

Chapter One

THE BIBLE'S LASTING IMPACT

Most people know that the Bible teaches about religion, morals, and God. But its influence spreads far beyond religion. In fact, the Bible has shaped human values and culture more than any other book.

This seems like a bold claim, to be sure, but history confirms it. For 2000 years the Bible has steadily transformed legal and social institutions everywhere, beginning with the Roman Empire. Before Christianity came along, Roman justice and social policy were harsh, often cruel. But Christianity, armed with the Bible, tempered that brutality and elevated respect for human life and dignity.

Medieval states continued this process. They took over Roman law, bound it more tightly to Biblical principles, and adopted it as their own. During the Middle Ages criminal trials moved into church courts and lawyers were schooled in Biblical precedents. In addition, the universities taught law and theology side by side.

As modern European nations emerged in the fifteenth and six-

teenth centuries, they adopted law codes that enforced Biblical standards of justice. Later, as these same governments raced to plant colonies around the globe, they took the Bible with them. And wherever they flew a colonial flag, they imposed European law, now thoroughly infused with values from the Bible.

This law proved so effective that former colonies tended to retain its basics even after throwing off colonial rule. As a result, today's legal systems in Europe, the Americas, and Australia, as well as many parts of Africa and Asia, trace their roots to Biblical concepts. And today's international law first took shape in the writings of men like Hugo Grotius, a serious student of the Bible, as well as a great legal mind.

Likewise, the quest for democracy owes much to the Bible. Democratic movements in the West first arose among people who turned to the Bible for moral guidance. They based their call for universal rights and personal freedom on Biblical ideals of individual worth and dignity. It was

also people dedicated to the Bible who led worldwide efforts to eradicate slavery, improve the status of women, and secure the equal treatment of all races.

Thus, the Bible has molded human history for hundreds of years. We could fill volumes talking about its lasting imprint on art, literature, and social policy. But its most telling influence has been in the realm of faith and personal religion. Both Judaism and Christianity grew out of the Bible. The Bible also left a mark on Islamic culture, for Mohammed, the founder of Islam, held the Bible in high regard. He even considered Jesus a prophet from God.

It is only natural, then, to ask why the impact of the Bible has been so monumental. What accounts for its attractiveness over the centuries? How has it had such enduring influence? And why is it still the best selling book in the world?

The answer lies in the great ideas conveyed by the Bible, the great truths it unfolds. No other book has ever surpassed its exalted view of God and His love for mankind. In a word, the Bible stretches our sense of who God is and what we have the potential to become because of His love.

God and the Human Race

At the very outset the Bible declares that God created human beings in His own image. This does

not mean that God resembles us physically, for the Bible is equally clear that God is a spirit-being. He does not have a body. But as a spirit-being Himself, God imparted a spirit to each of us. Thus, we are like him — created in His image — because we have a spirit-essence, like He does.

This inner spirit sets the human race apart from every other species. It gives us unique abilities, unknown to other creatures. We can reason abstractly. We can comprehend truth. We can create splendid works of art. We can make moral judgments. We can invent powerful technologies. In short, we can be distinctly human because we possess a spirit that makes creativity possible.

Unfortunately, we tend to behave in ways that pollute this spirit-nature. God as a spirit-being is loving, just, and truthful. But as spirit-beings ourselves, we are often unloving, unjust, and untruthful. When we act this way, we corrupt the spirit within us. If corruption goes unchecked, we become wicked, hateful people, and evil overruns society.

The Bible tells us that God foresaw this problem from the beginning. Fortunately, He did not give up on us and abandon us, even when evil gripped mankind. Rather, God chose to stay in a relationship with us. Out of His love, He longed to see us escape from the effects of corrupt lives, corrupt governments,

and corrupt societies. The Bible is the story of what God has done over countless generations to make that escape possible.

As this story unfolds, the Bible shows us a God who cares deeply for every individual. He also is a

God who actively involves Himself with the events of our lives. The Bible details how He guided human destiny, including the rise and fall of civilizations, beginning with man's first steps on our planet.

