

The Structure of the Old Testament, Part 1
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Pastor Larry Kroon: Last week we finished and wrapped up the story unfolded in the Old Testament. We began with man's rebellion that turned a good creation bad, answered by the astounding promise of grace by God, that out of a man named Abraham God would raise up a chosen people in a holy land. And out of that people in that holy land He would raise up a descendant of Abraham, a great king who would ultimately set all things right and change men's hearts. When you finish the Old Testament the chosen people are in their holy land, but the king has not come and things haven't been set right, and men's hearts have not changed. And there is a time of silence, four hundred years when there is no word from God.

We're gonna take a pause ourselves at that point in the story before we move into the New Testament, and what we're gonna do is take some weeks together to look at other parts of the Old Testament. We've just traced the storyline, and there's more to the Old Testament than the story. There are prophecies of the future, there are proverbs of wisdom for the present, there's songs and psalms of worship for the heart, there are commands of the law. And all of these things the Bible says restore the soul; they give wisdom to the eyes, they give light to our paths, and they give joy to the heart. And what we want to do is spend the next number of weeks in a particularly- and a designed set of sermons to just take us through those other parts of the Old Testament.

And I'm really excited about the way we've put it together. We're gonna have the different individuals from the staff taking us through different elements of the Old Testament, and we're gonna start off by establishing an attitude and a perspective with respect to the Old Testament. And I've chosen Ashley to do this, and so he's going to be taking us through this today and a little bit next week. And the reason we're gonna have Ashley do this is because he...I want the attitude and the perspective you're gonna see today. And the way you get it with Ashley is you put something in front of him like you do with a bull...you know, with a red blanket? You put in front of Ashley the challenge, and you say, 'You know, the Old Testament is worthless,' and then get out of the way. Because then, all of a sudden what you begin to see is Ashley, the polite Southern gentleman—"Yes sir, no sir"—turns into the airborne ranger that he was.

And Ashley, jump out of the airplane.

Pastor Ashley Brown: Ok, well, without any further ado, huh? Yeah.

About a month or two ago one of the middle-schoolers up in the Sunday School asked me what my favorite book of the Bible was. And I ended up telling the middle-schoolers that Genesis is my favorite book of the Bible. It is. It's...I love it. But, and I'll explain why as I get to the tail end of the sermon. And just to give you an idea, like really, I was so excited about the sermon this morning that actually I had a hard time goin' to sleep last night. It was like Christmas for a kid, or something. I don't know. I woke up multiple times through the night, lookin' at the clock and sayin' "Can I get up yet? Can I get up yet?" because I get really excited about sharing about some of this stuff.

So...but what we're going to do is between now and the end of the sermon, when I'll tell you exactly why it is that Genesis is my favorite book of the Bible and give you a peek into that, going to address a basic challenge. And the basic challenge, as Larry said, you know, dangle a challenge in front of me...it's one that Richard Dawkins actually does an excellent job posing this challenge. And it's a challenge that a lot of people have embedded in their hearts. And this quote from "The God Delusion" sums it up rather well. It says

To be fair, much of the Bible is not systematically evil but just plain weird, as you would expect of a chaotically cobbled-together anthology of disjointed documents composed, revised, translated, distorted, and improved by hundreds of anonymous authors, editors, and copyists unknown to us and mostly unknown to each other, spanning nine centuries.

Richard Dawkins, from page 268 of "The God Delusion"

Now, in this quote Richard Dawkins is primarily addressing the Old Testament, although he expands it to the entire Bible as a whole. And I'm going to key in on a couple pieces here that I take issue with. First of all, I take issue with his statement that it's "composed, revised, translated, distorted, improved", because ultimately what he is

assuming under that, that the underlying challenge under there, is that the Bible is not reliable. The Old Testament is not reliable. It's not accurate. It was just adjusted and changed to fit whoever's perspective was writing at the time. And so it can't be trusted. And I really take issue with that.

Secondly, I take issue with what he says just before that. He says it's "just plain weird, as you would expect of a chaotically cobbled-together anthology of disjointed documents". What he's saying is there is no cohesive unity to it. There's no systematic structure. It doesn't make sense. You look at this and it just...it doesn't compute. It's just a bunch of random stories thrown together.

