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ONE SHOT, ONE BOOK, ONE GOD: APOLOGETICS AND THE UNITY OF THE BIBLE

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SYNOPSIS

Christians are often asked, How do you know that the Bible is the Word of God? One succinct answer we can give is that the Bible bears God's fingerprint: *order*. Order involves a multiplicity of objects or parts that are unified according to a definite plan. The existence of order, or design, implies that an intelligent designer has been at work. Order is observable in the realms of science and ethics and points to the fact that an intelligent, personal, creative, powerful God exists. Order is also evident in the Bible. It is a multiplicity of books, written by many authors, over many years, in many literary styles, that contain many stories about many people, places, things, and events. It also displays an intricate, multilayered unity. It is *one story*, about *one God*, who is administering *one plan of salvation*, that is centered around *one person* (Christ), who is attested to by *one body of signs*, and who is worshiped by *one people*, according to *one worldview*. Like a spiral galaxy or a hummingbird's wing or a strand of DNA, the order found in the Bible could not have been created by a mere mortal, but only by God.

SOMETIMES YOU HAVE ONLY ONE SHOT. IF SO, YOU HAVE TO MAKE IT COUNT.

This was the case with me once, following a history lecture I attended at our local senior center. During discussion time, I had mentioned that modern archeology has repeatedly demonstrated the amazing historical accuracy of the Bible. I thought that nothing further would come of the comment, but I was wrong. Immediately after the lecture ended, an agitated man made his way straight for me. Before we could even exchange pleasantries, his question burst forth: "How can you possibly believe that the Bible is the Word of God?" He wanted an answer and, with some difficulty, was waiting for it. Leaning on the Lord, I gave him my best shot:

Sir, there is one piece of evidence above all others that persuades me that the Bible is God's Word. It's called the unity of Scripture. The Bible is actually a collection of books — 66 of them, written by more than 40 authors, over the course of some 1,500 years; yet it is one unified book. It tells one story, about one God, who sends one Savior — Jesus Christ — into the world. The more you study it, the more you see Christ — not just in the New Testament, but also in the Old Testament. Have you read Isaiah 53? It predicts details of Christ's death more than 600 years before it happened. Have you heard of the Passover Lamb? It pointed to Christ, the Lamb of God, 1,500 years before He came into world! The Christ-centered unity of the Bible is so intricate and so beautiful that no mere mortal could possibly have produced it. It has to be the product of a single divine Mind working through the different authors. It is this amazing unity that persuades me that the Bible is the Word of God.

With that, the man turned and walked away.

ORDER, ORDER, EVERYWHERE!

In taking my best shot, I pointed this troubled man to one of the great supernatural realities in the world today — what I call “the biblical order.” In the paragraphs ahead, I want to examine this order in some depth. Let’s begin with a few remarks about a common but richly significant phenomenon: *order*.

Webster’s Dictionary defines order as *an arrangement of different objects integrated into a system according to a definite plan*.¹ This definition highlights the main elements of any order. First, there is *multiplicity* — a finite number of different objects or parts. Second, there is *unity* — a perceivable oneness, integrity, or systematic quality that characterizes the multiplicity. This unity is created by the third element: *arrangement* — the way the component parts are put together. Note carefully, however, that just any arrangement will not do; for order to exist, the arrangement must be according to a definite plan. In other words, it must display the fourth element of order: *design*, or *rationality*.

This last element is significant; for when we come upon a multiplicity of objects that have been arranged into an intricate and beautiful design, we immediately experience an inescapable awareness that an intelligent person with a purpose — a *designer* — has been on the scene. Order implies and reveals design and design implies and reveals a designer. They are a little trinity; the first cannot exist without the other two. Order always bears upon itself a fingerprint of personal intelligence, purpose, and power at work.

The concept of order is a vital partner in the apologetic task. In order to fully appreciate the order or unity of Scripture we must look for a moment at two other areas in which order is found: in nature and in ethics.

