



ALAN J. THOMPSON

**A BASIC  
GUIDE TO  
BIBLICAL  
THEOLOGY**



**NINE THEMES THAT  
UNITE THE OLD  
AND NEW  
TESTAMENTS**

“Alan Thompson sets out to help the Bible reader understand how progressive revelation and the overall unity of the Bible provide the necessary reference points for the correct understanding of the scriptural message. His selection of major themes that are essential aspects of the progression of the message about Christ’s saving work aptly enables us to appreciate both the unity and the diversity of Scripture. This book is a valuable addition to a growing body of literature that introduces both the technically trained theologian and the layperson to the discipline of biblical theology. To magnify the Christ-centeredness of the Bible is a worthy aim, which is the emphasis of this book.”

—**Graeme Goldsworthy**, Moore Theological College, Sydney, Australia

“Understanding the Bible may seem daunting since it was composed over many centuries with an astonishing literary variety. Alan Thompson has provided an accessible, wise, clear, and faithful summary of some of the key themes in the biblical story. The length of the Bible and the diversity of historical situations addressed may hinder us from grasping where the story is going. Reading Thompson will help students, laypeople, and pastors see the larger framework and discern the overall structure and content of the Scriptures. It is a wonderful resource for a book club or for a small-group study or for a discipling relationship with another believer.”

—**Thomas R. Schreiner**, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“What a wonderful book on biblical theology! This volume is one of the most accessible, well-balanced, and engaging books on the subject. This project not only introduces readers to the major themes and structure of the Bible but also contains a splendid chapter on how to read Scripture responsibly. For anyone looking to dip their toes in the waters of biblical theology or to wade into the deep end, I heartily recommend Alan Thompson’s *A Basic Guide to Biblical Theology*.”

—**Benjamin L. Gladd**, The Carson Center for Theological Renewal

“Whenever a person hears someone do biblical theology—connecting the storyline of the Bible through its various parts according to themes written by the divine author—there’s usually a deep resonance that generates a desire to be able to see these connections. Alan Thompson’s *A Basic Guide to Biblical Theology* works through nine of the most important themes that span the Bible and presents them in a way that not only grounds the reader in these

foundational themes but also trains the Bible student in how to search out additional themes with biblical integrity, leading to joyful discovery.”

—Nancy Guthrie, Bible teacher and author of *Even Better than Eden: Nine Ways the Bible’s Story Changes Everything About Your Story*

“I highly recommend this accessible, insightful introduction to biblical theology. Thompson provides sound guidance for readers seeking patterns and principles for how the whole Bible fits together.”

—Brian J. Tabb, Bethlehem College and Seminary

“Knowing how the Bible fits together is foundational to the right interpretation and application of Scripture and to all theological formulation. Although the subject is vast, Alan Thompson has provided a wonderful, faithful, and helpful overview of the basic story and message of Scripture. This book is a must-read for those who want to know how to think God’s thoughts after him and want to understand well the whole counsel of God. I cannot recommend this book enough; it will help both beginners and seasoned Christians learn how to understand and marvel at the glory of our triune God’s redemptive plan centered in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

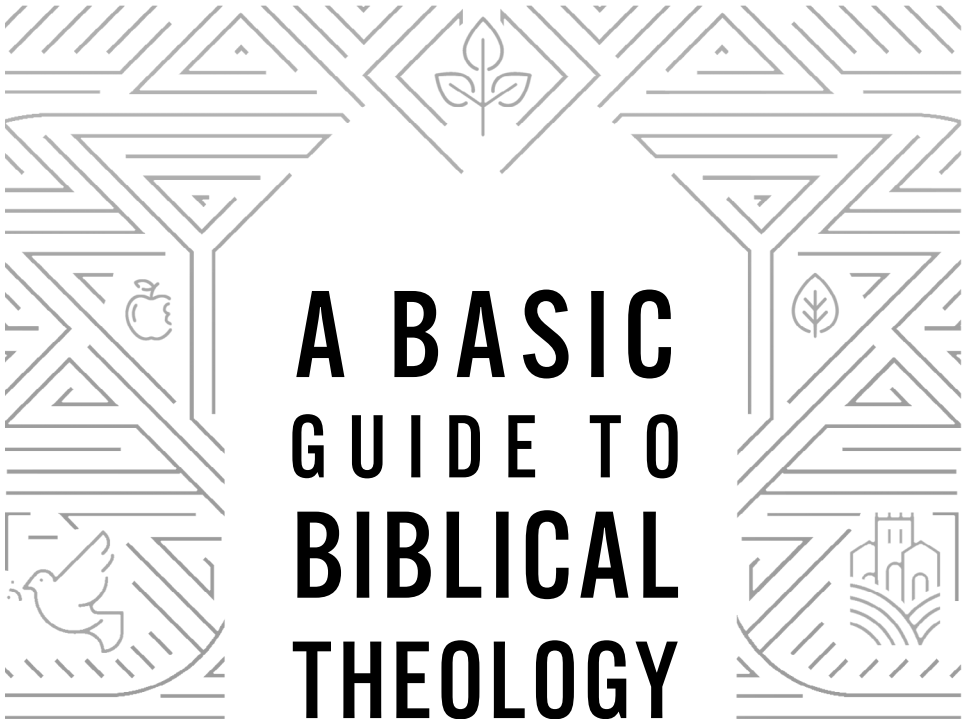
—Steve Wellum, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Too often readers of the Bible don’t see the forest for the trees. This engaging book will change that. It will open your eyes to a beautiful landscape in which all the paths lead to Jesus.”