Now I hope in the course of the next thirty minutes or so that we'll accomplish two things. One—I hope that if you have this challenge in your own heart, these two challenges here, that that will be answered; or if you know people who have made this sort of a challenge to you regarding the Old Testament, or scriptures in general, that you will be able to answer to that and your faith will be strengthened.

But there's another reason, or another thing, that I want to accomplish here, and this is part of the reason why I got so excited about this sermon. Because to tell you the truth, I think the vast majority of Christians subconsciously buy into this second aspect. We look at the Old Testament and it just seems like a weird, disjointed anthology of stories that...ok, nice little stories, but what do they have to do with anything? And deep down inside we kind of question that, and it doesn't make sense to us. And so what do we do? If you look at the vast majority of Christian Bible studies, devotionals, sermons...where do we typically choose to spend our time? We spend it in the New Testament. Why? Because it makes more sense to us. It's structured and it makes sense, the way that we think. And so we ignore...two-thirds of the time we're ignoring two-thirds of scripture. In the early church the Old Testament **was** the scripture. And so what I'm hoping to do here is hopefully start cracking open the door where you begin to see some of the richness and the beauty and the amazing cohesiveness that lies within.

So how we're going to do this is we're going to take two approaches to this challenge. The first one answers that reliability and historical accuracy question. It's a technical approach, and we'll walk through this pretty quickly, and that'll be a decent chunk of this sermon. Ok? And basically what we'll do here is we'll examine evidence, data, that sort of a thing, to understand whether or not the text of the Old Testament is reliable. Is it something that can be trusted? Second, we're going to look at kind of an aesthetic approach, ok? This is kind of the artistic appreciation approach. And I want to make sure that you understand this is not just literary appreciation. This is just cracking open the masterpiece of God's scripture...God the poet who wrote creation into existence with His very word. He spoke it into existence. He turned around and He wrote an amazing, beautiful work of truth that is scripture. And I hope to examine some of that and just crack that open and help you see a little bit of what's there. So that's what we're going to do.

We'll start off with the basic technical side of things. As you look at the Old Testament, the Hebrew scriptures, they were written around the time of 1300-1400 BC to about 400 BC, ok? That's according to textual indicators that we have. There's some uncertainty about exactly how early they began and when they were first written down, but that's approximately the time that the scriptures started being written down from the best we can tell. And that's according to the internal textual indicators. Ok? That's according to what they...when it says, when a prophet says, 'In the fourteenth year of the reign of this king I received this vision.' That is an internal textual indicator. It tells us that's when that was written.

What we see is this actually matches up; what the Bible claims for itself, what the Old Testament claims for itself, actually matches up very well with archaeological evidence that we have. Why do I say that? Well on the back side of that, the 400...425-400 BC, it matches up very well. We are very confident...scholars are very confident that the Old Testament was finalized by that point. Why? Because even outside of the Old Testament indicators say that it is. For one thing, Alexander the Great came on the scene at 333 BC. Why does that matter? Because Alexander the Great conquered a vast swath of land which included Palestine. When he did...he was Greek, Macedonian, and Hellenistic influences spread throughout his empire. And if you look at writings, histories, all kinds of records and everything else following that, they show a distinct Hellenistic influence after 333 BC. Everybody was influenced by Alexander the Great. There's a reason they called him 'the Great'. Ok? He influenced an entire region of the world. Because the Old Testament doesn't show signs of that Hellenization, we know that it was finalized prior to him coming on the scene. Make sense? Ok?

Also, there's a whole bunch of different writings...I've got a few of them listed up here. These are outside the Bible, and these come from a variety of times here, but they all point to the fact and they all record the fact that God stopped sending prophets to Israel around 400 BC. For whatever reason, God went silent according to these other authors, historians. And they say there weren't any prophets, nobody else wrote, and scripture was done. That

was it. It was just sitting there and it was finalized. And there it was. So that matches up very well with what the Bible tells us about itself.

