

Old Testament Story

“Christianity is essentially a historical religion. God's revelation, which Christians cherish and seek to communicate, was not given in a vacuum, but in an unfolding historical situation, through a nation called Israel and a person called Jesus Christ”

John Stott, Understanding the Bible p45

The quote from John Stott reminds us of the need to view Christianity (and Judaism) in its historical context. This doesn't mean we are to view the scriptures as a history book. The Old Testament is an account of God's dealings with His people. The emphasis is on the people's relationship with God and it is written from a spiritual perspective. So, for example, in Judges when dealing with the tribes inhabiting the Promised Land the writer acknowledges that the possession of chariots is a factor in the failure to dispossess the Philistines of the plains (Jdg1:19). However the deeper problem for the Israelites is that they frequently turned their back on God and worshipped other local gods so violating the covenant (Jdg2:20,21).

It also reminds us that we share our faith. We don't study any aspect of scripture for the sake of study, but to deepen our faith and to enable us to share it more effectively. To gain an overview of God's dealings will hopefully clarify His plan for humanity and we will be in a better position to communicate God to others. The Bible tells us that there is a God who impacted our world in space-time on several occasions, but most effectively in the person of Jesus Christ (Heb1:1,2) and gives us confidence that He will do so in the future.

Early History

The first five books of the Old Testament (Old Covenant) are attributed to Moses and are often referred to as the books of Moses (though nowhere in any of the books is the authorship stated). They witness the major actions of God and humanity in early history or even before historical records of any description were kept.

Genesis covers a time frame which is not clearly defined, but it is insistent that the Universe had a beginning. There was a point at which the Universe began. Before this there was no space-time. The Bible is also insistent that the Universe, much less the Solar System or the Earth, did not come into being without a cause, but was created by a transcendent God in a timely and orderly fashion. So Genesis begins with an account (or two accounts) of creation. The effect of God's creative activity is, in God's words, “very good” (Gen1:31). There are often comparisons made between the Bible's account of creation and the other early writings, for example the Babylonian stories. While there are superficial similarities between them, the Bible is the only one which gives a sense of order to creation and the only one which suggests God loves the people he created. (For example, the Babylonian story has it that the Earth was thrown up out of the chaos of the churning sea. Men were created to do the work

that the minor deities were previously responsible for and that they had refused to do any more.)

From these accounts we learn several things, God is beyond space-time, creative, far-sighted, plural yet one. Humanity is at the centre of the creation, or rather the culmination of this creative work. Humanity is intended to live in relationship with God and with each other. God provided all Humanity's needs, including the right to choose their own path.

With Humanity in the Garden of Eden is also the serpent, Satan (Gen3:1). Satan tempts Adam and Eve to doubt God and to concentrate on lower things and Adam and Eve thus fall from grace. Their sin in taking the fruit (not an apple) breaks God's command. Judgement comes on all three players. Adam is driven from the Garden and forced to battle against a hostile nature to feed himself, Eve is given pain in childbirth greater than was God's plan. Both die, immediately in spiritual terms and later physically. Satan is cursed, the snake form loses its legs and is forced to crawl, there is enmity between snakes and humans resulting physically in snakebites often to the feet and crushing of the snakes' heads (Gen3:15). Spiritually this points to the damage caused to Humanity in their separation from God and to the victory of the second Adam, Jesus Christ who will finally defeat Satan and restore people of faith to a full living relationship with God.

Driven from the Garden, the effects of the Fall begin to show, the murders by Cain (Gen4:8) and his descendant, Lamech(Gen4:23), the concentration of the sons of God on the daughters of men, the increase of wickedness. Yet there is still a recognition of God in some (Gen4:26, 5:22, 6:8,9) Eventually God realises that Humanity's wickedness has reached a point where He must step in. Noah finds favour in God's eyes and God reveals His immediate plan to him. Noah is obedient to God's command and builds an ark in which he and his family ride out the flood which God sends to destroy others. By God's grace and Noah's act of faith his family and other animals are preserved. (Once again there are other flood "legends" but these often differ from the Bible in the reason for the flood (e.g. in the Atrahasis Epic, the noise of the increasing number of humans annoys Enlil - "the clamour of humanity has become oppressive" - and he floods the Earth.) and in the design of the ark (often to the detriment of its ability to withstand a catastrophic flood), the length of time for the rain & days in the Sumerian myth) and the time in the ark. Some of these legends may well refer to minor (by comparison) localised floods, but if they do refer to the Noachic flood they provide extra-Biblical supporting evidence.