The Natural Order

Nature is the totality of all physical objects — the cosmos. We observe that order pervades the parts and the whole. It is present in the tiniest building blocks of nature — the atomic elements; in the largest objects in nature, such as stars, galaxies, and galactic clusters; and in all the objects in between, including crystals, clouds, conches, crickets, cuckoos, crocodiles, and chemists. It is seen in the structure of things, the motions of things, the relationships of things, and the beauty of things. It is also strikingly seen in the fantastic complexity of certain things, such as a strand of DNA, a living cell, an asparagus fern, a hummingbird’s wing, or a human brain or eye. The more we look at nature, the more we see that the things we call “things” are actually orders — unities of component parts arranged according to a rational plan.

In Paul’s letter to the Romans, he explained that order in nature reveals to all humans the existence and attributes of its divine creator. When we see order in nature, we cannot help but see design. Seeing design, we cannot help but see a designer — a person with a purpose. Seeing that person, we cannot help but see that he is divine; for what other kind of person could fashion an order such as this? Order in nature reveals that a divine, personal creator exists and that he is infinitely intelligent, artistic, powerful, and good (Rom. 1:18–32).

The Moral Order

The moral order is spiritual rather than physical. It is different from the natural order, yet it is no less real. Paul also discussed this moral order, affirming that all humans innately know its several elements (Rom. 2:1–16). The first of these elements is the *moral law* — a fixed code of moral absolutes, planted like solemn sentinels deep within each human heart. Next, there is *moral obligation* — an objective spiritual reality perceived by the faculty we call conscience. Conscience, together with moral obligation, urges us to align ourselves with the moral law and to reconcile ourselves to it when we break it. Finally, there is *moral cause and effect*. Our innate awareness of this moral law assures us that good will triumph over evil and that human deeds will bring reward or retribution, if not in this life, then surely in the next.

The moral order is no less pervasive, complex, beautiful, or influential than the natural order. It, too, manifests design and points to a designer — a person with a purpose. It, too, reveals that this person is divine; for what other kind of person could create and sustain an order such as this? This order, however,

also reveals that the divine person is a holy sovereign and a righteous judge, and that he would have us live according to the moral order he has created.

A Revelatory Order?

Suppose you are a seeker. Pondering the natural and moral orders, you come to the conclusion that there must be a divine person — an “unknown god” — behind them both; but no matter how hard you look at these orders, you cannot figure out his name (if he has a name), his plans for the world, why his good creation is riddled with so much evil and suffering or what (if anything) he plans to do about it. The orders have awakened you to the existence of an unknown god, but they supply frustratingly little in the way of answers to life’s ultimate questions.

Then it hits you: “If there really is a god, he surely has the answers to all these questions. Maybe he has sent us a teacher or a group of teachers to reveal them. Maybe they have written a book that contains the answers. Maybe I’m supposed to start looking for such a book. How do I know that it even exists? If it does exist, how will I recognize it among all the other holy books?”

I would say to you, “Friend, I have good news: there is such book, and you already have the tools to identify it. You know, based on your experience with nature and conscience, that the unknown god reveals himself in orders. He shows his intelligence and artistry by arranging multiplicities of different objects into intricate and beautiful unities. Order is his signature, his trademark. Doesn’t it make sense, then, that if he gave us a holy book that reveals the answers to the questions of life, that he would put his signature upon it? Like nature, wouldn’t it, too, be an intricate and beautiful order — a ‘revelatory order’? “By the way, here’s a Bible. Be sure to check out this book first.”

Christians have been claiming for centuries that the Bible is the *revelatory order* for which the God of the natural and moral order has prepared the human heart. What exactly is it about the Bible that persuades them that He has indeed put His signature upon it? It is now time to find out.

THE MULTIPLICITY OF THE BIBLE

We cannot appreciate the Bible’s order and unity unless we see them against the backdrop of its great multiplicity. The Bible contains a multiplicity of books — 66 of them. It was written over a multiplicity of years — about 1,500 of them. It was written in a multiplicity of places — on three separate continents (Asia, Africa, and Europe), in city and country, in palace and prison, at home and abroad. It was written in a multiplicity of languages — Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek.