The Old and New Testaments

The Bible uses a variety of literary forms. Within its pages we find books of history and engrossing narrative. There are also great poems and songs, along with dozens of moving speeches and letters. These elements of the Bible were pulled together between 1500 BC and 100 AD in two great collections. We commonly refer to the first collection as the Old Testament. The other is called the New Testament.

The Old Testament is respected by Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike. It describes how God dealt with individuals and nations prior to the birth of Jesus. For Christians the most important part of the Bible is the New Testament. This is where we learn about Jesus and what He taught. The New Testament also tells us how Christianity started and what the earliest churches were like.

The Old and New Testaments are somewhat like small libraries, for they both contain dozens of books. There are 66 books in all, 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament. Some of them are relatively short, no longer than a tract or a pamphlet. Others are rather lengthy and require several hours to read.

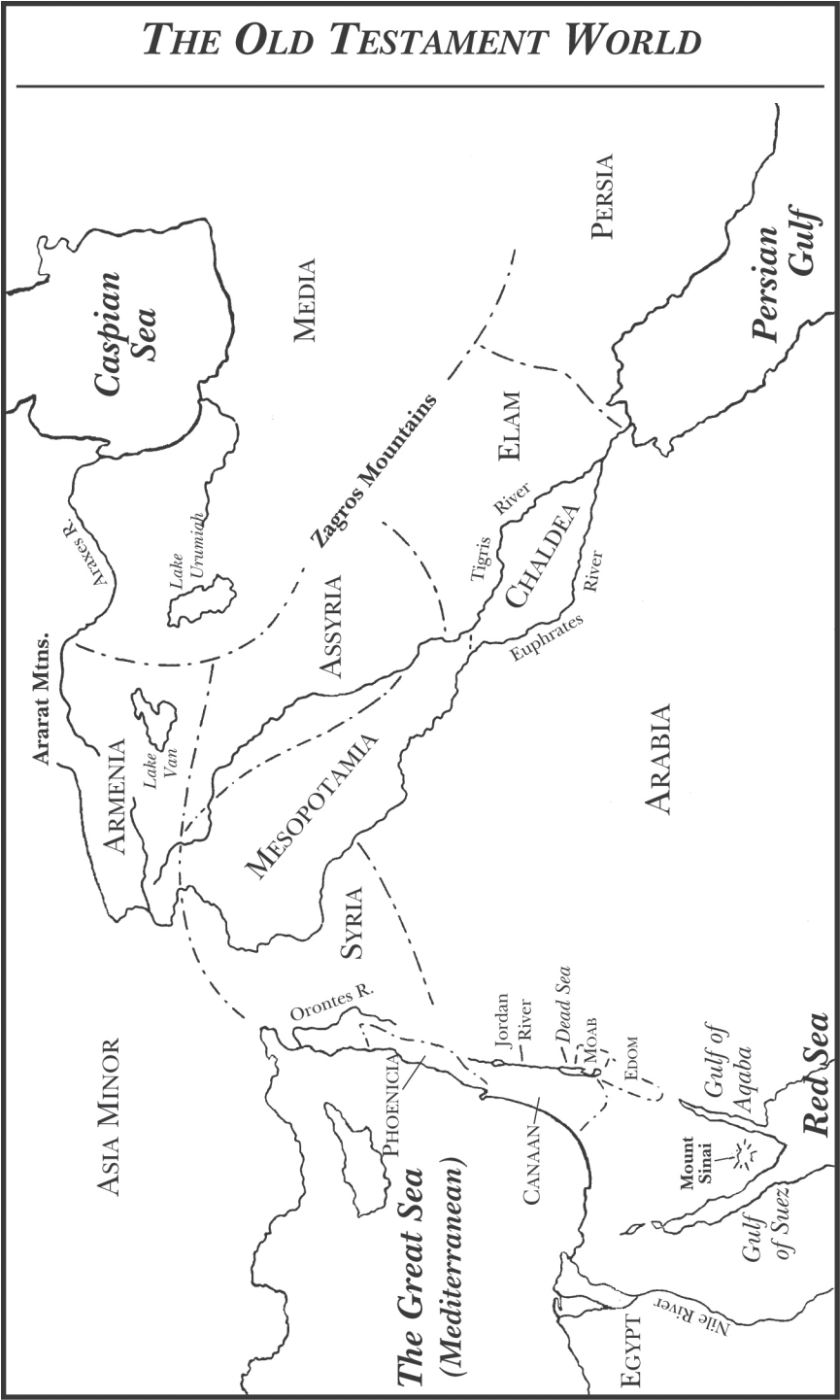
The Lands and People of the Old Testament

The pages of the Bible take us into renowned empires of the ancient world, places like Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. But most events in the Bible occur in the narrow strip of land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. The people of antiquity called this area Canaan.