—Sigurd Grindheim, Norwegian Mission Society and  
Mekane Yesus Seminary, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

**A BASIC  
GUIDE TO  
BIBLICAL  
THEOLOGY**






# A BASIC GUIDE TO BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

NINE THEMES THAT UNITE  
THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS

---

ALAN J. THOMPSON

**B**  
**Baker Academic**  
*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan



Alan J. Thompson, *A Basic Guide to Biblical Theology*  
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2025  
Used by permission.

© 2025 by Alan J. Thompson

Published by Baker Academic  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
Grand Rapids, Michigan  
BakerAcademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Thompson, Alan J. author

Title: A basic guide to biblical theology : nine themes that unite the Old and New Testaments / Alan J. Thompson.

Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2025] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2025013734 | ISBN 9781540969743 paperback | ISBN 9781540969750 casebound | ISBN 9781493452347 ebook | ISBN 9781493452354 pdf

Subjects: LCSH: Bible—Theology

Classification: LCC BS543 .T46 2025 | DDC 230/.041—dc23/eng/20250610

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2025013734>

Unless otherwise indicated, Scriptures are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. [www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com). The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.®

Scripture quotations labeled CSB have been taken from the Christian Standard Bible®, copyright © 2017 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Christian Standard Bible® and CSB® are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers.

Scripture quotations labeled ESV are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ESV Text Edition: 2016

Scripture quotations labeled HCSB are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible®, copyright © 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2009 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Holman Christian Standard Bible®, Holman CSB®, and HCSB® are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers.

Scripture quotations labeled KJV are from the King James Version of the Bible.

Scripture quotations labeled NASB are taken from the (NASB®) New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1971, 1977, 1995, 2020 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. All rights reserved. [www.lockman.org](http://www.lockman.org)

Scripture labeled NKJV taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations labeled NRSV are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Cover design by Studio Gearbox

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and postconsumer waste whenever possible.

25 26 27 28 29 30 31 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Alan J. Thompson, *A Basic Guide to Biblical Theology*  
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2025  
Used by permission.

*For Alayne,  
Deborah, and Rebekah  
with much gratitude for their love*



# CONTENTS

*Preface xi*

*Abbreviations xiii*

1. How to Put Your Bible Together 1
2. Creation and Rebellion 13
3. Covenant 25
4. The Exodus and the Tabernacle 43
5. Law (and Wisdom) 55
6. Sacrifice 73
7. Kingship 87
8. The Prophetic Hope 103
9. The Kingdom of God: “Now” and “Not Yet” 117
10. The Holy City: Complete Transformation at Last 133
11. Putting Your Bible Together: Patterns and Principles 149

*Bibliography 163*

*Scripture and Ancient Writings Index 171*

*Subject Index 179*



# PREFACE

This book is an introduction to a subject so rich that it is worthy of a lifetime of joyful investigation—how the whole Bible fits together! The first chapter will elaborate more on my focus and rationale. At this point let me just say that my goal is to introduce you to a framework and pattern of reading that you will be able to integrate with everything else you do when you read and study God’s Word. The book is designed for Bible readers at any stage of their Christian lives. Other classes (if one is beginning study at a college or seminary) or readings will supplement this introductory guide. At the end of each chapter are pointers to a few other resources for the beginnings of further study. I have learned from many others in the process of preparing and presenting this material over the years. The pointers to resources and occasional footnotes throughout show my indebtedness. Overall, I hope that there is enough in this introduction to spur you on to further study of God’s Word.