Exiting the ark, Noah worships God with his family. However, Noah is not perfect (as the story of his vineyard and drunkenness illustrates Gen9:20-27) and neither are his children. They are still sullied by the effects of the Fall and their minds turn to equality with God once again. They build a tower, probably a ziggurat, at Babel in the plain of Shinar to reach up to heaven. God intervenes again in judgement, confusing their languages and scattering them (Gen11:9).

In passing, let us note that these accounts show us that God was active in men's lives before the Abrahamic Covenant was given, before the Law was given and to people who were not Jews. That God spoke only to a small, obscure group after a considerable length of time is a criticism you may hear from the New Atheists amongst others and should not be allowed to go unchallenged.

The Patriarchs

The line of Abraham (Abram) is now marked out. Abraham is descended from Shem, hence the Jews sometimes being referred to as Semites (as in anti-Semitic). Abraham is living in a prosperous city called Ur amongst a people who would later be called the Chaldeans. Taken by his father, Terah, to Haran, he is called by God to leave and to go to a land God will show him (Gen12:1-3). Abraham is obedient and sets out south with his nephew, Lot, towards what will become Israel. On this journey he follows what is known as the fertile crescent.



During his lifetime Abraham is given confirmations of the promise of descendants, a land and a blessing to all nations (Gen12:2,3; 13:14-17; 15; 17). This is often referred to as the Abrahamic Covenant. Abraham exhibits much faith, notably in his willingness to sacrifice Isaac(Gen22:1-18 Heb11:17-19,) - incidentally not a blind faith, but one based upon experience and reason - but also shows the fallen nature of Humanity in some of his actions. The most significant of these failings is the desire to hurry things along as far as an heir is concerned. Abraham sleeps with his wife Sarah's maidservant and a son, Ishmael, is the result. Ishmael and his mother are later driven away by Abraham into the wilderness to die. God intervenes to save them both from the effects of this ungodly act(Gen21:17-20). The Ishmaelites (from whom come some modern day Arabs) and the Hebrews have been enemies ever since. Ishmael is claimed by Muslims to be an ancestor of Muhammed and Ishmael's rescue in the wilderness is celebrated during the Hajj. In later years Abraham has six further sons (Gen25:2-4) each of whom is the ancestor of a tribe which today makes up part of the Arab peoples.

Abraham's Hebrew line continues through Isaac, then Isaac's younger son Jacob. This is a reminder of God's sovereignty, He does not have to follow anyone's rules (though He voluntarily chooses to do so) in some cases. So, generally speaking, He causes the world to follow the laws He has set up, but occasionally He will break these in a miraculous or sovereign way. Jacob has twelve sons including Joseph. Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers (Gen27:38) and taken to Egypt. Here he advances by a dangerous and unlikely route to become the highest of Pharaoh's ministers (Gen41:43). During a severe famine Jacob sends the other brothers to Egypt to buy grain. Joseph traps his brothers, but then reveals himself to them and forgives them, later making one of the most insightful statements in Genesis, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good..."(Gen50:29). The whole family, perhaps 100 people (Gen46:26) move into Egypt and settle into the land of Goshen (Gen45:10).

It is probably during the time of the patriarchs that the book of Job was set, though not necessarily written. This wonderful piece of Wisdom Literature discusses the question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" Within the discussion, many aspects of God's character and actions are clarified or set out and many of His dealings with Man explained. Above all, God's majesty, sovereignty, justice and faithfulness shine out. Job finishes with an encounter between God and Job which finally and fully answers Job's questions. It is worth noting here that the names Abraham, Jacob and Job appear in other writings of the time (middle bronze age).