Also what we see is that there's other extremely strong archaeological confirmation of its historical accuracy. There was a recent FOX News article that caught my attention, because... It was titled, "When Was the Bible Really Written", and it was January 9th, I think is when it came out. But it verifies more of the early side of things. Why? Because there's all kinds of scholars, there's a variety of scholars out there who say, 'No, there's no way that this stuff could have been written that early.' And this article in FOX News was recording the astonishment of many scholars who were extremely crestfallen because an artifact was just found that points to the fact that aspects of the Old Testament which claim to have been written in an extremely early date were apparently around at least by 1100- or 1200 BC, ok? And so you have FOX News saying, 'Man, there's all these scholars who were saying, "Junk! I guess pieces of this really were written that long ago. We don't like it, but we don't know how else to match this up with the artifacts that we've found." '

And there's all kinds of other artifacts. One of my favorite things...Hezekiah and Sennacherib. When I was at Chapel Hill I took this class, an Ancient Civilizations class. And we studied Assyria among other things. And Sennacherib, he's one of the kings, the emperors in Assyria. And he makes an appearance in Old Testament scripture, in 2 Chronicles 32 and Isaiah 37. What it says is that he decided to go to war with Judah because Judah was not showing him the proper respect, and so he decides to go to war. What happens? He goes into Judah, and he lays waste to the place. He is totally destroying numbers of villages and towns and cities; and he is totally massacring the populations of those people. And those who he captures he hauls off into captivity. And Hezekiah calls out to the LORD and asks for help. And God says, 'Ok, here's what's gonna happen. He will come to Jerusalem, he will lay siege to Jerusalem, but I will deliver you.' And it tells us that that's exactly what happened. God basically, one night, wiped out a vast portion of the Assyrian army as it was besieging Jerusalem. They wake up in the morning, Sennacherib says, 'Whoa, I'm getting outta Dodge, because I have a whole bunch of people and I have an army dead.' So he gets outta there. Right? That's what the Bible says.

Cool thing that I learned about in this class is the 'Taylor Prism', ok? It's called the Taylor Prism because it's a six-sided artifact, a nice little clay tablet thing found by a man named Taylor in 1830. And it was found in ancient Nineveh in an excavation there. And the Taylor Prism, it's an official record of Sennacherib, and it's the official record from his perspective of his conquests in Judah. And it's interesting because he is very detailed about the cities that he ransacked, the loot that he carried away, the prisoners he kept, the people he wiped out...exactly what he did the whole way through. And it matches up amazingly with what we see here. And then it's interesting because he gets to Hezekiah in Jerusalem, and there's just this one little statement and then he moves on. He says, 'As for Hezekiah, I went and I surrounded his city, and I kept him pent up like a bird in a cage, and then I went home,' is basically all it says. That's all he says. No ransacking of Jerusalem, none of this; and he's not one to look bad and talk about how somehow, some way, a massive amount of his army is wiped out and he goes home. Why did he go home there? The Bible tells us, and the cool thing is it matches up amazingly well. And so I look at it and I have extreme confidence.

Not only that, but there's an unequalled manuscript accuracy with the Old Testament and with scripture in general. You go to the Qumran scrolls, the Dead Sea scrolls. These date back to 200...150 BC, around that time. And these scrolls were found in the 19...late 1940s-early 1950s. But the cool thing about them is you go into them and you see that all the way back then, over two thousand years ago to today, what you have in your Bible right here is still extremely accurate. You can pick this up and read it, and you pretty much have the text of the Dead Sea scrolls. Ok? And I'll explain why that sort of accuracy is possible. When we think of people handwriting a copy, we think, 'Oh', and this is the mistake Richard Dawkins makes. 'There's going to be all kinds of mistakes that creep in.' Well, here's the problem—we don't...he doesn't understand the way that it was copied.

