Hello, my name is Greg Perry, and this is Covenant Seminary’s course on Old Testament Bible Content Overview. It is a big challenge to read through the entire Old Testament in a semester’s time, in a matter of a few weeks. But it is also a greatly enriching time. If we recall Paul’s letter to Timothy he says that “all Scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” It is instructive for us to remember that Paul speaks about the Old Testament here.

As we begin we will talk about why we should read the Old Testament. What is the big idea in a collection of books that are many different genres over such a long period and vast array of material? Are there ways in which we can have a sense of what the whole is about? Then we will talk about which texts we should read. It is an important question about the underlying texts of the Old Testament that gives us a sense of confidence about the authority of the text. Finally, we will talk about the Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament. Do we read the books of what we call the Old Testament simply as the Scriptures of Israel, or now as Christians do we read them in terms of how they look forward to Christ? It is an important question hermeneutically.

Why should we read the Old Testament? A lot of times we focus just on the information that Scripture gives us. In your own study of the Bible perhaps you are accustomed to focusing on what dates things happened and when and where things happened. These are, of course, important questions, but the Scriptures address the whole person. They address not only our heads but our hearts and our practices and hands as well. We begin to answer this question of why we read the Old Testament with Paul’s instruction to Timothy in mind. We think about what Moses said to the people of Israel as they were about to go into the land that God was about to give them. He says to them in Deuteronomy 4, “See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me that you may follow them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations.” In other words, we must read the Old Testament because it has a missional purpose. It shapes our identity as the people of God to reveal God’s wisdom and understanding to the nations. Moses goes on, “They will hear about all these decrees, and they will say, ‘Surely this great nation has a wise and understanding people. What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to Him? What other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws that I am setting before you today?’” So we do read the Old Testament to learn the truth, to understand the wisdom of God, so that we can live in a way that is in accord with the way God made the world. That way all will see something of the character of this wise, holy, and good God. Again, Paul’s letter to Timothy says that these things in the Old Testament are profitable. They are beneficial for instruction in righteousness.

But there is something else there that I would like to draw your attention to that addresses one of our other questions. It is the reference there to Luke 24. What we see there is that the stories, the prayers, the hymns, the wisdom, and even the apocalyptic visions anticipate something. They are like a story without an ending. They are reaching out for something more. Jesus, you will remember, walked on the road to Emmaus after His resurrection, and there were two disciples there: Cleopas and one who was with him. Jesus asked them if they remembered the things that He taught them while He was with them. He said, “I told you while I was still with you, ‘Everything must be fulfilled that was written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the Psalms…’” So there Jesus refers to the three sections of the Hebrew Bible, the Torah, the Nevi’im, and the Ketuvim, the Law of Moses, the prophets, and the Psalms, which begins the whole section of the writings. Then Luke tells us that He opened their minds so that they
could understand the Scriptures, that they could see what the Old Testament looked forward to. What it ached for was the end of the story fulfilled in the Messiah of Israel, the Savior of the world. If we are to really understand who Jesus is, what Luke tells us is that we must read the Old Testament well. We cannot understand who Jesus is if we do not understand the Old Testament. So one of the reasons that we read the Old Testament is to learn the truth about the Creator—the redeeming God—and His wisdom. We also learn the truth about His Son, Jesus Christ, who came and died for our sins.

As I mentioned, the Scriptures address the whole person. It is not just our head. It is not just right and true information that we need if we are to live as the people of God. Our hearts also need to be shaped as well. You will see that in addition to the enlightened mind, we also have the Scriptures addressing our affections and hearts. Some who read the Bible accept a false notion that somehow the Old Testament does not address the inner person but is only concerned with external ritual aspects of religion: the sacrifices, the activities of the temple, and so on. But we read the famous Shamah of Israel, “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one,” that which was prayed in the temple and every synagogue, not only in Palestine but throughout the Diaspora. And then Moses says, “Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, all of your soul, and all of your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home, when you walk along the road, when you lie down, and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands, and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses.” The covenant relationship with God has always been about embracing God’s promises fully from the heart, not just with our minds.

How else can David write in the Psalms these incredible songs and hymns of worship, that “your words to me are wonderful. I love them more than the sweetness of the honeycomb. I weep with tears because your law is not kept.” He says in Psalm 19, “Your law is worth more to me than gold, than fine and precious gold.” We read the Old Testament not just to understand God’s wisdom but also to have our hearts shaped in worship of the God to whom the Old Testament attests.

