


NAXOS
AudioBooks

**NON-
FICTION**

RELIGION



The Old Testament

Selections from

The Bible

(The Authorized Version)

Read by

Philip Madoc

Anton Lesser

Michael Sheen

Josette Simon

NA609112D

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65	Belshazzar's Feast (Daniel 5) +	6:58
66	Daniel in the Lion's Den (Daniel 6) +	6:14
67	Jonah and the Whale (Jonah) *	9:55

Total time 7:46:13

- * Read by Philip Madoc + Read by Anton Lesser
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The Old Testament

Selections from

The Bible

(The Authorized Version)

The Bible – in this case, the *Old Testament* – may be read in many different ways, but perhaps the most obvious are: as a religious document containing truths and teachings which the reader discovers or confirms for himself; as evidence of historical events, or the origin of important myths; and as literature. We hope that this selection of stories and poetry from the *Old Testament* will be interesting and pleasurable to readers of any religious persuasion, or none at all: the narrative power and beauty of language are self-evident, especially in the Authorized Version, which we have used throughout.

Perhaps surprisingly, the oldest surviving texts of the *Old Testament* are not written in Hebrew but in Samaritan, Aramaic and Greek – the latter (dating from the third century BC and called the Septuagint) being probably the most significant. Jerome's Latin version (the Vulgate, including the *New Testament*) is of course of later date.

Before the invention of the printing press,

and in an era when few could read, the Bible was effectively available in full only to educated clerics, of whom one or two made translations into English of various sections – there are, for instance, the Lindisfarne Gospels and Aelfric's translation of the *Old Testament* from the tenth century – but it was only in the fourteenth century that complete English versions of the Bible appeared, done by Wyclif and his followers. The Reformation provided the vital impetus for the production of scholarly and accurate Bibles in the vernacular: for Protestants, it was essential that every believer should, if possible, have access to his own Bible and hence the capacity to develop a personal rather than institutionally-imposed understanding of it. Tyndale began the process in England, and his Bible formed the basis for the later (and definitive) Authorized Version of 1611 – the 'King James' Bible.

This was in part promoted by James himself and was begun in 1604. Teams of

revisers drawn from a total of forty-seven scholars were allocated sections of the text, and it is remarkable that a text of such beauty and consistency should emerge from a 'committee' system. Since its publication it has been generally acknowledged as not only a masterpiece of scholarship but also a literary text of astonishing and abiding value. It might be worth adding that its supposed difficulty or obscurity is much exaggerated by proponents of modern translations: it is, in fact, more often, most simply and directly rendered.

The Old Testament as History

The *Old Testament* gives us, as well as the Jewish description of the Creation of the World and its earliest times – description which non-fundamentalists will read as myth – a mass of stories about the triumphs and tribulations of the Jewish people, stories which taken together amount to a history spanning more than a thousand years. Abraham and Moses may not be historical figures in the same way as Queen Victoria, but it is difficult to believe that some great leader did not provide the original for the portraits we find in the *Old Testament*. With David, history begins to suggest some facts – and it seems that he

must have been a person of extraordinary character and talent, even if we accept that not all the Psalms are actually his. In 605 BC, Nebuchadnezzar became King of Babylon; in 597 BC the Babylonian captivity of the Jews began, and in 586 BC Jerusalem fell. Eventually the Jews were given leave to return to Judaea. By the time Pompey marched into Jerusalem in 63 BC, the *Old Testament* (or rather, part of it – the Pentateuch) was well established as the Jewish Bible. Then, in after years, the Septuagint – the Greek version of the *Old Testament* – was accepted by Christians as 'their' *Old Testament*.

The Old Testament: its organisation, and this selection

The *Old Testament* is conventionally divided into the following sections:

The Books of the Law – the 'Pentateuch' *Genesis* tells of the Creation, of Abraham coming to Palestine, of Isaac and Jacob, and of Joseph in Egypt. *Exodus* gives the story of Moses and the Exodus, of the Covenant at Mount Sinai and the Ten Commandments. *Leviticus* is devoted to God's laws for his

people. *Numbers* includes the 'organization of the people' and the appointment of Aaron as high priest. *Deuteronomy* concludes the story of Moses with a renewal of the laws and Moses's farewell.