It was written in a multiplicity of literary genres—at least eight of them, including historical narrative, law, poetry, drama, proverb, prophecy, epistle, and apocalyptic vision. The historical narrative alone is epic in scope, containing a great multiplicity of stories that reference thousands of persons, places, things, and events.

It was written by a multiplicity of authors — about 40 of them. These authors were not just priests or theologians, but men from many different walks of life — kings, peasants, fishermen, poets, statesmen, a herdsman, a military general, a cupbearer, a doctor, and even a tax collector! Many of them were opposed by the spiritual leaders of their day, and some were even regarded as heretics. The Bible, clearly, is not the handiwork of a closely knit religious cult.

These historical facts concerning the origin and literary character of the Bible reveal that this striking, multilayered unity is neither the product of one man, nor of the collusion of many. If it is not from either of these, however, then from whom is it?

THE UNITY OF THE BIBLE

The unity of the Bible is indeed striking, multilayered and, I would argue, patently divine. I will now try to make that case by expanding on the following thesis statement: The Bible is *one story*, about *one God*, who is administering *one plan of salvation*, that is centered around *one person* (Christ), who is attested to by *one body of signs*, and who is worshiped by *one people*, according to *one (eminently satisfying) worldview*.

One Story

The Bible tells a single story. This story has a beginning, middle, and end. In essence, it tells of the creation of humans (Gen. 1:27) and the cosmos, their wounding by the sin of the first human (Rom. 5:12), and their glorious restoration through the righteousness of Christ. This story has many characters, including divine, angelic, and human. It has many themes, including the love of the Father for the Son; the love of the Son for the Father; the love of God for humans and nature; and the triumph of good over evil, truth over lies, and humility over pride. It has a plot and many subplots. There is rising action, developing conflict, apparent defeat, and sudden, unexpected deliverance and final victory. There is romance, mystery, comedy, and tragedy. Finally, for everyone who plays his part in the story well, there is a happy ending.

In short, the Bible displays an outstanding *literary unity* that reveals the hand of a single divine Author. Note carefully, however, that the Bible resists being categorized as *mere* story (i.e., myth or legend), but because of certain characteristics forcibly presents itself as the kind of story we call *history*. Indeed, believers see it as *the* story *par excellence* — the true cosmic history from which all lesser stories, be they history or fiction, derive whatever beauty and truth they may contain. If this is so, it would explain mankind’s perennial fascination with the Bible. Many people sense that their lives have significance and meaning. They are like Sam Gamgee in *The Lord of the Rings*, who said, “What a tale we have been in, Mr. Frodo, haven’t we?” Many people know they’re in a tale and they long to find the book in which the *whole* tale, including their own appointed part, is told. The literary unity of the Bible will often draw them to it.

One God

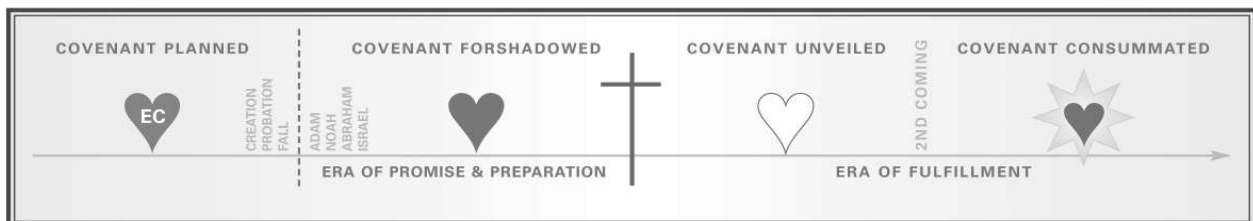
In the Bible’s one story, a single character towers above all others: God. Part of the drama of the story is that as it unfolds it reveals more about God, including His names, attributes, purposes, plans, prerogatives, mighty works, and mysterious ways. Then, as the story nears its climax, something of extraordinary interest is unveiled: the one God is actually a Trinity of persons — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The details progressively unfold, yet the message of the Bible remains the same: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!” (Deut. 6:4 NASB). “There is no other besides Him” (Deut. 4:35 NASB). In other words, the Bible, unlike the ancient pagan scriptures with their elaborate theogonies and vast pantheons of gods, displays a consistent *theological unity*. This is consistent with the fact that all humans intuitively know that there is, and can be, only one God. It is hardly surprising, then, that His book reveals that part of His mission in history is to expose and dethrone every other so-called god, so that “in that day there will be one Lord, and His name [Father, Son, and Holy Spirit] the only name” (Zech. 14:9 NIV; cf. John 4:22–24; Phil. 2:8–11).