Strategically Canaan was far more important than its small size would indicate. Within its borders the major trade routes connect-

ing Asia, Europe, and Africa came together. Thus, every rising empire wanted to control Canaan. The Bible tells of frequent wars as first one power, then another tried to seize this valued territory.

Early in the Bible we meet a man named Abraham who moved to Canaan at God's command. Abraham came from the Tigris-Euphrates Valley, home of a highly advanced civilization. God promised the entire sweep of Canaan to Abraham's family. But God made it clear that actual ownership of the land would take place in the distant



future, long after Abraham's death. In fact, almost 600 years passed before God carried out this promise.

During those years God created a special working relationship with one branch of Abraham's family. This branch descended from Jacob, Abraham's grandson. Jacob was a wanderer, living first in Canaan, then in Mesopotamia, and later in Egypt. In the course of those wanderings he also became known as "Israel."

Jacob had twelve sons, each the head of a large household. In time these households grew into twelve huge clans, or tribes. From Jacob they took the name Israel and referred to themselves as Israelites or "the children of Israel." By the end of the Old Testament they were also called Jews.

The Bible is largely the account of how God used Abraham's family, especially the Israelites, to reveal His promises, hopes, and expectations for humanity. Eventually God brought Jesus into the world through the Israelites. Most writers of the Bible were also from Israel.

Near the close of Jacob's life the Israelites started an extensive sojourn in Egypt. They migrated there after Joseph, Jacob's favorite son, gained prominence in the Egyptian government. Things went well for the Israelites at first. But following Joseph's death, Egyptian rulers turned against the Israelites and reduced them to slavery.

This enslavement continued for

four centuries under harsh conditions. During those years the Israelites grew into a vast nation. Then God raised up a man named Moses, who led them to freedom. With Moses at their head, the Israelites made their way from Egypt into the wilderness of the Sinai peninsula, where they lived as nomads for 40 years.

Shortly after Moses died, the Israelites marched into Canaan as a mighty military force. They subdued several Canaanite kingdoms and took possession of the land, just as God had promised Abraham. Israel's second king, a man named David, conquered Jerusalem and made it his national capital. Then Solomon, David's son, established a small empire that took up most of the area between the Euphrates River and the northeastern border of Egypt. He also built a magnificent temple in Jerusalem.

All this success, according to the Bible, was a direct gift from God. But despite His kindness, Israel drifted away from Him. She turned to other gods and openly set aside His commands. As this disobedience grew unchecked, God warned His people that they were risking the loss of their land, for He would drive them from Canaan if they continued to disobey.

After centuries of warnings, God finally carried out His threat. First the Assyrians and then the Babylonians overran Canaan. Not only did the Israelites lose

their independence, their enemies literally hauled them away and gave their land to other people. Several books of the Old Testament describe Israel's suffering at the hands of their conquerors. But suffering had the benefit of turning the Israelites back to God.

God responded by granting them a return to Jerusalem, which Babylon had demolished in 586 BC. During the next century the Israelites rebuilt the city and reconstructed the temple.

With the rebuilding of Jerusalem, the Old Testament comes to a close. About 400 years then pass before the events of the New Testament begin. During that interval Alexander the Great marched through Canaan en route to his conquest of Egypt and the Middle East. Israel came under Greek control, but later regained her independence, at least for a few decades. Then the Romans came in and subjugated Israel, as well as her neighbors.

Jesus and the Earliest Christians

When the New Testament opens, the Romans are still in control. But they have granted the Israelites considerable freedom to maintain their temple worship and to have their own courts and laws. This is the setting in which Jesus lived.