I wish to thank Jim Kinney, Jennifer Koenes, and the editors at Baker Academic for their excellent assistance. I am especially grateful to Alayne Thompson, Nathan and Katie Batten, Derek Brotherson, Marwan Dwalibi, Sigurd Grindheim, Kirk Patston, Malcolm Reid, Todd Stanton, Brian Tabb, and Stephen Wellum, who all took time out of their busy schedules to read earlier drafts of this material, and to Paul Davies for help with the diagrams. I am also thankful for Sydney Missionary and Bible College (an affiliated college of the Australian University of Theology), the board, and the principal, Derek Brotherson, for the opportunity to complete this book during an action-packed study leave! I dedicate this book to my wife, Alayne, and our two girls, Deborah and Rebekah. They are truly expressions of God’s kindness and grace to me.



# ABBREVIATIONS

## Secondary Sources

- DNTUOT* G. K. Beale, D. A. Carson, Benjamin L. Gladd, and Andrew David Naselli, eds. *Dictionary of the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*. Baker Academic, 2023.
- NDBT* T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, D. A. Carson, and Graeme Goldsworthy, eds. *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. InterVarsity, 2000.
- NSBT* New Studies in Biblical Theology

## Bible Versions

- CSB Christian Standard Bible
- ESV English Standard Version
- HCSB Holman Christian Standard Bible
- KJV King James Version
- LSB Legacy Standard Bible
- NASB New American Standard Bible
- NIV New International Version
- NKJV New King James Version
- NRSV New Revised Standard Version



# 1

## How to Put Your Bible Together



Imagine the following scenarios. You move to a new city or country, and when you meet some Christians, you discover that they have a special interest in celebrating some of the feasts of the Old Testament, including the Feast of Tabernacles. They insist that if you want to be considered truly a member of God's people, you should continue to celebrate these festivals too—after all, they are biblical. Or perhaps you join a church that frowns on much activity on a Sunday. They argue that we should observe the Sabbath, since that is one of the Ten Commandments. Or perhaps you and your spouse are newly married, and in due course you find out that you are expecting a baby. Then one of you says that soon after birth the baby should be baptized, but the other one thinks that is something the child should have a say on if they later (hopefully) come to faith. How do you work through this? Or let's imagine a scenario in which someone wonders why we should read from or preach from the Old Testament. After all, don't we follow Jesus? Why bother with the Old Testament? All these, and many more, are questions related to how you put your Bible together.

The Bible is a big book! Indeed, it contains sixty-six books that span the history of Israel to the spread of the early church. More than that, the Bible begins with the creation of the world and concludes with the new creation that is yet to come. One of the most helpful ways to appreciate the message of this big book is to know how to piece together its major parts. In fact, as I will go on to explain, this is not only helpful; it is essential to your understanding of the whole Bible. Although many individual stories of the Bible are well known—such as Israel's exodus from slavery in Egypt, or David's defeat of Goliath, or some of Jesus's famous stories, like the parable of the sower—the

key to understanding the Bible, and even these individual stories, is to know how the whole Bible fits together, and then how these individual stories fit into the overarching plan of the Bible. That’s what this book will help you with.

This first chapter is a broad introduction to what we will be doing throughout this book—that is, the discipline that has come to be known as “biblical theology.” In this chapter we will explain what biblical theology is, how it relates to other aspects of interpreting the Bible, how it is key to grasping the overall structure of the Bible, and then how we will develop this understanding of biblical theology throughout the rest of the book.

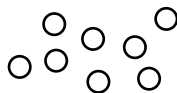
### What Is Biblical Theology?

To understand what we will be doing in this book, it will be helpful to know what biblical theology is. I am using the phrase “biblical theology” to simply refer to the need to interpret any given passage or Bible book in the setting and timeline of where it lands—that is, in relation to what came before and what comes after.<sup>1</sup> This approach recognizes that God did not reveal everything at once but revealed his saving plan progressively, or gradually, over time. So, words like “temporal,” “developing,” or “unfolding” are often used to describe the way in which God has revealed himself and his purposes across the timeline of the Bible.