The first sixteen stories in our selection are from the Pentateuch and form a more or less continuous narrative from the Creation to the giving of the Commandments.

The Historical Books: First Series

Joshua describes the entry into the Promised Land (including the destruction of Jericho). *Judges* includes the stories associated with Samson. *Ruth* tells of the girl of Midian who became an Israelite. *1 Samuel* and *2 Samuel* give the stories of Samuel the prophet, of Saul the first king, and of David's reign. *1 Kings* and *2 Kings* feature Solomon, Elijah and his successor Elisha, the fall of Jerusalem and the Captivity. Twenty-three of our stories come from this section of the Bible, with a strong emphasis on the first kings, Saul and David, and on the prophets Elijah and Elisha.

The Historical Books: Second Series *1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*

We have not selected from this section, partly because much of it is genealogical or prophetic rather than narrative.

The Poetical Books

Job is the story of a man's faith tested to the limit by his God. *The Psalms* are expressions of prayer, thanksgiving or praise. *Proverbs* and *Ecclesiastes* offer wise counsel on life and morality. *The Song of Solomon* is a poem of refined eroticism. We have chosen from *Job*, *The Psalms* and *Proverbs*. The *Song of Solomon* is included virtually complete.

The Longer Books of the Prophets

Isaiah, *Jeremiah*, *Lamentations*, *Ezekiel* and *Daniel* mainly concern the sins of Israel and their punishment through the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian captivity.

Stories from *Daniel* are included because of their familiarity and narrative vividness.

The Shorter Books of the Prophets

Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi.

We include *Jonah* complete.

The aim of this selection is to give the listener an experience of the *Old Testament* as narrative and as literature. I have started by including the generally accepted favourites, the stories which any child brought up in the Christian tradition would be familiar with; the selection is then broadened to encompass great historical moments in the history of the Jewish people, such as the Exodus and the Ten Commandments; and then I wanted to include some of the finest poetry of the *Old Testament* – the Song of Solomon, and a choice of Psalms.

The Creation of the World. The story unfolds with great regularity and formal control – at first, almost every verse begins with ‘And God...’; God’s power is thus suggested. The emphasis is on hierarchy, with Adam and Eve given ‘dominion...over every living thing’. (Genesis 1–2)

Adam and Eve. The tragedy of the fall, which by God’s grace will be turned into the ‘comedy’ of Christ’s redemption of

mankind. The story is both brilliantly concrete (‘And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day’) and chillingly absolute: ‘for dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return’. The story of Cain and Abel graphically demonstrates man’s fallen state by describing the first murder. Yet it also introduces the notion of the family and the ultimate spread of humanity – Eve gives birth to Seth, and the future of the race seems assured. (Genesis 3–4)

Noah’s Flood. The story of Noah is really the first in which stress is laid on the important notion of a covenant between God and Man: man will be punished if he sins against his God, but equally God offers his favour to man if he abides by his will: ‘God blessed Noah and his sons, and said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth.’ Man has another chance... (Genesis 6–9)

The Story of Abraham. God promises to make Abraham the father of a ‘great nation’, a ‘father of many nations’. Abraham and his wife Sarah are also promised a child by the Lord, although Sarah is long past child-bearing age... (Genesis 11–17)

Cities of the Plain. Further evidence of

God's terrifying power to destroy human wickedness is given in the vividly-told story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Only Lot is saved from 'brimstone and fire' – even his wife, because she looks back sadly at her old home, is turned to 'a pillar of salt'. (Genesis 18–19)