One Plan of Salvation

The Bible is fundamentally a history book — the history of God’s redemptive acts, past, present, and future. This “salvation history,” especially the part called the New Testament, reveals that God is always acting according to a plan. The Bible, therefore, may best be understood as a *history of the administration of a single divine plan for the redemption of the cosmos*. The biblical timeline outlined below (also see fig. 1) provides a glimpse of that plan.²

Figure 1



The Eternal Covenant of Grace. This is the heart of salvation history. The New Testament reveals that even before the creation of the world, God foreknew Adam's sin and its terrible consequences for humans and nature; but He also had a plan to redeem them. The writer to the Hebrews called this plan "the eternal covenant" (Heb. 13:20). Scripture reveals that this covenant is an agreement involving two *parties*: God and humankind; a *promise* to all who willingly enter into it: forgiveness of sins and eternal life in fellowship with God; a *penalty* for all who spurn it: eternal punishment away from the presence of God; a *provision* by which God can justly offer eternal life to humankind: God's incarnate Son, living and dying in behalf of His people; and a *proviso*, or demand: simple faith in the person and work of Christ. God determined that for many years the elements of this covenant would remain hidden in Him; only at the time He appointed — at the appearing of His Son — would He reveal to all nations the great mystery of this covenant.

Creation, Probation, and Fall. The sin of the first Adam, the head of all humankind, alienated the human race from God, forfeited the tree of (eternal) life, and plunged the whole world into bondage to a host of evils, including sin, suffering, Satan, death, and the peril of hell. There was only one hope: another, better, "Adam" must come to recover what the first Adam had lost and to undo what the first Adam had done.

The Era of Promise and Preparation. God began to administer the eternal covenant to sinful men and women during the lengthy Old Testament era, urging and expecting them to respond. He revealed the eternal covenant, but in a *veiled* manner. God accomplished this by using *types* — historical persons, places, things, events, and institutions that symbolized the covenant realities that were yet to come (see table 1). Types are a shadow of which Christ and the covenant elements are the body (Col. 2:17).

Consider the following example from the events of the fall: When God administered the covenant to Adam and Eve, He killed an animal so that they might be covered by its skin and not be ashamed before Him. In this respect, Adam and Eve were a *type* of God's people. The innocent animal that was killed in their place by God Himself was a *type* of Christ. The animal skin typified Christ's righteousness and the merits of His sacrifice that cover sin. The guilty pair's willingness to receive the covering and so meet the condition for entering the covenant with God typified faith toward Christ. Despite their sin, God was again their God and they His covenant people.

God increasingly gave previews of the covenant realities as the Old Testament era progressed, thus awakening hope in His people. He did so by means of prophecy. In essence, Old Testament prophecy consisted of promises that the provision of the covenant (Christ) would come, and that through faith in Him, God's people would receive the covenant blessings. Isaiah, for example, cast the Messianic era as a day of pardon (53, 55), spiritual renewal (44:3), holiness (35:8), healing (61:1-3), the banishment of Satan (27:1), victory over death (25:6-8), a restored cosmos (65:17), and the manifestation of the glory of God (40:5). The eternal covenant *to come*, therefore, is the hidden theme that mystically unites all Old Testament history and prophecy.

The Era of Fulfillment. In this era, the covenant blessings are unveiled at last. During its first stage — the period of proclamation between Christ's incarnation and His second coming — the saints experience the covenant blessings in part and behold them by faith. During the second stage — the eternal period of consummation (i.e., completion) that begins at Christ's return — they will experience them in fullness and behold them by sight. This is *gospel* — "good news"! The Redeemer has come and the mysteries of the eternal covenant are now an "open secret" to the people of God (Rom. 16:25-27).