Paul, again writing in the New Testament, talks about this in Colossians 3 and Ephesians 4 when he says that God’s people who gather in the house churches that are distributed throughout the Roman Empire are to encourage one another by speaking truthfully to one another but also by singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. The great hymnal of the temple, the great hymnal of God’s people, Israel, is the Psalms, and it was meant to shape our identity as God’s people by shaping our hearts and our affections.

There is one other aspect that shapes the reasons why we read the Old Testament: not only to give us insight into the way things really are and the wonders of who our God is, not only to shape our affections, but also to affect our practice and the way that we live in the world. It should affect what we do, our family life, our work, and how we treat our neighbors. Again, we turn to God’s covenant with Moses in Deuteronomy 26. This is a wonderful reminder of Pentecost worship, the worship and liturgy that God’s people were to recite at the Feast of Weeks. Here they had come into the land that God had promised them, and they were to do something. They were to live a certain way. They were to plant their crops. They were to have children. They were to reflect the image of this God, to multiply and subdue the earth, to show again the wisdom of who God is and the wonder of His love. So they would bring the results of their planting, their crops, as an expression of offering worship to God. These were the first fruits of their labor. In their very worship they would bring proof and evidence that God indeed had kept His word to Abraham. He had brought them into a good land flowing with milk and honey. He blessed their lives, and now they brought not only evidence of His faithfulness, but also evidence of their faithfulness that indeed they had obeyed His laws. They had planted those crops. They began to subdue the Earth so that the surrounding nations could see the wonder and the nearness of their God.
We read the Old Testament not only to shape our minds and our hearts but also to shape the way that we live. As Micah would say, we should “do justice and show mercy and walk humbly with our God.” It is not just about what we know, but it is also to affect the way we live.

In such a vast array of laws, stories, hymns, visions, proverbs, and wisdom sayings, is there a way that we can grasp a sense of what the entire Old Testament is about? This is a question that has been debated by many Old Testament scholars and has been answered in many different ways. Many, since the time of Gerhardt Van Rod, have answered the question about what the big idea of the Old Testament is in terms of the drama of redemption. It is answered in terms of the way in which God elects His people Israel and redeems them from Egypt and brings them to Himself and the way in which He then establishes them as a nation through a covenant relationship established at Sinai. He redeems them. He brings them to Himself for a purpose, and yet they disobey and rebel. Yet this God is patient with them, and again He reinitiates and constantly reinitiates His covenant with them, not only through Moses but also later through David. He makes a promise to them to establish them as a nation and yet again they rebel. They are cast into exile and conquered by foreign powers. Yet once again, toward the end of the Old Testament, there is a sense of a new beginning. There is a hope for something more. There is the promise of a new covenant. Many have summarized the story of Scripture in the Old Testament as a drama of redemption.

This is a very good way to summarize the story, yet others have pointed out that it overlooks some of the other aspects of the Old Testament. In particular, scholars have pointed to the wisdom literature and said that the drama of redemption does not quite summarize the wisdom literature. Some have talked about the Old Testament more generally and more vaguely as a book about God, His character, and His actions.

I think that we need to find a way to combine these two emphases: the rule and wisdom of God that is illustrated in the wisdom literature, and the actions, the mighty deeds, the wonders of God acting in history emphasized by the drama of redemption. William Dumbrell, an Old Testament scholar, has described a very helpful way to summarize the big idea of the Old Testament. He talks about God’s rule in God’s realm through God’s special relationships. God’s rule, His kingly, wise rule, is often revealed in the wisdom literature. God’s specific chosen places include the Garden of Eden and the land of Canaan. God works through special relationships with Adam and Eve, Abraham, and others.

We can see the way in which these three aspects of the big idea of the Old Testament are summarized. We see that God’s rule is expressed and is to be expressed through His people. This happens first through Adam and Eve in God’s realm of the garden. The garden is to approximate a temple, a sanctuary in which the rule of this creator God is visible to the surrounding world. Yet we see that Adam and Eve are supposed to extend the borders of Eden to subdue the Earth. It begins in the garden, but there is also even in Genesis 1 and 2 a sense of mission, a sense that the story has somewhere to go.