Abraham and Isaac. Sarah, as promised by God, bears a son, Isaac. God 'tempts' Abraham by ordering him to make a burnt offering of his own most precious son. At the last minute Isaac is reprieved and Abraham promised increased blessing. The story is a powerful and disturbing one, perhaps because to some listeners it may seem a perversely harsh way of testing a man's loyalty to his God. One might compare it with the story of Job (No. 41 in this collection). (Genesis 21–22)

Esau and Jacob. The story of Rebekah's twin sons. Jacob, the younger, prevails over Esau with the help of Rebekah, whose favourite he is. What seems like trickery and injustice is set in the larger context of God's purposes. Nevertheless, Jacob is forced to flee to avoid his brother's wrath when he finds he has been cheated out of his birthright. (Genesis 25–27)

Jacob's Ladder. One of those mysterious and haunting passages of the *Old*

Testament in which man comes into the presence of God: 'This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.' Here God communicates his promise to Jacob that 'the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed.' (Genesis 28)

The Coat of Many Colours. Joseph is Jacob's favourite son, 'because he was the son of his old age' – a touch typical of the way in which the *Old Testament* is not only concerned with families and their generations, but also with realistic emotional issues that arise within them. Equally realistic – and terrible – is the jealous response of Joseph's brothers, who threaten to kill him but eventually allow him to fall into servitude in Egypt, a servitude which of course will ultimately lead to Joseph's triumph. (Genesis 37)

Joseph in Egypt. Joseph, the interpreter of dreams, finds favour with Pharaoh and is 'set...over all the land of Egypt'. When his chance to revenge himself on his brothers comes, during the 'years of dearth', Joseph is powerfully compelled by his feelings for the youngest, Benjamin, to leave the room: 'for his bowels did yearn upon his brother; and he sought where to weep; and he entered into his chamber, and wept there.'

The whole story is a fascinating study of power within the family and the state. (Genesis 39–47)

Moses and the Exodus. This is a long and remarkable story, from Moses' birth and miraculous preservation to the eventual escape from Egypt, Pharaoh's resistance having finally been broken by the terrible destruction of the first-born. These last pages are extraordinarily dramatic, with the blood-marked door frames, the terror of the Egyptians – 'there was a great cry in Egypt' – the solemn ushering in of the Passover, and the hasty departure of the 'children of Israel'. (Exodus 1–12)

The Crossing of the Red Sea. The crossing of the Red Sea involves also the destruction of Pharaoh's cavalry and heralds the entry into the Promised Land – which Moses will see from afar, but not live to experience. Moses leads the Israelites through the wilderness, sustained by manna – the 'bread of heaven'. (Exodus 13–19)

The Tablets of Stone. This prepares the way for the presentation of the Ten Commandments. The covenant between God and his chosen people is renewed: the insistence here upon the absolute singleness of God is remarkable, and especially so in the ancient world – 'For thou shalt worship

no other God: for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God'. (Exodus 33–34)

The Ten Commandments. One of the greatest and most influential statements of the moral law in human history. Christian teaching may claim to have gone beyond the Commandments in its emphasis on mercy and forgiveness, but these rules nonetheless remain the basis for traditional Christian morality. (Deuteronomy 5)

Joshua and the Destruction of Jericho. It falls to Joshua, Moses's successor, to lead the children of Israel over the river Jordan into the Promised Land. Jericho's resistance is famously destroyed by the 'sound of the trumpet' and the people 'shouting with a great shout'. (Joshua 1–6)

Samson and the Philistines. It has been suggested that Samson 'is a sort of Hebrew Hercules, heroic, friendly, rather stupid, with a comic streak in him.' He is a figure who seems to belong as much to folklore as to history. (Judges 13–15)

Samson and Delilah. Samson falls victim to female wiles, but makes an end both heroic and tragic when he brings down the house (literally) on both himself and his Philistine tormentors. (Judges 16)

The Story of Ruth. This story tenderly evokes the pains of exile when Ruth the

Moabitess finds herself vulnerable and apparently alone in Israel. The resolution of this is beautifully handled, as Ruth finds that she too can belong... (Ruth)

