



How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour

By Gordon D. Fee, Douglas Stuart

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How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour By Gordon D. Fee, Douglas Stuart Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #136503 in Books
- Published on: 2002-03-18
- Released on: 2002-03-18
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.07" h x 1.22" w x 5.35" l, 1.14 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 444 pages

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Editorial Review

From the Back Cover

A Guided Tour from Genesis through Revelation

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About the Author

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The Narrative of Israel (Including the Law) in the Biblical Story We should begin by noting that the arrangement of the Old Testament books in the Hebrew Bible is a bit different from that in our English Bibles. Ours comes to us by way of the second-century B.C. Greek translation known as the Septuagint. The Hebrew Bible is divided into three parts: the Law (the Pentateuch, or 'five books of Moses'), the Prophets (the Former Prophets, including Joshua through Kings [minus Ruth], and the Latter Prophets, including Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve [the so-called Minor Prophets]), and the Writings (the Psalms [including Lamentations], the Wisdom books [Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs], Daniel, and the four narrative books of Ruth, Esther, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles). In this book we will follow the English order, except for Lamentations in the Old Testament, which is placed among the Writings, and Acts in the New Testament, which properly belongs with the Gospel of Luke. As noted in *How to* 1 (p. 18),

despite the way many of God's good people handle the Bible, it is, in fact, no mere collection of propositions to be believed and imperatives to be obeyed. Rather, the essential character of the Bible, the whole Bible, is narrative, a narrative in which both the propositions and the imperatives are deeply embedded as an essential part. And so the Bible begins with a series of narrative books--- which is true even of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, which may appear otherwise because they are composed largely of laws, but which, in fact, cannot be properly understood apart from the narrative structure in which they are placed. Thus the beginning of the biblical story takes root in the lengthy narrative that tells the story of God's chosen people, Israel. The first of the five books of Moses (Genesis) relates the beginnings of everything (Creation and Fall) and then focuses especially on God's call and covenant with Abraham and his seed, promising both to make them a numerous people and to give them the land of Canaan. After rescuing the people from slavery in Egypt (the exodus), God meets with them at Mount Sinai in the vast Sinai wilderness. Here he makes a second covenant with Israel that takes the form of 'the law,' which includes the building of a tabernacle (Exodus), the place where God will dwell among his people and where they are to worship him with proper offerings and sacrifices (Leviticus) as a part of the way they uphold their end of the covenant. As the people prepare to leave Sinai and make their way to the promised land, the number of men twenty years old and older are counted (those who will be Israel's warriors) and placed around the tabernacle in battle formation (Numbers). Thus they are prepared to take their place in the holy war by which they are to gain the land God had promised to their fathers---Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Before they embark on this conquest, Moses gives them a review of this history, another overview of the law, and the blessings and curses (promises and threats) of a kind that accompany ancient covenants; in their case, disobedience to God's covenant meant exile, but with a promised, even more glorious restoration in the form of a new exodus (Deuteronomy). After the story of the initial conquest and occupation of the land (Joshua) come stories of their failures to keep covenant with God, their true King (Judges). In this latter story (including Ruth), we are prepared for the next major turn in the main story line---that God will rule Israel through an earthly king. The books of Samuel thus tell the story of David, with whom God makes another covenant---that one of his sons will never fail to sit on the throne in Israel, as long as they keep covenant with God. As in many ancient kingships, David himself was also understood to embody the people, a key element in many of the psalms and in the final unfolding of the story of Jesus of Nazareth. But alas, the story of Israel repeats itself, as one king after another leads Israel astray to pursue other gods (1--2 Kings). Indeed, within two generations David's kingdom is divided into two parts. The northern kingdom (Israel; sometimes called Ephraim by the psalmists and prophets) falls to the Assyrians in 722 B.C. and for all practical purposes ceases to exist as a distinct entity. The southern kingdom (Judah) falls to the Babylonians in 586 B.C. In this case, the leading people carried into exile in Babylon thus form part of the remnant through whom God will still work out his redemptive plans. The exile brought untold misery and trauma to God's people, since they lost their promised land and their temple---the primary evidence of God's special presence and of their being his people. Especially through the prophetic ministry of Ezekiel, the exiles were held together. Many, though by no means the majority, were finally restored to their land under the Persians and rebuilt the temple (Ezra 1--6); about a century later, Ezra and Nehemiah led a further return of exiles and were instrumental in bringing about a significant reform (Ezra 7--10; Nehemiah). During this same overall restoration period, the story of Judah is retold from a more positive perspective (1--2 Chronicles), while Esther tells the story of the Jewish exiles throughout the Persian Empire being saved from annihilation. As you read through the books in this section of the Bible, you will find various threads that hold the larger narrative together: God's covenants with his people; God's faithfulness to them despite their repeated unfaithfulness to him; God's choice of the lesser and the unfavored ones (his choosing the 'weak to shame the strong' [1 Cor 1:27]); God's redeeming his people from slavery to make them his own; God's dwelling among them in tabernacle and temple as the gift of his renewed presence on earth (lost in the Fall); God's gift of the law in order to reshape them into his own likeness; God's provision of a sacrificial system--- the 'red thread' of blood poured out for the life of another---as his way of offering forgiveness; God's choice of a king from Judah who would represent him on earth and thus prepare the way for his own coming in the person of Jesus. These are the matters that make

the whole story hold together as one story. Be watching for them as you read.

Users Review

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Douglas Gibson:

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