

How to read the Old Testament

Seeing the Big Picture

When friends visit Brisbane there are a few places that we always like to visit to give them a taste of this fantastic city. The museums at South Bank, a ferry ride on the Brisbane River and a meal at West End are often part of the journey. But wherever we might venture through the city, there is one place we always like to go afterwards, to take in the big picture: Mount Coot-Tha.

From the great lookout point of Mt Coot-Tha you can see all the places you just visited and how they relate to each other. You can take in the vast landscape and see all the key features. That's what a lookout point does. It helps you get your bearings. You can see how one place relates to another place. You can see the big picture.

Wouldn't it be great if the Bible had a lookout point? Wouldn't it be wonderful if it had a place you could visit to see the big picture? The great news is that such a place exists – it's called Luke 24.

The Bible has many great 'lookout' chapters. Ephesians 1 gives a stunningly rich picture of God lavishing his grace upon us in Jesus. 1 Corinthians 15:1-4 is a great gospel summary. The genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1 gives a helpful framework for looking at the whole Bible story. Stephen's speech in Acts 7 or the roll-call of faith in Hebrews 11 are also great chapters for glimpsing a highlights packages of the Bible story. Yet Luke 24 is arguably the Mount Coot-Tha of the Bible, as Jesus himself tells us how to read the Old Testament.

So let's go on a journey through the Old Testament with Jesus as our tour guide...

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. – Luke 1:1-2

Luke introduces his Gospel as a fulfilment story – 'the things fulfilled among us.' Luke's story of Jesus is a fulfilment story. It's the story of the fulfilment of the Old Testament in Jesus' life, death, resurrection and pouring out of the Spirit. And as we read on from these opening two verses, chapter by chapter we meet a rich array of both Old Testament quotations and allusions as Luke weaves his fulfilment tapestry. Finally, in Luke's last chapter, Jesus' own words most strikingly announce the totality of this fulfilment:

He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. – Luke 24:25-27

He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." – Luke 24:44-49

In these two resurrection appearances, Jesus tells his followers how to read the Old Testament. It's all about him. All of it. In the first scene he refers to "all the Scriptures". In the second scene he says the same thing a different way – the three-fold division of "the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms" was a common way of referring to the entire Old Testament.

It's a stunning claim. The entire Old Testament – every page – every word – is about Jesus. Specifically, the Old Testament anticipated these things about Jesus:

- he is the Messiah – God's true King.
- core to his role as Messiah was his suffering and his resurrection.
- repenting – turning to this Jesus – brings forgiveness of sins.
- this message will be proclaimed to all nations.
- he sends the Holy Spirit, empowering this worldwide mission of the gospel (which Luke shows us in his second volume – Acts).

From the great lookout of Luke 24, Jesus shows us how to read every page of the Old Testament. Whatever book you're reading, from Genesis to Malachi, it's all about these key truths. It's all about Jesus.

Netflix and the Old Testament

Jesus teaches us in Luke 24 that each book of the Old Testament is not a stand-alone book, but together make up one big story. Like chapters in a novel. Or episodes in a Netflix series. All the episodes add up to one main story.

So, when you're watching a series, you have to be aware of certain things to watch it.

1. You are mindful of the story so far (many series help you here with a 'previously on...' intro).
2. You watch the episode, discovering what it adds to the unfolding story.
3. You think about what's been revealed and where the story is going.

We do this all the time. And it's the same sort of thing we need to do with the Bible, except that we can add one more important step about Jesus. So, when you read an Old Testament book:

1. Be mindful of the story so far – what has happened in the Bible books before this one?
2. Read the book – discovering what its themes and actions add to the unfolding Bible story.
3. Think about what it reveals – what it reveals about God, the world and us.
4. See how it anticipates fulfilment in Jesus – the key truths about Jesus we saw in Luke 24.

TWO PROMISES, A DISASTER AND A RESCUER

Matthew 1 is another great chapter for seeing the big picture of Jesus' fulfilment story. Matthew divides Old Testament history into three big chunks:

Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah. – Matthew 1:17

Matthew reminds us here of two key Old Testament promises – to Abraham and David – and a disaster – the Exile:

I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” – Genesis 12:3

When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³ He is

the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. ¹⁴ I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with a rod wielded by men, with floggings inflicted by human hands. – 2 Samuel 7:12-14

It was because of the Lord's anger that all this happened to Jerusalem and Judah, and in the end he thrust them from his presence. – 2 Kings 24:20

God promised Abraham that he would reverse the curse of The Fall. God promised David a son who would bring this blessing. Yet none of the kings of the Old Testament fulfilled this calling and the story ends as a repeat of the Garden of Eden – with God's people removed from God's presence – in the tragic event of the exile. Jesus is the Messiah – the promised son of David – God's true King. He ends the exile and brings the blessing to all nations which God had promised Abraham (see Matthew 28:18-20).

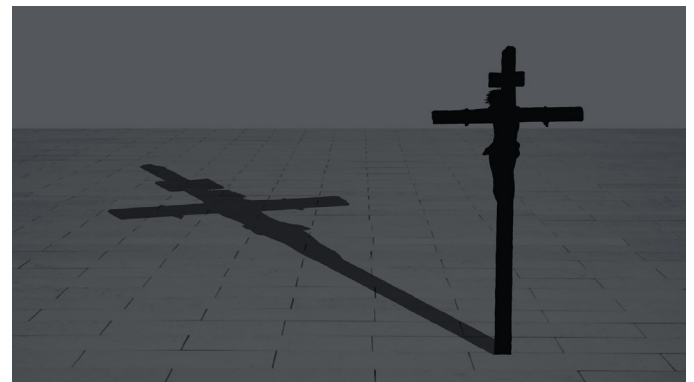
The Book of Hebrews, Shadow and Reality

On a sunny day when someone's coming toward you around the corner, often their shadow arrives before their body. You see the outline then you see the reality.

The Old Testament is like that – a shadowy picture of Jesus that arrived in history before he did in the flesh. The New Testament book called Hebrews describes the whole Old Testament as Jesus' shadow thrown back into history. For example:

The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming – not the realities themselves. – Hebrews 10:1

Hebrews is one long 'sermon' preaching theme by theme how the whole Old Testament is Jesus' shadow. The Old Testament is the shadow. Jesus is reality. Just as Jesus himself said in Luke 24.



Paul's Gospel of Jesus

As an exercise, compare Paul's gospel summary in 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 with Jesus' words in Luke 24, noting especially his repetition of 'according to the Scriptures.'

Resources

'God's Big Picture: Tracing the Storyline of the Bible' - by Vaughan Roberts

'According to Plan' by Graeme Goldsworthy

'The Big Picture Story Bible' (for kids 0-7)