The time of the patriarchs came to an end with Joseph. During this period of history, the middle bronze age, no single king was dominant in the area of Canaan. The situation in this area is recorded not only in Genesis, but also stated as above in the Mari texts, a collection of some 20 000 texts from the then Amorite capital of Mari. Our belief that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God means we do not need other evidence to confirm it. Non-christians or liberal christians will question the reliability

of the Bible and it is helpful to be able to cite other evidence which supports the Bible's accounts.

The Exodus

Over time, the children of Israel became a nation and represented a powerful people within Egypt. After many years, a new Pharaoh came to power who knew nothing of Joseph's deliverance of Egypt. This may well be because this Pharaoh was from a new line. This new Pharaoh viewed the Israelites as a threat to national security and began to persecute the Israelites, subjecting them to slave labour (Ex1:11) and attempting to carry out a form of ethnic cleansing by killing any newborn baby boys (Ex1:22). In this situation a Levite couple hide their son from Pharaoh's soldiers. Pharaoh's daughter discovers him in an ark in the Nile and adopts him, naming him Moses (Ex2:10). Moses grows up in Pharaoh's court, knowing the luxury and lifestyle of the Egyptians. However, he is also aware of the suffering of his own people. The tension between these two comes to a head when Moses sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave. Moses intervenes, killing the Egyptian. He attempts to cover up his action by burying the Egyptian, but is challenged about this action and flees Egypt (Ex2:15).

In Midian Moses married the daughter of a local priest and tended the flocks of his father-in-law. Shepherding on Mt. Horeb (Mt.Sinai), Moses sees a bush burning, but not consumed. When he approaches, God speaks out of the bush (Ex3:4). He calls Him and equips him with signs and a spokesman, Aaron, to rescue the Israelites from Egypt. Moses returns to Egypt and speaks to the elders, who accept his testimony, and to Pharaoh, who is dismissive of Moses and his God and increases the workload placed on the Israelites. This causes division between Moses and his people (Ex5:21).

God brings plagues on both the Egyptians and the Israelites, turning the Nile to blood and bringing swarms of frogs and gnats. Pharaoh is still hard-hearted and further plagues are visited on Egypt, but not on Goshen (Ex8:22), flies, death of livestock, boils, hail, locusts and darkness. Finally, God through Moses warns Pharaoh, and all Egypt, of the final plague, that all the firstborn sons and the firstborn of all cattle will die(Ex). The Israelites are given the Passover ritual to avoid this plague, sacrificing a lamb and spreading its blood on the lintel and doorposts of their houses. The angel of God goes throughout Egypt carrying out God's judgement but passing over the houses marked with blood (Ex12:13). The Passover is a powerful symbol of the effectiveness of the blood of Christ (Ro).

The children of Israel were expelled from Egypt, taking with them gold and silver from their neighbours. They travelled initially by a meandering route towards Pi Hahiroth near the Red Sea or Sea of Reeds rather than taking the direct route through the land of the Philistines where they would have had to fight. To Pharaoh it appeared that the Israelites were wandering aimlessly, though the Israelites were in fact led by God by means of a fiery cloudy, pillar (Ex13:21). Pharaoh mobilised an army against

Israel and trapped the people between the army and the sea. The Israelites were miraculously delivered by God who sent a strong wind to dry up the sea when Moses held his staff out over the waters (Ex14:21,22). Pharaoh and his chariots were caught in the returning waters and drowned (although careful reading shows that Pharaoh may not have died at this point). The children of Israel celebrated with joy, dancing and singing (Ex15).

Up to this point it is difficult, or perhaps impossible, to date any life with accuracy. However, the date of the Exodus can be reasonably well established. There are two major points of view. The first is that the Pharaoh of the Exodus was either Tuthmosis III or Amenhotep II who ruled Egypt from 1479BC to 1400BC. This would place the Exodus around 1446BC. The second is that the Exodus was later during the reign of Ramasses II and giving a date of around 1220BC. Working back from these using the Bible's chronology taken as literal gives us the following dates.