Here, then, in too few strokes, is something of the Bible's complex *soteriological unity* (i.e., unity regarding God's plan of salvation). The myriad stories of the two Testaments unite like tiles in a mosaic to show us a single God, administering a single plan, for the salvation of a single beloved people. No one on earth could devise and carry out such a plan — or such a book to tell us about it.

One Person

In the same way that Christ is the focal point of the eternal covenant — the one Mediator between God and man — so, too, He is the focal point of the Scriptures; like planets around the sun, the Scriptures revolve around Him. Jesus Himself said, "These are the Scriptures that testify about me" (John 5:39 NIV).

He told His disciples, “All things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me” (Luke 24:44 KJV).

This, the *christological unity* (i.e., unity regarding Christ) of the Bible, reflects the Father’s purpose that all people should honor the Son (Christ) just as they honor Him (John 5:23). In the New Testament, therefore, Christ is at the center, or “in the midst.” The New Testament places Him historically in the midst of the disciples, the religious leaders, the crowds, Moses and Elijah, the 7 lampstands, the 24 elders, and the very throne of God. It places Him doctrinally in the midst of creation, providence, redemption, and the triune Godhead itself. He is in the midst of the Old Testament, likewise, by means of christophany (i.e., temporary appearances of Christ in physical form), type, and prophecy. If the Bible may be called the body of truth, then its skeleton is the history of God’s administration of the plan of salvation, its sinews are the 66 books, and its heart — burning in the midst of all — is the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

One Body of Signs

The Father purposes to draw a people to His Son, so that they may enter His covenant and experience its blessings (John 6:44). He does this by means of a body of signs — extraordinary, supernatural phenomena that cause men and women to marvel and therefore inquire about Christ and the gospel (John 5:20, 31–36). God has posted such signs all along the highway of salvation history.

In the New Testament, God shines a spotlight on Christ by means of His virgin birth, angelic visitations, theophanies (i.e., temporary appearances of God in physical form), mighty miracles, and most importantly, His resurrection from the dead. God’s people are also a sign, and have been right up to our own day (Acts 1:4–8).

The Old Testament signs are especially important. There are two principal kinds: messianic types and prophecies. The Old Testament types and their New Testament fulfillments are astounding for their abundance, intricacy, and beauty; so, too, are the prophecies. How can it be that long before He was born, the Old Testament prophets predicted the entire course of Christ’s earthly and heavenly life? How could they speak of His divine nature and preexistence (Ps. 110), His virgin birth (Isa. 7), His birthplace (Mic. 5), His miraculous ministry to the poor (Isa. 61), the minute details of His atoning death (Isa. 53), His resurrection (Ps. 16), His heavenly reign (Ps. 2, 110), and His second coming in power and glory to judge, redeem, and usher in the Kingdom of God (Dan. 7; Isa. 66)? These signs naturally evoke wonder and curiosity and move seekers to inquire about the One who fulfills them.

The one body of messianic signs contributes substantially to the *evidential unity* of the Bible and is vital equipment for the apologetic task. It is God’s chosen vehicle for directing lost sinners to His Son, for persuading them that the Old and New Testaments constitute a single, Christ-centered book that is, indeed, the very Word of God.

One People

The Bible reveals a divine Father who gathers a single people to worship His Son, just as it reveals a divine Son who gathers the same people to worship His Father. This group of people is a multiplicity of Jew and Gentile, male and female, (a few) rich and (many) poor, slave and free, good and (formerly) evil; yet, because of their God-given love for Christ, they are one. The Bible highlights this unity by many striking images: they are a seed, a people, a nation, a race, a priesthood, a congregation, a bride, a body, a temple, a flock, and a new man (1 Pet. 2:9–10). Jesus named this people His church — those who are divinely *called out* of Adam’s doomed world-system and *called into* God’s marvelous family, where they worship Him in spirit, truth, gratitude, and joy.³

One Worldview

The purpose of the signs is to draw these people not only to Christ, but to the biblical worldview. Therein can be found fascinating answers to all of life’s great questions: What is the ultimate reality? What is the origin of the universe, life, and man? Why is there evil and suffering in the world? What, if anything, can

be done about it? What is the meaning or purpose of life? How shall we live? What happens when we die? Where is history heading? How can we find spiritual truth?