This is key, therefore, in approaching any given verse, chapter, or Bible book. Rather than thinking of the Bible as a collection of unconnected bits and pieces of information, we are to think of the Bible verses, chapters, and books as part of an unfolding plan in which more and more is revealed as time goes on. We are not to approach the verses or events and stories as though they appear in the Bible in a random, scattered way (see fig. 1.1). Rather, we approach the verses or events as they appear in a particular place in the unfolding timeline of the way God is revealing himself and his purposes (see fig. 1.2).

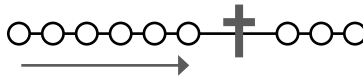
Figure 1.1

**Not this:**



1. The resources at the end of this chapter and throughout this book will point to a variety of ways of doing biblical theology and a variety of ways of structuring the development of themes through the Bible. A comprehensive book-by-book approach is Köstenberger and Goswell, *Biblical Theology*. A broad thematic approach is Grindheim, *Introducing Biblical Theology*.

Figure 1.2

**But this:**

Thus, with any given passage, you need to ask where you are in the timeline of events. More than that, you need to ask, What came before, or led up to, this, and where does it lead? This is more than just understanding that you are reading a passage, say, in the middle of Israel's history, or while Israel is in exile, or during the period of the early church. This is a recognition that these are all connected and a part of the gradual unfolding of God's plan. So, the question is, How does this part that you are reading fit into that developing plan?<sup>2</sup> Recognizing the unfolding nature of God's saving plan, therefore, helps us better understand the place of the passage and connect it to earlier or later related passages.

There is, of course, much diversity in the Bible. There are many themes and various events impacting different people across hundreds of years. The contribution that biblical theology makes is to help us see that all these events and people are part of an overall unity of purpose and plan that runs through the whole Bible. As some commentators have said, we can think of the many authors across the Bible not as soloists, playing their own independent tunes, but rather as part of a symphony, all playing their part in a unified and coherent masterpiece.<sup>3</sup>

Two *prior* assumptions, therefore, that support this approach to the Bible are that

1. God is sovereign in history, and
2. the Bible is God's Word, his own revelation.

First, if God is sovereign in history, then he knows what will take place in the future. Thus, even in earlier events, he already has later events in view (this is easiest for Christians to see in the sacrificial system, for example—God already has in view the ultimate and final sacrifice through Jesus, and these earlier sacrifices anticipate and point to that final complete sacrifice). Second, if the Bible is God's Word, then God is providing his own interpretation of

2. I am not suggesting that the storyline must be found in every book (e.g., 2 John). I am merely saying that each passage or book must be understood in light of where it is in that timeline (e.g., in the context of the new covenant).

3. E.g., Strom, *Symphony of Scripture*.

those events through the human authors. We can expect there to be a unity and correspondence between earlier parts and later parts of his Word since ultimately he is the divine author behind it all. This also has in view what the Bible is (God's own revelation and explanation of his purposes and plan) as well as how the Bible comes to us. That is, unlike a textbook with topics listed in the table of contents, the Bible comes to us as an unfolding plan, with a beginning, development, and conclusion. So, basically, biblical theology is about "how to put your Bible together."<sup>4</sup>

Returning to our opening questions, this recognition of the unfolding nature of God's plan shows us how important biblical theology is to a whole host of questions and debates across different denominations. How do the covenants relate to one another? What is the role of the Old Testament law for believers today? How should we interpret the Old Testament in general, or Old Testament prophecy in particular? How should any given book of the Bible (e.g., 1 Kings or the book of Acts) be understood in its context and its setting and place in the unfolding plan of God? Sabbath observance, baptismal candidates, ethics, the place of Israel, and many more topics are all part of interpreting the Bible in this way, asking, How do earlier parts relate to later parts of the Bible? Or how does the Bible fit together? In other words, this is not an optional extra in learning how to read and understand the Bible; it is essential! As has often been said, the Bible is shallow enough for a child to play in and deep enough for an elephant to swim in. So, there is enough here to help new believers as well as seasoned readers of the Bible.