2166 Birth of Abraham
2066 Birth of Isaac
2006 Birth of Jacob
1915 Birth of Joseph
1876 Jacob settles in Egypt
1859 Death of Jacob
1805 Death of Joseph
1526 Birth of Moses
1446 Exodus (assuming the early date for the Exodus)

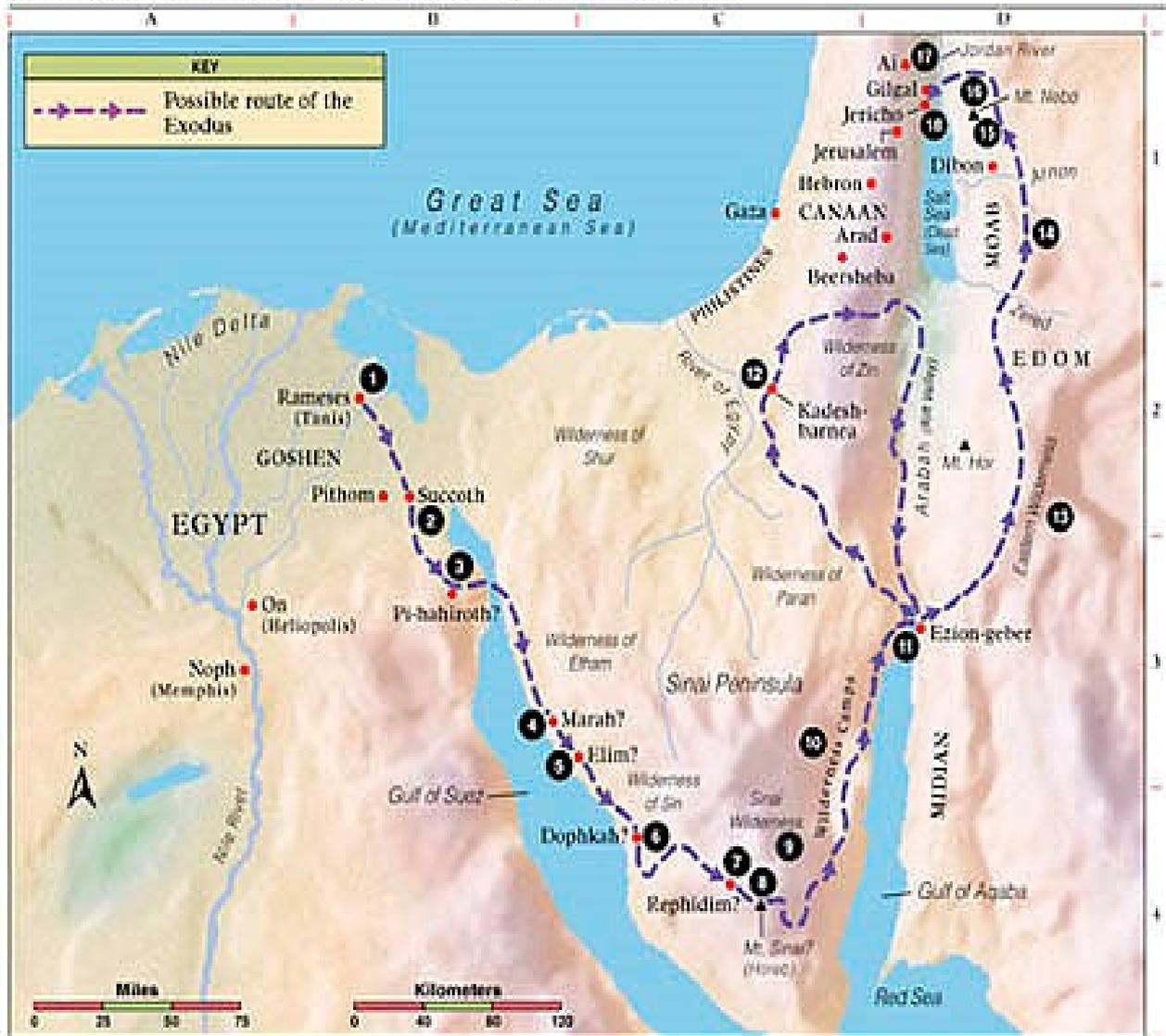
If the later date for the Exodus is assumed, all these dates would be about 225 years later. Notice that the early dates come from the dating of Solomon's reign by using extra-Biblical records and working back using Biblical figures. The later dates come from assuming the Pharaoh of the Exodus to be Ramasses II because of the statement that the Israelites worked on the building of the city of Ramasses.