The biblical worldview offers answers that are intuitive, reasonable, hopeful, and ethically sound — far more so than those offered by any other world religion or philosophy. The Bible also speaks to humanity's existential anxieties; for example, it not only identifies the ultimate reality (God), but explains how alienated sinners may be united with it. It not only tells about an afterlife in either heaven or hell, but it reveals the grounds on which anyone may be sure that they are going to one and not the other.

Finally, the Bible's answers coalesce into a unified worldview — a view of all things: things past, present, and future; things above, upon, and beneath; things without and within; things human, angelic, and divine. Reality can be seen and understood as a whole through the biblical worldview. The entirety of this *philosophical unity* will require a lifetime — perhaps an eternity — to take in.

The natural and moral orders point to a personal God and His spiritual truth. The biblical order is evidence that the same God has put His truth in this one Book. If, then, you are not yet a Christian, please consider carefully the amazing unity of the Bible; perhaps for you it will become a bridge to the Christ it celebrates. If you are already a Christian, please keep that bridge in mind, for in a tight witnessing situation, with only seconds to explain why you believe the Bible is God's Word, it may be your only shot — and your best.

NOTES

1. *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*, college ed., s.v. "order."
2. This timeline reflects the view of traditional covenant (i.e., Reformed) theology, which sees salvation history as the outworking of an eternal covenant of grace between God and humanity. Traditional dispensational theology would draw the timeline somewhat differently. In this view, types in the Old Testament era foreshadow certain New Testament realities, but God maintains His purpose to fulfill His promises to Israel literally. All would agree, however, in representing salvation history as the administration of a single Christ-centered plan in two basic eras: one of promise, the other of fulfillment.
3. Dispensational theology holds that although Jews and Gentiles are spiritually united in Christ as the people of God, the nation Israel maintains an identity that is distinct from the church in God's plan.

Table 1

TYPES OF CHRIST AND THE COVENANT

OT REFERENCE	TYPE	ANTI-TYPE (Fulfillment)	NT REFERENCE
PEOPLE			
Gen. 3	Adam	Christ, head and progenitor of God's heavenly people	Rom. 5:14; 1 Cor. 15:45
Gen. 14:18–20	Melchizedek	Christ, eternal king-priest without predecessor	Heb. 5:8–10; 7:1–17
Num. 12:7; Deut. 18:15	Moses	Christ, faithful prophet and servant of God, mediator of the eternal covenant	Acts 3:20–22; Heb. 3:2–6
OBJECTS			
Num. 21:9	Bronze snake	Christ, elevated for dying people to look to for salvation	John 3:14–15
Exod. 16:11–15	Manna	Christ, bread of life for God's pilgrim people in the world	John 6:32–35
Exod. 12:3–6, 46; Num. 9:12; Ps. 34:20	Passover Lamb	Christ, slain to spare God's people from judgment	John 19:36; 1 Cor. 5:7; Heb. 10:4–10
PLACES			
Exod. 1–15	Egypt	The world, a place of bondage to sin	Acts 7; 1 Cor. 10; Rev. 11:8
Num.	Sinai Wilderness	The world, a place of hardship and testing	Matt. 4:1–11
Num. 14	Canaan	The new heaven and earth, future inheritance of God's people	Rom. 4; Heb. 11
EVENTS			
Gen. 6–9	The Flood	The judgment of God, through which Christ the ark of God delivers the people of God	Luke 17:20–37; 1 Pet. 3:18–22
Gen. 22, 24	Sacrifice of Isaac	The sacrifice of God's only Son by the Father, offered on wood and received back from the dead	John 3:16; Heb. 11:17–19
Exod.; Num.; Deut.	Exodus	The deliverance of God's people from bondage to sin by a Redeemer who leads them through hardship to a new heaven and earth	Matt. 2:14–15; 1 Cor. 10:1–11; Heb. 3:7–19; 4:1–11; 11:23–40; Jude 1:4–5

See Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Topical Analysis of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 72–78.