### **How Does Biblical Theology Relate to Other Interpretive Approaches?**

Broadly speaking, we could speak of three terms that are often used for interpreting the Bible: (1) "exegesis," (2) "biblical theology," and (3) "systematic theology."<sup>5</sup> First, "exegesis" is the word used for what we do when we seek to understand the meaning of a particular verse or passage in its immediate context. Rather than pluck a verse out of its setting, we aim to understand what it means in that paragraph, chapter, and book. We seek to get out of the text what is intended in that context (associated with a little Greek preposition,

4. I first heard this phrase or a variation of it from Don Carson, although this is a common expression.

5. For an expanded discussion of this, drawing esp. on Carson, see DeRouchie et al., *40 Questions About Biblical Theology*, 119–29.

*ek*, which often means “out of”). The opposite of this is called “eisegesis” (associated with another little Greek preposition, *eis*, which often means “into”). That is, instead of reading *out* of the text what is there, eisegesis is reading *into* the text what is not there or what we want to be there. So, if someone says to you after a Bible study that what you did was remarkable “eisegesis,” they are probably not complimenting you.

Second, biblical theology, as we have seen, is concerned with placing that text in the timeline of the Bible—what came before it and what comes after it. Third, after doing exegesis to find out what the text is saying and biblical theology to locate the meaning of the text in the unfolding plan of God, systematic theology focuses on logical (or systematic) relationships between all the texts on the same topic across the Bible. That is, systematic theology is *primarily* focused on not where the text fits in the timeline but how the text relates to and integrates logically with the other texts on that topic. For example, one text says Jesus is God, another says the Holy Spirit is God, and another says the Father is God. How do they relate to one another? What does the Bible teach about God? Thus, we have the doctrine or theology of the Trinity. Or, to take another example, one text says Jesus is fully human, and another text says Jesus is fully God. How do they relate to each other? Thus, we are thinking now about the doctrine or theology of the two natures—the humanity and deity—of Jesus.

We need all three of these approaches when we interpret the Bible: exegesis (placing the text in its immediate context), biblical theology (placing the text in the timeline of God’s unfolding plan), and systematic theology (logically connecting the text to others on that topic). Many say, therefore, that whereas biblical theology is related primarily to temporal connections, systematic theology is related primarily to logical or atemporal connections.<sup>6</sup> In some ways, biblical theology is a mediating link, and systematic theology is culminating, putting everything together. Another related discipline is called “historical theology.” This could be thought of as a subset of systematic theology, as it recognizes that these doctrines have been discussed and debated in councils and embedded in creeds throughout church history. We are not the first to try to put these texts together! Since none of us approach the Bible without our own prior understanding about matters like the nature of God, humanity, sin, and so on, we should aim to be shaped and corrected by the exegesis of the text in its immediate context. In this sense exegesis of the text should have the priority and should affect our biblical theology as well as our systematic theology.

6. E.g., Carson, “Apostolic Hermeneutics,” 62.

## Are There Any Examples of This Approach in the Bible Itself?

This approach of recognizing the importance of sequence, of a timeline, when interpreting the Bible can be illustrated briefly from three texts: Romans 4:9–12; Galatians 3:17–19; and Hebrews 4:6–10.<sup>7</sup> Although each passage makes a different argument, these examples illustrate how knowing historical sequence helps us understand the Bible.

First, in Romans 4 Paul uses a temporal argument to show that Abraham’s circumcision wasn’t a requirement for getting right with God. Paul asks the question, Under what circumstances was Abraham circumcised—was it before or after righteousness was credited to him? Then he answers his own question. Abraham was credited with righteousness by faith before, not after, he was circumcised (Rom. 4:3, 10, 22; referring to Gen. 15:6). Paul’s simple point is that in light of this sequence of events, circumcision can’t be a requirement to receive righteousness. Faith alone is all that is required!

Second, in Galatians 3:17–19 Paul argues along temporal lines that the law of Moses cannot be an essential requirement for believers today (we will explain this more in chap. 5). Then he lays out the sequence of events (see fig. 1.3).

Figure 1.3



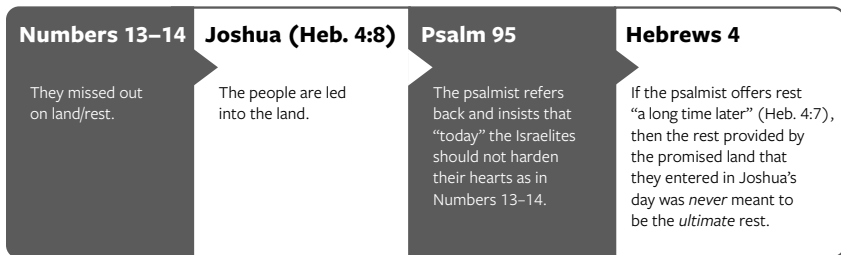
The law was a temporary arrangement. On the one hand, it came in at a certain point in time. On the other hand, it came for a specific period of time (hence the word “until” in Gal. 3:19). In this context, Paul argues against law keeping to gain favor with God on the basis of the sequence and timeline of events (elsewhere he argues against it on the basis of our sinfulness and inability to keep the law; e.g., Rom. 3:9, 20; Gal. 3:10).

