

THE UNITY OF THE SCRIPTURES

INTRODUCTION

The sixty-six writings that comprise the Bible were written over a period of some fifteen hundred years and were penned in varying styles by forty or more authors, to serve different purposes. Nevertheless, there is an underlying unity that would be hard to explain were it not for our belief that all these writings were inspired by the one divine author – the Holy Spirit (2 Timothy 3:16).

This overview of the Bible as a whole will seek to reveal the theme that develops throughout the whole corpus of the Holy Scriptures.

(Note: What follows is condensed and adapted from the concluding Chapter of the Study Guide *The Bible for Our Times*, by Michael Button, which can be downloaded by request from this website <http://www.learn-your-bible.org.uk>)

1. THE PROBLEM OF SIN: A Perfect Creation Spoilt

Mostly in Genesis. // *Key verses* Genesis 1:31 & 3:17.

The first Book of the Bible (Genesis) tells us, very briefly, how God made the world. Everything God made was “*very good*.”¹ The highest of all God’s creation were human beings who, uniquely of all creatures on earth, were endowed with the capacity of free will. God could have a relationship with humans that would be impossible with creatures who could not voluntarily return His love.

Sadly, the very first human couple used their free will to disobey God, thereby destroying the relationship of mutual love and trust that bound them in fellowship with God. They had, in fact, unwittingly become involved in a rebellion against God, led by a spiritual being whom we know as ‘Satan.’* Satan now had a hold on the first two humans and upon all their descendants. Death, pain and disorder now entered the world as a ‘curse.’ We see the results of disobedience, of the curse and of Satan’s hold over humankind, through the rest of the Bible, and indeed throughout the rest of history.

2. A PLAN FOR SALVATION: God’s Remedy for Fallen Humankind

Mostly in Genesis. // *Key Verse* Gen 3:15.

God could have washed His hands of humankind but His love was too great for that. He began work on a plan by which the barrier of sin could be overcome, death defeated and humankind reconciled to Him.

The rapidity with which sin spread, and the depth of depravity to which it took the majority of humanity, seemed likely to make God’s plan unworkable. Just as a gardener might have to cut a diseased plant back to a small stem to preserve its life, so God needed to take the drastic action of destroying most of depraved humanity, preserving just the righteous family of one called Noah. This He did by means of a cataclysmic flood.

¹ Genesis 1:31

* We are told in Genesis only of a serpent who tempted Eve to disobey God. It is only as we read on through the Bible that we learn of angels - beings whom God created to serve Him - and their ability to rebel against God (Is 14:12-15). It also becomes apparent later that the leader of the rebellion (Lucifer, whom we know as Satan) was behind the serpent’s cunning (Rev 20:2).

Once Noah's descendants were re-established, God started to work on His plan, by choosing a people through whom He could work. These were the descendants of Abraham. We read about the first four generations of Abraham's family in Genesis. The verse we read in Genesis 3:15 is called by scholars the '*Proto-evangel*,' that is to say, it was hinting of the Gospel of salvation to come, when a descendant of Eve would defeat Satan.

3. A CHOSEN PEOPLE: God Raises up a Nation

Mostly in Genesis - Joshua. // *Key verses* Deuteronomy 7:6-9.

God needed a nation of people who would know Him and through whom He could work to become known to other nations. This was not straightforward, for the 'virus' of sin was still in the human population that had descended from Noah. Their rebellion against God developed into completely ignoring Him and worshipping gods of their own invention. However, the family of Abraham remained largely faithful and responsive to God's tutelage. When the family had grown through the generations into enough people to populate a nation, God brought them into a land of their own, a land known as Canaan. They were known at that time as 'The Children of Abraham,' later the 'Hebrews,' later still the 'Israelites' and eventually the 'Jews.'

Meanwhile the land of Canaan had been populated by heathen tribes whose degenerate religion had taken them again into the depths of moral depravity. The time had come for another 'cleansing,' though this time confined to the geographical area of Canaan rather than the whole of humanity. The agent of this cleansing was to be the Hebrew nation. They were instructed to clear the land of all its inhabitants before taking possession of it for themselves.

4. THE LAW - WAY OF OBEDIENCE: God Teaches His People

Mostly in Exodus to Deuteronomy // *Key verses* Deuteronomy 10:12-13.

It was to be some while before conditions were right for God's salvation plan to be put fully into effect. Meanwhile, His chosen people needed to learn how to obey Him, how to recognise sin and its serious consequences, and to have a way of seeking, and receiving, His forgiveness when they gave way to sin. Since they were now an independent society, free from the rule of Egypt, they also needed to know how to relate to one another in society. God gave them a system of laws to fulfil these needs.