Despite Adam and Eve’s rebellion in the garden, we see God reinitiating this relationship, the assertion of His rule in His world that He will not give up on, with Noah in Genesis 6 and 9. We see that He repeats many of the same things that He says to Adam and Eve there. Noah is to multiply and subdue the Earth, and God says that He will bless him. Through this particular relationship, God will bless the entire world.

We see also how this works with Abraham, and we see a narrowing of the story here. In some ways the Old Testament begins with a very wide lens, and then as we see with Noah and his sons he still talks
about the table of all the nations in Genesis 10. But when we come to Genesis 12 we see a real narrowing down to one particular family that God will work through. Notice what God says in Genesis 12 about this relationship with Abraham. Yes, He will bless him personally and give him a seed. He will bless that seed and make his name great, make him into a great nation. He will give him a land, a particular realm that God will assert His rule in. But the purpose is so that he might be a blessing to all the families of the earth.

We see this, and in some ways we can see that story of the Old Testament from Adam and Eve in the garden, Noah, Abraham, then with Moses and the people of Israel, and finally through the house of David. The story continues to narrow in a sense of God’s choice, but always there is a sense that He will do something to bless the entire world through this particular people. He does not give up on the world that He has made and the people whom He has chosen. They have a particular vocation to show forth His wisdom and goodness in the world. In fact, the Mosaic covenant would say it a different way than the Abrahamic covenant. To Abraham He said, “So that you might be a blessing to all the nations.” God said through Moses to the people of Israel in Exodus 19:4-6 that they are to be “a holy nation, a priesthood to all the rest of the nations around.” He summarizes that again in Ezekiel when He points out to them that they have been disobedient to this vocation. He says, “I set you in the center of the earth that all the other nations around would see and know who I am.”

This narrowing comes to the cross of Christ and the person of Christ in the New Covenant. Notice what happens in the story of Scripture. Once again now there is a broadening out. What begins as a Jewish reform movement, a Messianic movement in the early church with the disciples, then very quickly goes to the ends of the earth and includes the nations, as the story of the book of Acts tells us. There is a narrowing down but always with a sense of mission to be a blessing to the entire world and then again an expansion through the rest of Scripture.

We see a thread of hope through the entirety of Scripture. The opening chapters talk about God making His world and placing people in it who would bear His image in the garden, but they rebel. They rebel against God’s commands to them, and so God chooses Abraham, in many ways, as a new Adam to bear His image in the world and to be a blessing to the nations. Then we see that, through the sins of others this time, through the sins of Egypt, God’s people are taken captive and treated as work units. He comes to rescue them on the basis of His promises to Abraham, and He makes them a great nation. He gives them a mission in the world, but once again we see a story of rebellion against this mission and this sense of who they are as a people of God. God promises at the end of the Old Testament to renew this covenant again with Moses, Abraham, and David. It is a story and promise that will be fulfilled in the New Testament. That is the big idea. These are some of the reasons why. We will work hard to read the entirety of the Old Testament in this course.

Let us talk a little bit about the text that we will read. Which text informs the English text that we will read together? There is a whole history of how God has superintended His work of preserving His Word for His people. We see that there is a whole history of various texts. The first one is the Samaritan Pentateuch. The word “pentateuch” shows us that only the five books of Moses are in the Samaritan Pentateuch, only Genesis through Deuteronomy. You will remember that the Samaritans were a resettling people. They were the result of the northern kingdom of Israel being taken off into exile and the Assyrians repopulating that area. So the Samaritans, after the fall of the northern kingdom to Assyria, recaptured some of the traditions, but we can see in the Samaritan Pentateuch, for example, a focus not on Mount Sinai or on Jerusalem, but a focus instead on Mount Gerizim and Samaria. What we see in the Samaritan Pentateuch that helps us with the various texts of the Old Testament is that the earliest account of these manuscripts goes back to the first century.
There we have, as you might remember, a very important discovery, which is the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls. Just outside of Jerusalem to the south was a community at Qumran that rejected the authority of the priests in the temple because they felt that they had compromised the priesthood during the Hasmonean Revolt. From that community the Old Testament was preserved very, very well. They had a scriptorium there, a place where they could make several copies. There were portions of every Old Testament book except the book of Esther discovered at Qumram in the first century. There are correspondences between some of the texts in the Samaritan Pentateuch and those in the Dead Sea scrolls that have important implications for establishing the text of the Old Testament.