Samuel's Vision. The child Samuel 'did not yet know the Lord', but 'ministers unto the Lord before Eli.' The Lord calls him three times in the night in one of those memorable and painful scenes typical of the *Old Testament* where one generation is being prepared to take over from another: Samuel the child must tell Eli the priest of the Lord's determination to destroy him and his sons for his sons' impiety – and Eli's inability to control them. God's justice can seem harsh at times. (1 Samuel 1–3)

The Anointing of Saul. Against Samuel's and, it seems, God's wishes, a king of Israel is anointed for the first time: Saul, who 'was higher than any of the people from his shoulders and upward.' (1 Samuel 8–11)

Saul Disobeys the Lord. The tragedy of Saul begins here, one of the most poignant, credible and remarkable stories of the *Old Testament*. Saul is clearly a highly emotional, erratic, impulsive man, capable of great generosity but equally a prey to his own insecurity. (1 Samuel 14–15)

The Anointing of David. The story of another of the great figures of the *Old*

Testament begins here, and will for a while entangle itself fascinatingly with that of Saul and Saul's son, Jonathan. David is chosen and anointed king by Samuel against all expectations – called in from his duties as shepherd to displace his older brothers. One is reminded of Cinderella... (1 Samuel 16)

David and Goliath. David is first brought to Saul's attention by his exploit against Goliath – a story too well known to require comment, but told with a delightfully effective simplicity and naturalness nevertheless. (1 Samuel 17)

David, Jonathan and Saul. Jonathan, Saul's elder son, loves David 'as his own soul'. He finds himself caught between loyalty to his father and his father's increasing jealousy of David, his anointed successor. More than once Saul seeks to slay David, and yet when David confronts him with this, his tears of remorse seem, and perhaps are, genuine. Such are the contradictions in this all too believable character. Finally, at Mount Gilboa, Saul and Jonathan die in battle. (1 Samuel 18)

David Laments Saul and Jonathan. Surely one of the greatest threnodies in any literature, as it circles around the haunting refrain 'How are the mighty fallen!' (2 Samuel 1)

King Solomon. A brief glimpse of Solomon, in his wisdom and magnificence. His creation of the Temple marks a high point in Jewish history – even if he fell away from his previous standards in his dotage... (1 Kings 2–11)

Ahab, and Elijah's Proof of the True God. Ahab exceeds in wickedness any of the kings who have gone before him, and points to a general decline in the obedience of the Israelites which eventually leads to the captivity and the fall of Jerusalem. But meanwhile Elijah upholds the standard God expects of his people and spectacularly routs the worshippers of Baal. (1 Kings 16–18)

God Appears to Elijah. Jezebel, Ahab's evil queen, threatens Elijah's life. Elijah in the wilderness encounters God in the 'still, small voice', and casts his mantle upon Elisha to mark him as his successor. (1 Kings 19)

Naboth's Vineyard. A classic story of power abused: goaded on by Jezebel, Ahab arranges to have the innocent Naboth stoned to death so that he may possess his vineyard. (1 Kings 21)

Elijah and Elisha. Elijah is carried up into heaven as Elisha cries in wonder, 'My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the

horses thereof...' (2 Kings 2)

Naaman is Cured of his Leprosy. Naaman, 'captain of the host of the king of Syria', must learn humility before he can be cured. In what might seem a cruel twist, Elisha's servant Gehazi is himself made a leper for his greed: 'he went out from his presence a leper as white as snow.' (2 Kings 5)

The Death of Jezebel. In a satisfying and brilliantly painted vignette, Jezebel is finally rewarded for her dreadful greed and cruelty: 'in the portion of Jezreel shall dogs eat the flesh of Jezebel.' The story moves to its climax with brutal directness. (2 Kings 8–9)

Isaiah and Sennacherib. As the prophet Isaiah foretells, the Assyrian host is destroyed during the reign of Hezekiah. (2 Kings 18–19)

The Fall of Jerusalem and the Captivity. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, becomes the instrument of God's wrath against the Jews. In poignant detail the ravages of Jerusalem's beauty are sketched. (2 Kings 23–24)