Prominent in this law system was the practice of sacrifices, particularly the slaughtering of animals, with an emphasis on the shedding of their blood. The sacrifices pointed towards the way in which the problem of sin and its consequential death would eventually be dealt with. By believing that God would accept the life of the animal in lieu of their life, God's people were, in effect, believing in God's remedy for salvation that was still to be fulfilled.

5. RULING GOD'S PEOPLE: Rulers Good and Bad

Mostly in Judges – Nehemiah. // *Key verses* 1 Sam 8:4-7.

God's desire was that Israel should be a Theocracy, i.e. ruled directly by Him. However, the people clamoured for a king to be like the other nations, and God gave way to their request. Some kings were godly men but many married foreign wives and imported their pagan religions. Early in the monarchy the Kingdom of Israel had split into two. Both Kingdoms slid into idol worship - Israel in the North succumbed more rapidly than Judah in the South.

For God's salvation plan to work He needed to preserve a people that would be true to Him. To do this He gave them over to the empire-builders of their day to conquer and deport the populace: First Israel taken by Assyria and later Judah taken by Babylonia. A 'remnant' of those in Babylonia later returned to restore their communities and, most importantly, their worship of the true God.

6. PROPHETS: Warnings and Promises

Mostly in Isaiah – Malachi. // *Key verses* 2 Kings 17:13.

God did not ignore or overlook His people's tendency to idolatry. He inspired godly men to speak His words to them, repeatedly telling of His displeasure, warning of the consequences of their unfaithfulness and calling them to repentance. These were the prophets.

Some of the messages of the prophets told of things to come: the defeats and other judgments that would ensue but also inspiring messages of hope for the future after God had dealt with them in judgment. Chief among the prophecies of hope was that God would send a Messiah (Hebrew for 'Anointed One') who would set up an eternal Kingdom of peace and righteousness.

A different kind of prophecy is seen in the Apocalyptic Literature. Given in times of persecution, these visions revealed the spiritual forces behind world events whilst showing that God was ultimately in control and would not forget His people. The Book of Revelation sets forth an inspiring hope for the future for those who remain faithful to Him.

7. PRAISE AND POETRY: Poetry and Wisdom

Mostly in Job-Song of Songs. // *Key verses* Proverbs 1:1-4 & 1 Chronicles 16:8-10.

Psalms help God's people in expressing their praise to God whatever mood or situation they are in. Some of the Psalms include words of predictive prophecy of the Messiah who was to come. Wisdom Literature helps people know how to conduct themselves sensibly in obedience to God.

8. THE SAVIOUR: The Gospel

Mostly in Matthew-John. // *Key verses* Galatians 4:4.

After centuries of preparing His people through what might appear to have been many setbacks because of their disobedience, the time had come for the critical moment in God's plan. The Gospel writers tell of how God sent His Son into this world as a man, yet without losing His divinity. Through His teaching, example and perfect obedience, Jesus revealed the character and love of God in a new way.

However, the key element in God's plan that brought salvation to sinners was the death of Jesus by crucifixion. By giving His sinless life on behalf of sinners, Jesus cancelled the consequences of sin for all who put their faith in Him. It was as if He took all our sins to the grave, leaving them there when He arose from the dead.

9. SALVATION PLAN CONTINUES: The Church

Mostly in Acts - Jude. // Key verse Matt 6:18.

In just over a month after Jesus had risen from the dead He left the world in physical form but sent the Holy Spirit to empower His disciples to carry on His work of teaching and healing and to spread the Gospel (Good News) of sins forgiven. The rapidly growing community of disciples was known as the 'Church.' The Acts of the Apostles tells of the expansion of the Church from 120 in Jerusalem to thousands across Asia and into Europe, reaching Gentiles as well as Jews.

As new congregations sprang up in various cities and towns, Apostles wrote letters to teach and encourage the believers. Chief among these was the missionary-apostle Paul. Though he was himself a Jew, Paul had a particular ministry to Gentiles. His letters to the churches form nearly a third of the New Testament.

The Biblical record of the expansion of the Church ends in Rome. This being the capital of the empire which covered most of the known civilised world of the time, it was a fitting juncture to end the Biblical account of the fulfilling of the Great Commission to "*Go... and make disciples of all nations.*"² That commission has still to be completed - a responsibility which lies with us Christians today.

10. THE FUTURE: Behind the Scenes, Past, Present & Future

Mostly in Revelation. // Key verse Rev 1:1.

Opinions differ as to how much of the Book of Revelation tells of future events. In essence, however, this vision, given to the Apostle John, reveals in imagery spiritual beings and forces at work both in heaven and on earth. The conclusion shows a return to the perfect conditions that were lost to humankind with the introduction of sin.

² Matthew 28:19