You see, what would happen is a person would sit down and they would have the original and they would make a copy. And they'd copy it line, by line, by line. When they were done they would hand it to a proofreader. Now here's what the proofreader would do...he would take the original and he would take the copy. He would sit down, and he would compare reading at exactly the same time, line by line, all the way down. When that was done, assuming he didn't find any mistakes, he would go ahead and he would actually check the first word and the last word, make sure they were the same, first letter, last letter. Then he would start going through and count the number of letters and the number of words on every single line. If for some reason there was any difference that meant there was a mistake somewhere. Then, if there was still no problems, he would count to the exact middle of the document, to the exact middle of the middle word, middle letter, and he would make note of that to make sure they were exact. He would go through this whole process like that. And here's the thing...if a single mistake was

found in the copy, they didn't correct the mistake. They destroyed the copy, they would hand the man a fresh page, and they would say, 'Here you go...start over, get it right this time.' That's a pretty serious transcription passing-on of text. So that's why I look, and I believe that there's an unequalled manuscript accuracy.

But we're gonna go on and we're gonna look at the basic aesthetic cohesiveness here. What we'll see is that if you want to look at the cohesiveness, the structure of the Old Testament, there's three basic ways that you'll typically run into it. Ok? The first way is what I would call the structure of the Old Testament. That's the thirty-nine books that are arranged according to classification, meaning genre...the type of writing that they are; and then within that genre, by chronology. That's what you have, I guarantee, in probably every single Bible in here because it's the most common way that the Old Testament is structured in modern English-speaking Christian settings. Ok? And so it's structured, and in a few moments I'll go through here and expand a little bit more on this and help you see the way that it's structured and the thought process behind it. Ok?

But then we also see that there's a structure of a chronological narrative. This is...you'd see this in, say, Bible translations like the Narrated Bible, ok? What it does is it takes those same books and it interweaves them in a chronological order. Say if you run into something that David is doing in Samuel, and he hits a point in his life that lines up with one of the psalms that he wrote. You would take that psalm and you would interweave it right there so that in the flow of that narrative you would then read the psalm that he writes as he is in that period of his life. And then you would go on with the story. It interweaves the books like that. That's similar to actually what we've been doing this whole semester...this whole past semester, this whole past year, is looking at the chronological narrative. Ok?

Then there's a third way, and this structure we'll actually look at more so next week. It's the structure of the Tanakh, the traditional structure of the Hebrew scriptures. And in particular I'll look at how it was done in ancient times, but it's the exact same books but they aren't necessarily set in chronological order or in genre order. They have a thematic coherence. They're set in a certain way that it's structured for a thematic coherence, not necessarily a sequential, chronological one.

So those are three ways, and I'm going to primarily focus on the first one here, ok, in the next few minutes. And what we'll see is this is actually something that in the weeks ahead, as Larry said, we'll have staff members come back and hit on these different aspects, these different genres, the different sections. Ok?

What we see is that there's thirty-nine books, and they're arranged as you would find in your table of contents, most likely. The one that is different on this screen is it says "The Twelve". Those are the minor prophets, the ones who...we would look at and many of us would say, 'That's a funny name.' And if you flip a page or two you've probably passed it. Right there at the tail end of the Old Testament. But there's thirty-nine books.

And the first grouping is the Torah, the law, the Pentateuch. And this is basically the foundational document for the nation of Israel. It tells the story of the foundation of a specific nation that is in covenant with God, through whom He intends to redeem all of humanity. Ok? So it's kind of the foundational document for Israel. And they are grouped together for that reason.

The next section that we have is what would be called narrative or history. And this section primarily consists of Joshua through Esther, ok? And this is a grouping that tells the narrative history, it tells the story of God's faithfulness to His covenant people, Israel, despite their continued, repeated rebellion. So it tells the story of God's faithfulness through that time, through their history. That's the basic thought process and structure there, and...yeah.

The next section is wisdom. Wisdom is a grouping of literature that it comes from different time periods, but it has a single element in common. It's an element that explains how are we, as followers of God, as people who are God's people, how are we supposed to live in a fallen, messed-up, sinful world where things go wrong. How do we do that in the light of God's goodness and His sovereignty? How can we still trust Him? That's what the wisdom literature is all about...how does this play out in our lives? How do we interact with God? How can we walk rightly in a sinful world? And I'll zoom in just a little bit here. Within the wisdom literature there's a special book, the book of Psalms. And this is basically a book that God has given to help give voice to our thoughts, our feelings as we interact with God in a sinful world. It helps give us a vocabulary, a way by which we can express ourselves to God. Why? Well, because it provides understanding of how we relate with Him in a real and dynamic way. It covers everything from the depths of despair and how the psalmist responds to God when he is in the depths of despair, to

times when he is broken over sin, and he is dealing with sin and conviction and forgiveness. It deals with the exaltation of being in the presence of God and just simply rejoicing and being in awe of Him. That's the point of the Psalms.