The most important aspect of this first-century discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls is how confirming it was in regard to what is called the Masoretic Text. The Masoretes were a group of scribes who developed a system of very carefully counting every letter of every line in order to be sure that they copied the word of the Old Testament exactly. Before the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls, the earliest codex that we have of the Masoretic text only goes back to about the year 925 AD. With the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls going back to the first century, 1000 years are recaptured. Old Testament scholars have very carefully compared the text that they found among the Dead Sea scrolls and the Samaritan Pentateuch with the Masoretic text. What they found is that the Masoretic text very carefully and very accurately had preserved the tradition that they had received. There is such a close correspondence between what the Dead Sea scrolls reveal and the Masoretic text that we can see a great weight of authority that the Masoretic text should have for us in establishing the text of the Old Testament.

It is the Masoretic text that primarily undergirds all of the English translations with some comparisons to the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Dead Sea scrolls, and two other groups of manuscripts. One of the other texts is the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Old Testament. After the dispersion of God’s people in the exile and after Alexander the Great conquered the known world in around 333 BC, a lot of Jews established synagogues and communities of worship in all different areas of Egypt and the Mediterranean basin. They needed texts that they could understand for their worship. We see that the king of Alexandria, Egypt, Ptolemy Philadelphus, at about 250 BC, authorized the translation of the five books of Moses into Greek. He did this for several reasons, one of which was to please a very important constituency in his population, the Jews. He also did it to find out what the law code was of that people group. As a result, the beginnings of the translation of the Old Testament into Greek came about in 250 BC. By about 150 BC the entirety of the Old Testament was translated. Another reason that this is really important is that it is the Septuagint that the New Testament writers primarily quote because they too wrote to Greek speakers. They wrote in Greek.

Another translation used for readings in the synagogue is the Aramaic Targumim. Targumim just means “commentary,” and in the synagogue there would perhaps be a reading in Hebrew. Many of the people did not understand Hebrew anymore in the Diasporan synagogues, so there was a need to translate and interpret. Of course the Septuagint was one way to do that, but also the language of Aramaic was spoken widely among the Jews in the Diaspora. There would be commentary and a homily, and these would often times either be in Greek or Aramaic.

These texts, primarily the foundational authoritative texts of the Masoretic texts and their careful system of counting and pointing, along with some comparisons to these other texts, is what establishes the authority of the English translation that we read. It helps us have great confidence in the Word of God as the Spirit of God has superintended this process of transmission.
You will remember that one of the other questions that we wanted to answer was the question of how we read these different books. Do we read them simply as the Hebrew Bible, or do we read them as the older testament, our Christian Scripture? We have already begun to answer that question in terms of Luke 24. We should note that there are some differences in the way in which the Hebrew Bible and the English Bible that we read are arranged. It is helpful to understand those differences. In our English Bible, as we read through the Old Testament together, we will read first the law. That is the same as the Hebrew Bible, the first books of Moses. There are no differences there, but then in our English Bibles we have what is called the historical books, beginning with Joshua and going all the way through Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. We also include Ruth and Esther in those historical books. The Hebrew Bible arranges them differently. The second section of the Hebrew Bible is called the Nevi’im.

We have three main sections of the Hebrew Bible. The first is Torah or the law, and the second is Nevi’im or the prophets. That is just a transliteration into English letters of the Hebrew word for the prophets. This is helpful for us to realize because it gives us some insight into how we should read especially the historical books in the Old Testament. How is it that those books should be approached or viewed? They are called the prophets because in the Hebrew Bible the books of Joshua and Judges of 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings are viewed through the lens of a covenant. If we have here the book of Deuteronomy in mind, or the Mosaic covenant, as we read through Joshua and Judges and 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings, we will notice that the history of Israel is evaluated in a particular way. It is not evaluated in terms of military power, economic systems, and broad political influence. That is not the basis on which the writers of Scripture write. They evaluate the events of the history of Israel—the kings of Israel and the judges of Israel—on a particular and unique basis, which is on the basis of Israel’s covenant. We see that the activities of the kings of Israel are often summarized in one of two ways: “They had a good heart, and they walked after the actions of their father David.” Unfortunately those types of evaluations are fairly rare. Most of the time what we see in the books of Samuel and especially Kings is more like, “His heart was wicked. He walked in the deeds of his father Manasseh, or his father Jeroboam.” These were evil and wicked kings.

