

## A Tale of Two Testaments

By Heather Kendall

What is the biblical storyline? The fact that the Bible is divided into the Old Testament (OT) and the New Testament (NT) gives us a clue. The OT relates God's story before Christ's birth while the NT tells his story from the birth of Christ to the end of time.

In Genesis we learn what happened shortly after creation. Ever since Satan enticed Adam and Eve to rebel, God has condemned everyone to spiritual and physical death. Therefore Paul writes, "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom. 8:22, 23, NIV).

In Revelation we view the new heaven and new earth where the redeemed will live forever with God in a sin-free world. There we shall have our redemptive bodies similar to Jesus' resurrection body. It will be paradise restored superior to the original one, for Satan will never be able to infiltrate it and cause chaos the way he did the first time.

Since God will not allow sin in that new world, people have a terrible problem. Sin has separated us from God. Therefore our greatest need is spiritual reconciliation with our Creator. Before the foundation of the world, God planned a solution to our problem (1 Pet. 1:18–21). Jesus' death and resurrection would bring glory to God and restore believers to fellowship with him. After Adam and Eve sinned, God promised to send one who would crush the head of the serpent, meaning Satan (Gen. 3:15). Thus the promised Seed would restore fellowship between God and sinners. Throughout the OT God revealed more details of his plan of salvation.

In the NT God fulfilled all the promises for Jesus' first coming. Now believers look forward to Jesus' second coming. Then God will complete his plan by taking the redeemed to live with him in the new heaven and new earth—a world free of sin forever. This is a broad outline of the Christ-centered biblical storyline.

Many centuries passed before God called the pagan Abraham to leave Babylonia and go to an unknown land. Because he obeyed, God promised Abraham that in his Seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed. In 1852 B.C., God gave Abraham the everlasting covenant.<sup>1</sup> The blood of Christ would ratify the unconditional spiritual elements of that covenant while God required circumcision to keep the physical promises in force (Gal. 3:13–16; Gen. 17:10–14).

Later in Genesis God continued the line of promise through Abraham's grandson, Jacob. God blessed Jacob with twelve sons who would become heads of the twelve tribes in Israel. He also changed Jacob's name to Israel. On Jacob's deathbed, God revealed the coming King would descend from the line of Judah.

The OT contains 39 books, almost all of which cover 1000 years of Israelite history. In 1446 B.C., God established Israel as his special people, his treasured possession (Deut. 7:6).<sup>2</sup> He did this to provide a nation and a family for Jesus to be born into. The covenant at Sinai, or the old covenant, was the legal agreement between God and the Israelites. If they obeyed the Ten Commandments and all the other rules and regulations, then God promised to bless them. Disobedience meant a loss of blessing (Deut. 27, 28).

When God established the nation of Israel, he began to keep his promise regarding the physical blessings of the everlasting covenant with Abraham. But notice how much more stringent the requirements. In addition to circumcision, the Israelites must keep all the Law. Thus God merged the physical aspect of the everlasting covenant into the old covenant.

Inherent in this covenant were the promises of a kingdom and political clout over their enemies. Through the Law, God revealed his holiness and the sinfulness of people. Through the sacrificial system, God reminded them constantly of their need for a blood sacrifice to pay the punishment for their sins. God also sent prophets urging his people to repent of their sin. But only a few listened and obeyed.

Those prophets revealed specific information about the coming King and his kingdom. For example, Micah foretold Jesus' birthplace. Isaiah gave many details about Jesus' character, his death, and the salvation offered to sinners. God promised Jeremiah the arrival of the new covenant—the day when all Israel would have the laws of God written on their hearts. Daniel announced the approximate date of Jesus' birth and had a vision of Jesus' inauguration as King of kings. By the time of Malachi, in 430 B.C.,<sup>3</sup> the Lord had prepared his people for the King's arrival. But they had to wait 400 more years.

The NT contains 27 books, which span 100 years of history about Jesus and the church. It begins with the Gospels of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus; continues with Acts, the history of the early church; and follows with letters to the churches. Many times throughout the NT the Holy Spirit points out how Jesus and the church fulfill OT prophecies. Before his ascension, Jesus promised to return a second time. Meanwhile he is preparing a place for us. At Jesus' return the wicked will be cast into hell and believers will live forever with God in the new heaven and new earth.