And then, finally, the last section here is prophecy. These are writings that God provided, and this would go Isaiah through the Twelve, through Malachi. And these are basically writings that God has provided to His covenant people in order to reveal what He would do in His sovereignty. The whole point is so people would know 'God will do this.' And not just that God will do this, but when that time comes and they see it come to fruition they know God said He would do it all the way back then, and He has been faithful. So when God says He will do this out here that has not yet come, I can have confidence in that; even though I don't see where He's at right now, I know that when He says this it will come true.

So that's the basic thought process. That's the basic outline, and that's where, just real briefly, initially, I would say the challenge doesn't seem to hold weight to me. Ok? That the Bible is unreliable. No, it's extremely reliable. The Old Testament is extremely reliable. Not only that, but it is cohesive; there is a structure behind it and it makes sense when you understand the way that it's pulled together and structured.

Now, with that said, what we're gonna do next week is we're gonna come back again and we're gonna look at some of the structure of the Tanakh, some of the thematic elements. But that hits on why Genesis is my favorite book...it's the thematic elements. This is where...I mean, I can give...the technical stuff, ok, that's cool. But I can get really excited when we start talking about the truth, the theological and thematic truths that run throughout the Bible, because it is amazing. It's like a 3-D...those weird 3-D images that, you know, you look at 'em and it's a weird, and all of a sudden that 3-D picture just pops out at you and you go, "Whoa! That is cool!" Ok, you guys ever seen those? They were big, I don't know, ten-fifteen years ago, somethin' like that, anyway.

Ok, here's the thing...why I love Genesis. I love Genesis because Genesis is a massive string of failures capped off with one success. It is the perfect picture of my life, and I bet every other person's life in here, in one way or another. It really is. Here's the thing, think about this—why do I say that Genesis is a string of failures that ends in success? Let's just kind of follow some of the main plot line characters, ok? Adam...think about his original sin, ok? Think that's a problem? Yes. Ok. Noah...yeah, he had the ark. But look, he died a drunk. His kids were ashamed of him. He messed up. He was a failure. You look at Abraham. He mistrusted God on a number of occasions; he failed to believe God about the promises that He would make; so much so that he turned around and he slept with women who were not his wife so that he could try and figure it out and make it happen. He lied about who his wife was so that he wouldn't get killed, and he let his wife be taken by another man to be treated as wife. Not exactly a fine, upstanding citizen that you would aspire to be like. Isaac, his son...very much the same. In fact, his life follows very much in his footsteps. Jacob, Abraham's grandson...he is less than inspiring, let's put it that way. His whole name...I'm sorry if your name is Jacob, but this is just what your name means. I means 'the trickster, the con-man, the cheat, the thief.' That's what it means, and that's why he was named... And you look at his life; that's...he is out for number one, and he is going to get what he can get, however he can get it. Not exactly a fine, upstanding, moral figure. And then his son, Judah, through whom the royal line will be traced, the line of Messiah will be traced. Read Genesis 38 sometime; because there are an age range of years in here I won't get into Genesis 38, but Judah has a pretty messed-up life, ok? And so there's this whole string of failures, people who don't get it right.

And then finally what do you come to? You come to Joseph. He is the one person in Genesis who gets it right, across the board. You look at it and it's like throughout his whole life, throughout the whole story it's like he doesn't make a single misstep. He's always on it; he's right there; he doesn't despair. He always trusts God; he's right there. In fact, here's an interesting thing...Joseph is the only person in the entire book of Genesis who is described as being filled with the Spirit of God. In Genesis 41:38 Pharaoh is the one who actually points that out, and he points it out through a question. He says, 'Is there any other man? Can we find anybody else who's filled with the Spirit of God?' As you look through Genesis the answer is 'No'.