The history of Israel is not thought about in terms of some sort of objective, bare, disinterested history. The writers of these historical events, those who describe these historical events, evaluate them passionately in relation to the covenant. That is why the Hebrew Bible sees this as prophets. Samuel and Moses were prophets who revealed the Word and covenant of God and evaluated the events of God’s people that way. One of the differences that we see is that all of the prophets are included together in this way: the major prophets, what we would call the minor prophets, and also the former prophets, what we would call the historical books.

The books of Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah, along with the books of Ruth and Esther, are put in the third section, which is called the Ketuvim. This is a Hebrew word that means “the writings.” The Psalms, the wisdom literature, Lamentations, the stories of Esther and Ruth, and the stories of those returning from exile are grouped together in the writings after the prophets. We can see some of the differences in the way the Hebrew Bible and the English Bible are organized. It is helpful for us to recognize that in terms of how especially the historical books are seen. Let us also keep in mind what we have talked about already in terms of the Old Testament as Christian Scripture—as looking forward to the end of the story, looking forward to that New Covenant, that new David, that new Moses, our Lord Jesus Christ. We have the same books in the Hebrew Bible in the Old Testament; they are just put in a different order.

Now we come to when and where the events of the Old Testament took place. We have the three lands of the ancient Near East: Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Syria-Palestine. If you have a map in front of you,
you can see the crescent that reaches down into Palestine up through the various Tigris and Euphrates river valleys. You can see the sliver in the middle of Egypt where there are two massive river-based economies of Egypt and Mesopotamia. Right in the middle between them is Israel and the land of Canaan where God put His people. Some have called that a land bridge between Egypt and Mesopotamia to the northeast but also to Europe back to the northwest. You can see that, in the known world, the land of Syria-Palestine lies right at the crossroads of the world at these great river cultures. For that reason it was a land that was much fought over and much contested. Ezekiel acknowledges the geography here when he says, “This is Jerusalem, which I have set in the center of the nations with countries all around her.” Again you can see the special vocation and identity of the people of God with the nations all around. They are to be a blessing to those nations, to reveal the wisdom, mercy, and wonder of their covenant God and the One who made everything. He is the Creator of the world.

We can see in this contest over these lands that first Egypt in its great power, economy, and military might, would dominate this region. Egypt and Mesopotamia would be the first to develop means of writing. In Samaria, in Mesopotamia was the development of what is called Cuneiform. They would press these wedges down into clay and make letters. They were able to keep record for their economy, communicate, and write letters. We see the stories of the conquest of Egypt in hieroglyphics on these great temples and monuments in Egypt. You can see in a map how the Hittites first, after the Egyptians, and then the Assyrians, and then the Babylonians, dominated this part of the world. It is a very strategic location and a land in which the events of the Old Testament took place.

Let us talk a little bit more about this land, because it can help us understand different aspects of the stories in the Old Testament and the events of the Old Testament if we know something of the geography of Syria-Palestine. There are four primary regions on the western side near the Mediterranean Sea, or what is called the coastal plains. The coastal plains reach from the north of Galilee down through the plains of Sharon and then down into the western Negev toward Egypt. They are very narrow in the north and much broader in the south. What you can note, just from the map, are two very important things. First, there are no natural harbors, so the relationship with the rest of the western Mediterranean would be primarily dependent on relationship with the Phoenicians. The Phoenicians in Tyre and Sidon were to the north of Galilee, and they would develop sea vessels and sea trade. They were an important connection with the western Mediterranean.

The port of Acco is a little hook that juts out into the Mediterranean Sea if you go down from Galilee in the north and you move toward the plains of Sharon. The Port of Acco really is the only port on the western boarder of Canaan or Palestine, and it is a very important strategic area that needed to be controlled through military force. You will also see something that juts right into the Port of Acco, cutting across from an east and west way, and it is called the Jezreel Valley.

The highways of commerce mainly run north and south. We have the way of the sea that comes up from Egypt that runs along the Mediterranean coastline. On the map it goes from the bottom left hand corner, around the crest of the sea, and up into Galilee. There is a road there called the Way of the Sea or the Via Maris. Then if you look to the east of the Dead Sea and the Jordan Valley, there is a road that goes up, called the way of the Kings or the Kings’ Highway. Most of the commerce from Arabia in the south up to the north into Mesopotamia along the eastern boarder of Syria-Palestine would run along the Kings’ Highway. From Egypt the commerce ran along the Way of the Sea.