Third, in Hebrews 3–4 the writer refers to the time Israel approached the promised land in Numbers 13–14. At that time, when Israel rebelled, the Lord said they would not enter the land—the “rest” that God had promised them. Hebrews 3–4, however, cites Psalm 95 (written, of course, many years after Numbers), in which the psalmist urges God’s people that “today” they should not harden their hearts like they did when they failed to enter God’s rest. In Hebrews 4:7 the writer states that this psalm was written “a long time later.” Thus, if Psalm 95 refers to a “rest” that must still be entered after Israel was in the land, then the land can’t be the ultimate meaning of

7. For these examples (and others) see Carson, *Collected Writings on Scripture*, 279–81.

God’s promise for rest. “For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day” (Heb. 4:8). The “rest” must point forward to something else, something greater than God’s presence in the land. This, says the writer to the Hebrews, is fulfilled in Jesus. However, the writer uses a temporal argument to make his case, highlighting the sequence along the timeline, as seen in figure 1.4.

Figure 1.4



These arguments from biblical authors illustrate the importance of reading our Bible in light of the sequence of events. Since understanding the sequence of texts and events, and the relationship between these texts, helps us put our Bible together, grasping an overall structure of the unfolding plan of the whole Bible will also help.

### What Are the Major Epochs (or Eras) in the Bible?

Many commentators have identified discernible major stages in the unfolding plan of God in the Bible. Usually, key events or people are identified along the storyline of the Bible. It is common, for instance, to recognize different stages in Adam (creation), Noah (flood), Abraham (promises), Moses (the law and the nation of Israel), Jesus, the church, and the second coming (new creation). Although these common divisions helpfully show the main stages and broad outline of the Bible, they don’t necessarily help show the unity of God’s unfolding plan, or how these various stages relate to one another. If, however, we take the arrival of Jesus and the writings of his apostles as key to identifying the goal, or the fulfillment, of the unfolding plan, then we can look for ways in which the New Testament can help us see not only a broad structure but also a structure that shows how the various parts or stages of the Bible relate to one another.<sup>8</sup>

8. I am not saying that what follows is the only way to identify the broad structure of the Bible, nor is this the only way to trace themes. However, I think the following broad structure

### ***The Kingdom of God as a Broad Organizing Principle***

Let us begin with Jesus's opening words in Mark's Gospel: "The time has come. . . . The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15). This indicates that one way of looking at the whole Bible is that it is about the "kingdom of God." Because Jesus says that the kingdom of God has come, he implies that in one sense it wasn't here before, but it is here now. Psalm 103:19 declares that God's kingdom "rules over all." In that sense, *everyone* is in God's "kingdom" (under his universal, sovereign rule), whether they realize it or not. However, Jesus announces that the kingdom of God has arrived only with him, and it must be entered (e.g., Luke 18:17). Jesus's use of the phrase "kingdom of God," therefore, refers to something like God's saving rule, the kind of rule anticipated in the Old Testament when God's people would be restored, the enemies of God and of his people would be defeated, and God's righteousness would be seen (e.g., Isa. 24:23; 25:6–9; Dan. 2:44; Zech. 14:9).<sup>9</sup> This leads us to the second observation.

