula, east of the Red Sea. Moses leads them through this desolate area for 40 years. It is here that God gives Israel His law. At the heart of this law are ten principles — the Ten Commandments — that serve as Israel's basic moral code from this time forward. It is also here that Moses begins writing the first books of the Bible. During this time the Israelites live as nomads, growing in size and preparing for the conquest of Canaan. By the end of his life Moses has brought them to the border of Canaan and positioned them to invade it.

*The Period of Conquest* — Under Joshua, Moses' successor, the Israelites enter Canaan, fight a series of pivotal battles with God's help, and take over the region. They divide the land among themselves according to tribes, so that specific sections of Canaan will hereafter bear the name of an Israelite tribe.

*The Period of Judges* — After Joshua dies, no national leader appears immediately. All government is at a local level. The only exception occurs when military emergencies arise. Then the Israelites turn to some exceptional individual

to lead them. These individuals are known as judges, because they often settle legal disputes, in addition to providing military leadership.

*The Period of the United Kingdom* — Israel ultimately wants a permanent leader and Samuel, the last of the judges, appoints the nation's first king. For more than a century, over the lifespan of three rulers, all of Israel answers to one crown. Jerusalem becomes the capital of this kingdom, and Solomon, the third king, builds a great temple there. But following his death, internal rivalries break the nation apart and two separate kingdoms emerge.

*The Period of the Divided Kingdom* — In this period ten tribes band together to form a kingdom in the northern portion of Canaan. Two others pull together in the south. Sometimes these two kingdoms stand side by side against invaders. At other times they turn on one another in pitched battle. Of the two, the northern kingdom is shorter lived, for it was an early victim of the rising Assyrian Empire.

*The Period of Judah Alone* — The southern kingdom took the name of its largest tribe, Judah. (This is the name that eventually gives us the word "Jew.") Assyria never succeeds at toppling Judah. Yet Judah does eventually fall to the Babylonians, who supplant the Assyrians and become rulers of the Middle East.

*The Period of Babylonian Exile* — Like the Assyrians before them, the Babylonians transplant conquered people from their homes to distant lands. The Babylonians take thousands of families in Judah to Babylon, where they live in exile for 70 years. During this period the Medes and Persians overthrow the Babylonians and seize their empire.

*The Period of Restoration* — Under the rule of the Medes and Persians, conditions improve for the displaced Israelites. They are permitted to return to Jerusalem and rebuild it. They also reconstruct the temple, which the Babylo-

nians had leveled. As the rebuilding of Jerusalem nears completion, the Old Testament comes to an end.

*The Period Between the Testaments* — This era, some 400 years long, is addressed only indirectly in the Bible. The book of Daniel foretells some of the events that play out in this period, including the rise of both Greece and Rome. Toward the end of this period Israel falls under Roman rule, as does most of the Middle East.

*The Period of the Life of Jesus* — The New Testament opens by giving us four parallel accounts of Jesus' life. In these accounts we have the most exhaustive statement of what Jesus taught. We also learn here how He trained His followers and prepared them to spread His teachings far and wide.

*The Period of the Early Church* — The remainder of the New Testament is about the first Christian communities in the Middle East, Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome. We learn about how they began, the challenges they faced, and the rapid growth they experienced. In general, the New Testament focuses on the Christian communities that came into existence within 30 years after Jesus died.

With this series of periods in mind, you will grasp Biblical developments more fully. There is no correlation between the length of a period and the number of books devoted to it. The earlier periods are sometimes covered in just a few chapters. Other periods are the subject of several lengthy books. As we introduce each book, we will place it in its proper time period so that you see God's story unfold in historical sequence.

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