Now here's the thing...the whole point of this, I'm absolutely convinced, is not to make you fall in love with Joseph and say, 'Joseph is the man!' In fact, the whole point of Joseph's life, and even of his death, is to not point you to him and how awesome he is. The whole point of Joseph and his life is to point you to Messiah, Y'shua, Jesus, the One who would come and deliver. Ok? Why do I say that? Let me just point out a few similarities between Joseph and Jesus, and let's see if maybe God might be setting the stage for us to expect and be prepared for, in a context, who Messiah will be and what he will look like. Think about this: Joseph was favored by his father; so was Jesus.

Joseph was betrayed by his brothers, and so was Jesus. In fact, Joseph was sold as a slave, the mastermind of which...of this plan...was Judah. He was sold as a slave by Judah for silver. Jesus was sold by Judas, the Greek equivalent of Judah, for thirty pieces of silver, which is the price of a slave. Joseph avoided impossible temptations in Egypt; Jesus avoided impossible temptations in the wilderness. Joseph was not rewarded for his obedience, but instead he was punished. Jesus was not rewarded for His obedience, but instead he was crucified. Yet, out of that punishment, Pharaoh exalts Joseph to the highest throne in the land. The text says that 'no one on earth was higher than him.' In fact, it tells us that people...everywhere Joseph went they were commanded to bow their knee. In the same way, the Bible says that God has highly exalted Jesus and given Him the name that is above every name, and that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow. Joseph did not use the throne that he received to get back at his enemies; instead, he saved a whole world through it, and he loved and forgave the brothers who had betrayed him. Jesus also uses the throne He sits on to offer salvation to the whole world, and He reaches out in forgiveness even to the most wicked of us, like myself, whose sin put Him on the cross.

Genesis 47:19 says that the Egyptians, or the non-Jewish people willingly offered themselves to Joseph. Now, this church here is filled with a bunch of non-Jewish people who willingly offer ourselves to Jesus. In Joseph's day there was no other way to be saved in the days of famine than if you were to come to Joseph. If you wanted to live you came to him. Today there is no other way to be saved than by coming to Jesus, because He is the way, the truth, the life. If you want to be saved you come to Him...the whole world.

The thing that's different is this...in the end, Joseph is not the promised deliverer. He's still a sinful man. Even though we don't see what his sin was (in Genesis it doesn't record it), we know he was a sinful man. He died. In fact, Genesis ends in the perfect spot for it to end. The last word in the Hebrew scripture in Genesis is 'coffin.' That's the last word. That's the last word of Genesis. Why does that matter? Well, think about back in the beginning. God said, 'You sinned, and the end of that will be death.' At the beginning He said, 'You've sinned; it will end in death.' And death is the last thing we see in Genesis, where a man is being laid in a grave, in a tomb, in a coffin. But the cool thing about it is in the beginning God also said death would not be the final end, because He would send One who can deliver, who will through death defeat death and deliver all of humanity if they accept Him, if they follow Him, if they surrender their lives to Him. And how does Joseph die? On his deathbed he is looking towards God's deliverance and he says, 'I know that God has promised He will deliver. And so though I die I know one day God will deliver, and He will make good on His promise.' And so though Genesis ends in death, of the person who in many ways began setting the stage for Christ, though it ends in death it ends with the promise that it will not remain that way, and that ultimately the Deliverer will come...God's deliverance will come.

Genesis is an amazing book. But the cool thing is Genesis is not the only one. This sort of stuff runs throughout the Old Testament. In fact, in Luke 24, Jesus said 'Guess what? All that stuff there? It's all about Me.' Ok? And we're going to look at some more of that next week. We're going to look and see how thematically so much of that traces back to the Old Testament.

But what we'll do now is we'll go ahead and close. And I'll ask you to stand with me. And ultimately what we're going to close here with is a prayer, singing a prayer, that we will give witness to the only One who can save, the One to whom we must go if we want to know and see God. And we're praying that ultimately our lives, our words, will point to Messiah, to Jesus, to the One who is...has come, just as Joseph did. So I ask that you would join me in prayer.

[Congregation sings the prayer song.]

Go in God's grace.