What you can see with this one area, this one valley that cuts through mountainous regions that run north and south, is the Jezreel Valley. The Jezreel Valley just to the west runs to the coast at the Port of Acco, and it runs just south of the Sea of Galilee. In this Jezreel Valley is a city called Megiddo, which
would be fought over time and time again. It is the city at the center of what the book of Revelation calls Armageddon as well. You can see how strategically important, militarily and commercially, that port and that city in that valley is. It controlled access to the sea, but it also controlled east and west access across Palestine. Whoever conquered the land of Syria-Palestine made one of their first targets the Jezreel Valley.

Going from west to east at the next longitudinal zone, the first one is the coastal plains and the next one is called the Central Mountain Range. The top of that mountain range in northern Galilee is the highest point in the land of Syria-Palestine. North of the Sea of Galilee is Mount Hermon, which is 9100 feet tall, and it is the highest geographic point in Syria-Palestine. It really is at the top of the Central Mountain Range. The lowest point is if you go south down to the Dead Sea. That is not just the southernmost point, but it is also the lowest point in terms of sea level. The Dead Sea is almost 1300 feet below sea level. That is why there are all those salt deposits there. That Central Mountain Range runs from north to south from the highest to the lowest points in Palestine.

Palestine is not very far across. We see from top to bottom, from Dan to Beersheba, from the northernmost point to the southernmost point, is about 150 miles. It is not very long, but it is also not very wide. It is only about 65 miles wide. We are talking about a relatively small area of land that really is cut through north to south with these four longitudinal zones. Over by the sea is the coastal plain, but very quickly as you move east you come to the Central Mountain Range. In the middle of the country is the Jordan Rift, which runs from the Sea of Galilee down to the Dead Sea. It usually is only about 10 miles wide, and it follows the path of the Jordan River down from Galilee to the Dead Sea.

On the easternmost side of Syria-Palestine we have what is called the Trans-Jordanian Highlands. The Jordan Rift is a cut between two sets of mountainous regions, the Central Mountains and the Trans-Jordanian Mountains, sometimes called the plateaus. That region is on the eastern side of the Dead Sea, the Jordan River, and the Sea of Galilee, and it is cut through by four major rivers that run east and west. Those rivers include the Yarmouk, Jabbok, Arnon, and Zered rivers. Those help us to understand basically four regions on the east that come up time and time again as we read through the stories of the Old Testament. We read about Bashan, which is at the northern border and the Yarmouk River. As you move south, the next region is Gilead, and then Moab, and then the southernmost point is Edom. The people of those four regions are constantly in opposition to Israel on the eastern side.

On the western side in the south along the coast is where the sea people known as the Philistines would come and establish five major cities on the Mediterranean coast. You can see on the western side by the coast is where the Philistines established their cities. Edom, Moab, Gilead, and Bashan are on the eastern side. Further to the south is Egypt, further to the northeast is Babylon, and due north is Assyria. These are the important geographical regions and the areas where important people groups engaged the story of the Old Testament. It is helpful for us to realize some of the aspects of the geography of Palestine and how that plays into the way events transpired. It helps us know why some of these regions in particular are important. That is a sense of the place and where events happen, how important the land of Israel is in relation to these two river economies of Egypt and Mesopotamia. It plays an important role in the history of the events of the Old Testament.

Let us talk now about the time periods in which these things happened. Earlier I mentioned the development of writing. That writing did not develop until the Bronze Age. The Early Bronze Age was about 3000 BC and included Samarian and Egyptian writing. During this time some of the Semitic languages developed in terms of Samarian, Acadian, and, later, Ugaritic. Then we see with the Samarian economy in Mesopotamia that there were no natural barriers that would prevent other people from
conquering them. So as the Acadians began to move in and take over Mesopotamia. That was about the
time in which there was a great migration around 2000 BC. This was during the Middle Bronze Age,
and there were great migrations from Mesopotamia reaching down into Canaan and even down into
Egypt. That was about the time of the patriarchs, the time of Abraham’s journey down into Canaan.