The four Gospels are pivotal to God's storyline. Paul writes, "And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (1Cor. 15:14, NIV). Because of Jesus' death and resurrection, God sent the Holy Spirit to give birth to the church at Pentecost. The rest of the NT explains the work of the Holy Spirit in spreading the gospel message and in growing the church. In so doing, the Holy Spirit exalts Jesus and brings glory to God. Instead of Jesus' preaching in a small geographical area, the Holy Spirit is working through people everywhere. That is why the church has grown exponentially and is gradually spreading throughout the whole

world. Finally in Revelation, believers rejoice at Jesus' sovereignty over the church, world events, and natural disasters.

Furthermore in the NT the new covenant has replaced the old covenant. Paul writes, "For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. But God found fault with the people...By calling this covenant 'new', he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear" (Heb. 8:7, 8, 13, NIV). When Jesus completed his mission on earth, there was no more need for the sacrifice of animals. Furthermore such sacrifices insult the precious blood of Jesus.

Moreover the church replaced Israel as God's special people. That is why Peter declares, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pet. 2:9, NIV).

At Jesus' last supper, he taught his disciples that he would be the sacrifice ratifying the new covenant. He said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" (Luke 22:20, NIV). Priests under the old covenant sacrificed animals continually because their sacrifices could not remove the guilt of sin. In contrast, Jesus was sacrificed once for all time for the sins of believers (Heb. 10:11–14). The writer to the Hebrews declares that Jesus' blood satisfies the requirements of the everlasting covenant (Heb. 13:20). Thus the everlasting covenant with Abraham and the new covenant are identical.

In the NT believers are called Jews and the spiritual descendants of Abraham. Paul explains, "No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code" (Rom. 2:29, NIV); also, "It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children...In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring" (Rom. 9:6–8, NIV); finally, Paul writes to the Gentiles, "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:29, NIV).

We have seen how most of the OT concerns the old covenant with historical Israel while the NT teaches us about God's new covenant with the church. Since the NT calls believers, Jews, I think we are justified in naming historical Israel, old Israel, and the church, new Israel.

Old Israel was the foundation of God's redemptive plan. Paul writes, "Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised!" (Rom. 9:4, 5, NIV). Indeed we must not forget the first missionaries of the church were Jews. Ever since Jesus' death and resurrection, the Holy Spirit has been busy building God's spiritual house, new Israel.

Old Israel's kingdom was political. God promised them many times that they would have power over Gentiles. But we must not forget God's law for nations: "If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it" (Jer. 18:7–10, NIV).

History in the OT records how often old Israel disobeyed God. As in Noah's day, God's mercy does not last forever. Therefore Assyria conquered Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel, in 722 B.C.<sup>4</sup> Then the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C. and forced many Jews into captivity.<sup>5</sup>

Although old Israel constantly sinned, God promised to return them to the Promised Land. In 538 B.C., Cyrus, king of Persia, allowed the Jews to return to their land.<sup>6</sup> God did not promise them another return. The three books, Haggai, Zachariah, and Malachi, written after their return are silent about that subject. After their restoration the Jews still could not keep God's Law perfectly. Therefore God could not bless them more than he did. In A.D. 70, the Roman army under Titus destroyed Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup> Like all political kingdoms, old Israel was physical and temporary.

In contrast, Christ's kingdom, the new Israel, is spiritual and eternal (Dan. 2). Once Jesus told the Pharisees, "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:20, 21, NIV). Since God's kingdom is spiritual and not physical, no one will ever be able to look at a geographical area and say, "There it is!" Furthermore Jesus told Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place" (John 18:36, NIV).

God has circumcised the citizens of new Israel so that they will want to love and obey him; he guarantees them the unconditional promises of the new covenant: "I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people... For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Heb. 8:10, 12, NIV). This means that only regenerate people belong to God's kingdom, the church. Since the Holy Spirit dwells within believers, he is constantly teaching them God's truth and sanctifying them.