The people then moved on following the pillar of cloud and fire to Mount Sinai (Mt. Horeb). Here Moses, accompanied partway by Joshua, ascended to meet with God whilst the people stayed below (Ex19). God gave Moses the law, including the ten commandments written on tablets of stone. Moses descended to find that in his absence the people had persuaded Aaron to build a golden calf which they are worshipping. Moses breaks the tablets (Ex32:19) and berates the people, the Levites attack the people who are out of control, killing 3000. Moses re-ascends and chisels out new stone tablets on which God writes. God later sent a plague to punish the Israelites..

When Moses returned to the camp he explained the law and the arrangements for the priesthood and the tabernacle to the people. The tabernacle was constructed according to the pattern which God showed Moses on Mt. Sinai and can be interpreted in ways which illustrate methods of worship. The rest of Exodus and much of Leviticus,

Numbers and Deuteronomy deal with various laws (613 in total) which govern behaviour as individuals, as a nation and as the people of God. The covenant is established between God and His people with undertakings on both sides and judgements for God to exercise if the people are unfaithful. Though notice that much of the judgement reflects the absence of blessing and protection because of the people's disobedience.

2. Israel's Exodus from Egypt and Entry into Canaan



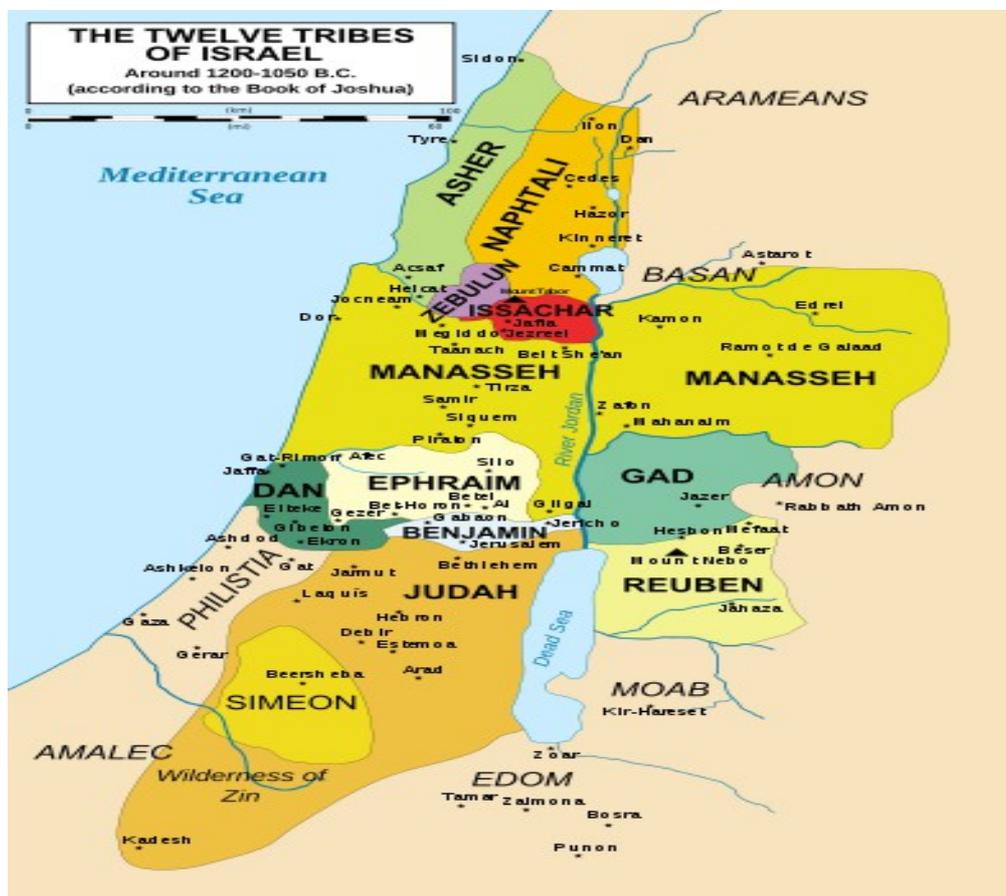
Over a year after encamping at Sinai the Israelites, about 1.5 million people, moved on towards the Promised Land (Nu10:11). When they reached the borders, Moses sent spies out from all the tribes. They returned bearing some of the fruit and confirming that it was indeed a land flowing with milk and honey. However ten of the twelve caution strongly against entering the land, saying the people there are too strong and their weapons too good for the Israelites to survive the encounter, let alone overcome them. Only Joshua and Caleb urge the people to trust God and march on the land. God is angry and tells the people through Moses that they will wander in the desert for 40 years until the generations that made the decision to turn back are dead. Only Joshua and Caleb are to remain after this exile. The people are penitent and say