About this same time the Code of Hammurabi was developed, in around 1790 BC. The old Babylonian
kingdom developed with Hammurabi and the development of his codes. The way in which the literature
developed there and in Egypt would later influence the way in which the literature of the Old Testament
developed and the way the stories would be told. Sometimes it was in direct opposition to the way that
stories were told about the beginnings of the world in Egypt and the Samaritan cultures. But sometimes
the stories were told in similar ways, because they would capture the cultural aspects of the day. As
Calvin tells us, God accommodates Himself to us and talked to His people—He developed and used the
cultural aspects of literary genres to communicate His Word, tell His stories, and be relevant to the
surrounding cultures.

In the Late Bronze Age, in around 1447 BC, was the time of the Exodus. Around that time the Hyksos
people no longer ruled Egypt. As Moses would say in Exodus, “a new king who did not know Joseph
came into power.” So there was a new dynasty that began in the Late Bronze Age, and that was about
the time of the bondage in Egypt and the exodus from there.

Next we come into the Iron Age and the development of the use of iron in weapons, household utensils,
and tools. We see that introduced to this Syria-Palestine area by the Philistines. The period of the judges
was just after the conquest of the land around 1375 BC. Then David ruled the united kingdom in around
1050 BC. David and Solomon reigned over the united monarchy of Israel until about 930 BC, when the
kingdom became divided. That was in the middle of the Iron Age. Egypt was weakened, and Assyria
was on the rise. As a result, the northern kingdom of Israel and its 10 northern tribes were invaded by
Assyria, and Samaria, the capital of Israel, fell in 722 BC. Jeremiah, Isaiah, Micah, and others warned
Judah repeatedly not to be like her northern sister, but she did not heed the warnings. A new power was
on the rise in the neighborhood, and Nebuchadnezzar conquered Assyria around 605 BC. He conquered
Egypt as well and became the dominant power in the region. It was Babylon that carried Judah off into
exile in 586 BC.

Persia was a rising power about 50 years later. Cyrus the king was used, as foretold by Isaiah the
prophet, to release God’s people so that they could resettle Judah and rebuild Jerusalem and the temple.
In the Late Iron Age period in 538 BC, the people of Israel who had been exiled returned under Ezra and
Nehemiah, and the rebuilding of the temple took place in 515 BC. Of course the Iron Age extends all the
way until the time in which Alexander the Great brought together the various city-states of Greece and
conquered all the way through Syria-Palestine, reaching over into Asia as far as India around 332 BC.
We can see even that foretold by Daniel the prophet in his prophecies. This is something of not only
where these events happened but also when they would happen.

Let us talk about why we read the Old Testament. We read the Old Testament because it informs us
about the character, wisdom, mercy, and goodness of the God who made everything and who chose a
particular people. He gave them a vocation and commission to be His holy nation and a blessing to all
the nations around them. They were to embrace this covenant with the heart. We see that as we read the
Old Testament. One of the great criticisms about their rebellion is that they went astray in their hearts
after other gods. Not only were they to know this God and love Him, the One who redeemed them from
Egypt and made all the world, but they were to live in a way that was in accord with the created order.
They were to live in a way that was in gratitude to the redemption that God had provided them. We see
in their worship and practices that God had provided a way in which to deal with their sins, to have the representative priesthood, and to have sacrifices that could help to deal with their sins. Even in the Old Testament we see the great grace of God that anticipates His great gift in His Son Jesus Christ. I really look forward to reading with you in this course as we drink deeply from the fire hydrant of the massive story of the Old Testament. Let us pray together.

Lord God, we thank You for the ways in which You have worked over such a long period of time, reaching back to 3000 BC, the beginnings of the peoples and their recording of their history in the Mesopotamian and Egyptian region. Lord, You raised up a people and entrusted to the family of Abraham and to the nation that You would make of His family a special relationship and a covenantal relationship. You formed in their identity important categories for the way in which Your people should understand who You are throughout history, Your holiness, and Your righteousness. You taught Your people that they might understand what sin is, the way in which You have made the world, and the way in which You have graciously redeemed Your people. Lord, thank You for Your tenacious commitment to Your world. We pray also that by the power of Your Spirit You would enlighten our hearts and minds that we, too, with David, might praise the wonder of Your Word and taste the sweetness of Your Word. We ask that with our whole heart we might embrace Your good Word to Your people and see the ways in which it anticipates the indescribable gift of Your Son Jesus. We pray in His name. Amen.