### ***The Broad Structure of Promise and Fulfillment***

When Jesus says, "The time has come," he implies not only that this saving rule has arrived but also that it must have been anticipated. This idea of promise and fulfillment is a major feature of how the New Testament writers view the broad plan of the Bible.<sup>10</sup> In Romans 1:2–3, for example, Paul says that the gospel was "promised beforehand through [God's] prophets" and that it was "regarding [God's] Son." Likewise, in 16:25–26 Paul says this gospel was "hidden for long ages past" but is now "made known through the prophetic writings." Similar references to the broad idea of promise and fulfillment are found throughout the New Testament (e.g., Matt. 11:13; John 1:16–17; Rom. 3:21; Gal. 3:17–19, 24; 1 Pet. 1:10–12). This simple observation has far-reaching consequences. First, it helps us see that there are discernible stages to God's unfolding plan—broadly speaking, there is a promise or anticipatory stage and a fulfillment stage. God's plan does not advance haphazardly. Second, this identifies Jesus and the good news about his saving life, death, and resurrection as the goal of the promise stage, the goal of the Old Testament. We will come back to this in the "So What?" section below. So far, we might

---

helps us put our Bible together. This section is indebted to Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible*, 73–75, 82, 89–90; and Goldsworthy, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology*, 20–27.

9. We will discuss this in more detail in chap. 9.

10. Of course, I don't mean that this is all there is to understanding the Bible. Chapter 11 will point to a range of ways to move from the Old to the New Testament. In this context, I'm looking at a big-picture way of seeing how the saving rule of God helps us put our Bible together.

visually represent this broad structure for how we put our Bible together as in figure 1.5. But can we be more specific than these two broad stages?

Figure 1.5



### ***A More Specific Structure***

There are a few places in the New Testament where an overview of the whole Bible is provided: Matthew 1:1–17; Acts 7:2–53; and Acts 13:16–41.<sup>11</sup> Let’s briefly note the common stages and broad outline of these three passages. In Matthew 1:17 (summarizing 1:1–16), Matthew identifies the stages as in figure 1.6.

Figure 1.6



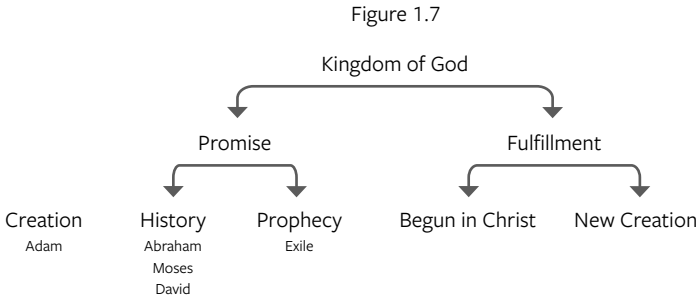
Similarly, in Acts 7 Stephen begins his history of Israel with Abraham (7:2) and concludes with David and Solomon (7:45–47), before pointing his audience to Jesus (and noting the exile in 7:43). In Acts 13 Paul begins with Israel’s “ancestors” (13:17) and then summarizes Israel’s history up to David (13:22), before concluding with John the Baptist and Jesus. These three outlines suggest that the high point of Israel’s history was during the reigns of David and Solomon. This is not surprising when we read the Old Testament history of Israel and see how much space is given to David and Solomon (e.g., 1 Sam. 16–1 Kings 11). It is also not surprising when we remember what happened during their reigns. Israel was in the land, Israel was one nation under one king, the temple was built, everything was in place. The split of the nation and everything that followed eventually led to (as Matthew and Stephen highlight) the exile of both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel. Before, during, and after the exile the prophets explained the exile as God’s judgment and pointed forward to a glorious transformation.<sup>12</sup>

So, the overall promise stage of God’s unfolding plan could be seen in two stages—Israel’s history (up to David/Solomon) and Israel’s prophecy

11. See Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible*, 73–75, 82, 89–90; and Goldsworthy, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology*, 20–27.

12. We will look at the themes of kingship and the prophets in more detail in chaps. 7 and 8.

(surrounding the exile and pointing forward).<sup>13</sup> Since some fulfillment comes with Jesus and the fullness of the saving plan of God awaits the new creation, the fulfillment can also be seen in stages—a fulfillment begun in Christ and completed in the new creation (i.e., Jesus’s first and second comings). So, we could visualize this as in figure 1.7.<sup>14</sup>



**So What? Some Implications for How We Read Our Bible**

What is the significance of this discussion about the overall structure of the Bible? There are significant implications for understanding the broad structure of the Bible as one of promise and fulfillment (i.e., the broad structure explained under the heading “The Broad Structure of Promise and Fulfillment” above). This affects how we approach each of these two major sections of the Bible. First, if Jesus and the good news about him are the fulfillment of what was written in the Old Testament, the goal to which the Old Testament was pointing, then this later stage of God’s revelation (fulfillment) helps us interpret the earlier stage (promise). The later stage shows us what that earlier stage was anticipating. Likewise, if the earlier stage of God’s revelation (the Old Testament) was pointing forward, anticipating the later stage (the arrival of Jesus and his rule), then that earlier stage is also necessary for us to be able to understand this later stage that came with Jesus. We need the New Testament to properly understand the Old Testament, and vice versa. This overall structure also helps us see that the unfolding plan of God is better understood not just as having different stages but as having stages that

13. I am using “history” here in broad terms to refer to the narrative accounts of Israel’s life in the land. I recognize that what we call the “historical books” of Joshua to 2 Kings are called the “former prophets” in the Hebrew Bible.