In contrast, the citizens of old Israel were a mixed multitude, mostly unregenerate—only a few waited for their spiritual Savior and King. They were concerned with outward obedience, and even then they failed. Their hearts were wicked and rebellious for they were spiritually dead (Ps. 36:1–4; Eph. 2:1–3). How often God warned them of impending judgment! At the final

judgment all the wicked, including those in old Israel, will be cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:11–15).

In conclusion, new covenant theologians believe in a Christ-centered storyline with an emphasis on what the NT teaches. Instead covenant theologians and dispensationalists derive their biblical storylines from the OT rather than the NT.

Covenant theologians believe in a storyline embracing the whole Bible called the covenant of grace. In so doing, they have transferred the terms of God’s covenant with the nation of Israel at Sinai to the church. Thus the church is ideally a state church composed of regenerate and unregenerate people. Infant baptism has replaced the physical circumcision of males in Israel. This teaching violates the new covenant in which every member is regenerate. The result is that some nonbelievers consider themselves to be saved when they are not. This is a false security of salvation. They are relying on their family and church heritage or on their infant baptism to save them.

Dispensationalists believe in two storylines—one for Israel and another for the church. Therefore they understand the new covenant promised in Jeremiah chapter 31 to be actually two new covenants—one for the church and the other for Israel. When Jesus returns, they believe he will reign on earth in history for 1000 years. During this period God will save some people. They base this idea on the fact that God promises to return Israel to its land at the end of time. Then Israel will finally obtain its political utopia and reign over the other nations of the world. This teaching violates the fact that the kingdom promises have long expired for old Israel. Dispensationalists refuse to apply the law for nations to Israel. Moreover, since the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70,<sup>7</sup> the Jews have intermarried with other races so much that the pure bloodline of old Israel no longer exists.

Although premillennial churches reject a political utopia for Israel during the millennium, like dispensationalists, they still believe God will save some sinners. What a false hope of salvation! Some people may think they have a second chance to be saved after Jesus’ return.

Paul writes, “I tell you, now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2, NIV). The writer to the Hebrews confirms this idea: “But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (Hebrews 3:13, NIV). This present age is the only time when people may be saved by the preaching of the gospel. This opportunity will be gone when Jesus comes back. Like the parable in Matthew 25 of the ten virgins, Jesus will tell unrepentant sinners, “I tell you the truth, I don’t know you” (Matthew 25:12, NIV).

We have considered God’s storyline throughout the Bible. Our original problem was that separation from God causes everyone physical and spiritual death. God the Father in his mercy planned for Jesus to come and pay the penalty for the sins of his people. Jesus accomplished

God's plan by shedding his blood on the cross and rising again. The Holy Spirit is busy bringing many into God's eternal kingdom.

The OT explains how God prepared for the coming of his Son. The NT rejoices in Jesus' accomplishment which allows the Holy Spirit to spread the good news. The two testaments also give us a picture of two kingdoms—old Israel and new Israel. For 1400 years old Israel received the blessings and mercy of God in the physical realm. Yet most of them rejected God and continued in their sin. That is why Jesus condemned them for belonging to their father, the Devil (John 8:44). In contrast, new Israel is like a bride preparing for the eternal kingdom. All members are saved, not by their own works, but by the grace of God, for their sins are washed white in the blood of the Lamb. One day they will live in the new heaven and new earth with God forever.

#### Notes

1. Heather A. Kendall, *A Tale of Two Kingdoms* (Belleville: Guardian, 2006), 415–417.
2. *Ibid.*, 415.
3. David Maas, "A Chronology of Bible Events and World Events," *Life Application Study Bible* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1991), 1627.
4. Ira M. Price, Leslie E. Fuller, and Chester J. Attig, "Synchronous History of the Nations," *The New Standard Alphabetical Indexed Bible* (Chicago: John A. Herrel, 1963), 256.
5. Maas, "A Chronology of Bible Events and World Events," 601.
6. Price, "Synchronous History of the Nations," 260.
7. *Ibid.*, 270.