He began His teaching career by surrounding Himself with twelve special students. The New

Testament calls them "apostles," from a Greek word that means "one sent out." Jesus planned to train these men and send them out with His message.

He worked with them for only three years before the Romans crucified Him. At first His death sent the apostles into despair. But then, in a series of striking events, He appeared among them, alive. He announced that God had raised Him from the dead. (The Biblical term for this is "resurrection.") He also said that God was preparing a resurrection for every person who accepts the teachings of Jesus and follows them.

Armed with this message, the apostles went out and immediately began telling the story of Jesus. Within 30 years they had established communities of Christians from Jerusalem to Rome and beyond. As these communities matured, they occasionally needed fuller guidance on how a Christian should live. To provide that guidance, the apostles and others around them wrote a group of books called Gospels. These are detailed accounts of what Jesus did and taught.

In addition, the apostles often sent personal letters to various Christian communities. These letters usually addressed moral and spiritual questions that followers of Jesus commonly face. As you might imagine, the early Christians treasured these letters. As a result, the

letters were carefully copied and circulated. Eventually 21 of them — along with four Gospels, a history of early Christianity, and a book called Revelation — were pulled together in a single collection to form the New Testament.

Revelation, the last book in the New Testament, was written about 95 AD. It anticipates a great persecution of Christians that broke out a short time later. The highest levels of the Roman government sponsored this persecution. The book of Revelation urges Christians to remain faithful to God, even in the face of official repression. By staying faithful, Revelation assures them, they will secure their own resurrection — a life beyond death in the presence of God.

With this assurance the Bible comes to an end. But the principles and ideals in its pages are as relevant today as ever. Throughout the Bible, God upholds an exalted standard of moral excellence for every man and woman. He calls on us to live extraordinary, upright lives. While the people of the Bible lived in a world vastly different from ours, we still struggle with the same moral and spiritual issues that they faced. The Bible thus speaks to us as meaningfully as it did to them.

Names for God

In the chapters ahead you will become familiar with the Biblical themes that have sustained God's people for ages. Beginning with the

first books of the Old Testament, we will examine the Bible section by section, highlighting vital insights and central truths. You will learn what the Bible says about the nature of God, the nature of mankind, the nature of the universe. You will discover what God tells us about building strong families, loving homes, and healthy communities. You will become familiar with Jesus, who He was, and what He taught. And through it all, you will ask fresh questions about yourself and the meaning of your life.

In short, you are about to embark on a rewarding journey. But one note before we begin. On this journey we will encounter different names for God. Since no one name can fully describe Him, the Bible relies on a variety of terms to refer to Him. Often it speaks of Him simply as the Lord, or as the Lord God. In the Old Testament (which was originally written in Hebrew) the name "Lord" is usually a translation of the Hebrew word "Yahweh." The Jews considered this the most sacred name for God, so sacred that they hesitated even to pronounce it. Consequently, they eventually forgot how to pronounce it at all.

However, Yahweh is the name God uses for Himself in the Bible when He wants to emphasize His personal involvement in human existence; when He is revealing His laws for us to follow; or when He is making promises to us. The name Yahweh frequently appears in

combination with some other word to highlight a particular quality of God's existence. For instance, He is referred to by the name "Yahweh Shalom," Hebrew for "Yahweh Is Peace." Or in another place as "Yahweh Jireh," which means "Yahweh Who Sees," affirming that God sees the plight of people who are afflicted.

The Hebrew word that we normally translate as "God" is "Elohim," or in its shortened form, "El." This points to God's great power and majesty. In general this is the name God uses when He speaks of His ultimate control over the universe, nature, and mankind. Many people in the Old Testament have names that include a shortened form of Yahweh or Elohim, or sometimes both. We will point out

several names like this as we work through the Bible.

A third name for God in the Old Testament is "Adonai." The term calls attention to His sovereign rule over mankind. It closely parallels the concept of a lord over a group of subjects.

In this study we will restrict ourselves to the terms "God" and "Lord," with occasional references to "Yahweh." Moreover, we will use "God" and "Lord" interchangeably, since modern languages do not distinguish between these names the way the Israelites did. Simply remember that God reveals Himself under different names, but He is the same God wherever we encounter Him.