14. Although, as we will see in the next chapter, the pattern of God’s rule is found already in Eden, I have placed “Creation” to the side of the diagram, as I am using the phrase “Kingdom of God” above to refer to God’s “saving rule” (i.e., the outworking of God’s pattern and plan to restore and save his people, anticipated in Gen. 3:15, 21).

build on and relate to one another. We will see this as we unpack how major themes develop across the Bible.

### **The Plan for the Rest of This Book**

For the rest of this book, we will show how major themes help us put our Bible together. In chapters 2–7, from creation to kingship, we will broadly follow this overarching structure of promise (in Israel’s history and prophecy) and fulfillment (in and through Jesus) to see how each theme unfolds. At each stage we will aim to show first how the theme is introduced in the context in which it appears in the Old Testament (observing the emphases in that original context, showing that we are not reading back into that context something illegitimate) and then how that theme develops across the Bible in these broad stages (showing that we also need to read ahead to understand the theme fully). Then in chapter 8 we will show in broad terms how the writing prophets (e.g., Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel) take up each theme and how they help us put our Bible together. Since we treat these themes as they rise to prominence in their salvation-historical order, in chapters 9 and 10, having arrived at the fulfillment stage, we will break from our broad structure (of history-prophecy-fulfillment) to focus on how Jesus’s teaching on the kingdom helps us put our Bible together (chap. 9) and then what the end of the Bible, especially Revelation 21–22, teaches us about the goal to which salvation history has been heading (chap. 10).<sup>15</sup> Finally, in chapter 11 we will take a step back and reflect on the broader question of how these themes help us move from the Old Testament to the New Testament.

How did we decide on the themes to follow? There are many more themes that we could develop (see chap. 11). What we will be looking at, however, are some of the themes that the Bible itself raises to prominence and that help us understand God’s overarching and unfolding plan of redemption. The Bible highlights these themes as significant for understanding how the whole Bible fits together (e.g., covenants, sacrifice, kingship). We will also treat each theme in roughly the order in which it rises to prominence in salvation history (i.e., we look at the themes of covenants, the exodus, etc., before we reach the high point with David’s and Solomon’s kingships). Finally, each chapter concludes with a brief “So What?” section. These sections include brief reflections about some implications of the theme or what the theme teaches us about God.

15. Thus, the word “themes” in the subtitle for this book shouldn’t be interpreted to mean that each chapter will follow the same structure (or development).

Because this book is an introductory basic guide to how to put your Bible together, there is obviously much more that could be said on each theme. Each chapter closes, therefore, with some books and articles that further explain the chapter and trace the theme in more detail. For readers who want to dig deeper, each chapter also closes with suggestions for other topics or debates that relate to the chapter, along with resources for those. These resources (such as dictionary articles and entire books on the theme) will also show that there are a variety of ways of tracing these themes and many more texts and topics that could be incorporated into each theme. There is more than enough here for an elephant to swim in! But let's begin at the beginning—creation.

### FOR FURTHER READING

---

- Goldsworthy, Graeme. *Gospel and Kingdom: A Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament*. Paternoster, 1981.
- Goldsworthy, Graeme. *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*. Eerdmans, 2000.
- Roberts, Vaughan. *God's Big Picture: Tracing the Storyline of the Bible*. Inter-Varsity, 2003.

### TO DIG DEEPER

---

- What are some differing approaches to biblical theology? See Klink and Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology*; Carson, “New Covenant Theology and Biblical Theology”; and DeRouchie et al., *40 Questions About Biblical Theology*.
- How do dispensationalists and nondispensationalists approach biblical theology? See Parker and Lucas, *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies*.
- How does the New Testament use the Old Testament? See Beale and Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*; Beale et al., *Dictionary of the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*; and Tabb and King, *Five Views of Christ in the Old Testament*.