they will march in. Moses warns them that God has spoken and they will be defeated, but they ignore him and are driven back with great loss of life. (Nu13,14).

The story of the desert wanderings with murmurings against God, judgements on the people, battles against kings outside the Promised Land, is recorded mostly in Deuteronomy and Numbers. Two of the tribes, Reuben and Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh asked to be allowed to stay east of the Jordan as the lands there were suited to their lifestyle. This was permitted providing their men entered Canaan at the front of the army and fought alongside their brothers. At the end of Deuteronomy Moses dies having seen the land but not being allowed in because of failings in the wilderness. Traditionally he left the collection of books known as the Torah or the Pentateuch containing God's early dealings with men, the early history of Israel and the collection of 613 laws given by God at Mt. Sinai.

Entry to the Promised Land

Following the mourning for Moses, Joshua gathered the people east of the Jordan river. In a reminder of the crossing of the Red Sea, the Jordan dries up as the priests carry the Ark of the Covenant into it (Jos3:15,16). The whole people cross, rededicate themselves to the covenant (Jos5:3) with God and begin to take the land one city at a time. Under Joshua the people of Israel drove across the land, splitting the north from the south. God was with them and they were successful in these initial battles which began with the conquest of Jericho.



Joshua divided the land between the tribes (Jos13-21), handing the responsibility for conquest of their area to each tribe. The tribes had mixed success, but generally speaking their faith in and commitment to God were insufficient and the indigenous tribes, Philistines etc. remained in the land and caused problems for Israel both by direct opposition and by temptation to serve other gods. At the end of his life Joshua challenged the children of Israel to choose between Yahweh and the local gods. Despite Joshua's solemn warnings that they will not keep their word the people swore to follow Yahweh (Jos24)

Time of the Judges

Following Joshua's death, the children of Israel moved into a repetitive cycle of obedience, forgetting God's acts and forsaking Him, being oppressed by the other tribes in the area, crying to God for release and deliverance. At the point of penitence, God sent a Judge to lead the people back to Him in freedom from their enemies (Jdg2:6-23). Judges like Gideon, Deborah, Samson, Othniel, and Ehud served the people well. The book of Judges ends with a negative summary of the state of the nation, "There was no king in Israel, each man did as he saw fit". This theme is taken up during the time of Samuel, the last and arguably greatest Judge.

It is during the time of the Judges that the events recorded in the book of Ruth take place. This book is important because it tells how Ruth, a Moabite woman who shows great loyalty to her Hebrew mother-in-law, came to be married to Boaz, the great-grandfather of David, arguably Israel's greatest king (Ruth4:18-22).

The Last Judge

Samuel, the son of an Ephraimite man and a barren woman who cried to God for a child, judged Israel for many years, serving God faithfully from childhood (1Sam1:28, 2:11). Samuel took over from Eli when he died on hearing of the death of his two sons and the capture by the Philistines of the Ark of the Covenant (1Sam4:17,18). The people badgered Samuel to set a king over them so that they would be "like all the other nations" 1Sam8:19,20. Samuel warned them of the consequences, especially of the taxation which would follow (1Sam8:11-18). Nevertheless the people insisted and God led a young man called Saul to Samuel. Samuel anointed Saul (1Sam10:1) who initially had some success, along with his son Jonathan, in pushing back the Philistines and in uniting the Israelites into a single kingdom.