The Patience of Job. Some of the finest language of the Authorized Version is reserved for this sustained meditation on suffering, endurance and faith, a meditation

which is also a story. Job is terribly afflicted as part of what almost seems like a wager between God and Satan: he loses his children, his possessions and his servants, and yet he refuses to condemn God or abandon his faith. Surrounded by the famously complacent and unhelpful 'Job's comforters', he wins through to a restitution by God. On the way, some of the poetry attains sublime yet simple heights: 'Man that is born of woman is of few days, and full of trouble. He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down: he fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not.' (Job)

The Psalms. These range from the blissful simplicity of No. 23, 'The Lord is My Shepherd' to the sustained anguish of its predecessor, No. 22. This variety of mood is one of their chief glories, as also is the sense of a continuing dialogue between man and his God, whether that man be an individual (David himself) or whether the Psalms are (as is more likely) the product of several different writers. The idea of a personal God is strongly suggested, even if that God may also be terrible in his rage or his apparent abandonment of the suffering soul. (The Psalms)

The Proverbs of Solomon. This collection of gnomic sayings is often surprisingly

domestic in its style and subject matter. The writer has a firm grasp on the material world. (Proverbs)

The Song of Solomon. This astonishing piece of writing is quite unlike anything else in the *Old Testament*. Anxious theologians developed a tradition in which this openly (and beautifully) erotic poem was interpreted as an allegory of the union between Christ and his Church, but perhaps few would nowadays make this claim. Much of the work is set out as an amorous dialogue in which the lovers express their joy in and their yearning for each other. (Song of Solomon)

Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar's Dream. In the time of captivity Daniel and three others acquire a reputation with the king for wisdom and the interpretation of dreams. Reminiscent of Joseph and Pharaoh, Daniel is made 'a great man' and 'ruler over the whole province of Babylon'. (Daniel 1–2)

The Burning Fiery Furnace. Victims of jealousy, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, Daniel's compatriots, are consigned to the furnace but 'walk in the midst of the fire', unhurt. (Daniel 3)

Nebuchadnezzar Dreams Again. Nebuchadnezzar is led by Daniel to a truer understanding of God. (Daniel 4)

Belshazzar's Feast. King Belshazzar, who lacks his father's humility, is terrified by the mysterious writing upon the wall which is chillingly interpreted by Daniel as foretelling imminent disaster for the ruler: 'Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting'. (Daniel 5)

Daniel in the Lions' Den. Once more jealousy prevails and Daniel is put into the lions' den; once again, the innocent are protected by the true God and he emerges unscathed. (Daniel 6)

Jonah and the Whale. Jonah finds that there is no escape from the will of the Lord, in a story which mingles charm and morality in equal parts. (Jonah)

The Old Testament and European Civilization

Although one might assume that the *New Testament* might be by far the more important influence on European culture since the time of Christ, this is in fact not so, especially since the time of the Reformation when the Bible as a whole increasingly became available to lay as well as clerical readers. The Protestant movement rediscovered the *Old Testament* and found in it a powerful ethic of judgement which often suited its spirit and

purposes: one has only to look at Milton's *Paradise Lost*, for instance, with not only its basis in the story of the Creation and Fall but also its multiple reference to names and events of the *Old Testament* to see that this was so. An example would be the epic simile by which he compares the destruction of Pharaoh's 'Memphian Chivalry' in the crossing of the Red Sea to the fallen angels rolling, defeated, on the floor of Hell.

One should not, of course, suggest that the Catholic Church or the art it sponsored was uninterested in the *Old Testament* – Michelangelo's frescoes in the Sistine Chapel would dispel such an idea on their own, or one might cite Chaucer's witty quotation of the Song of Solomon in *The Merchant's Tale*, where the corrupt old hero defiles the pure eroticism of the original by using it to entice his beautiful young wife into the garden he has created so that they may perform amorous rites not possible in bed...

Later writers such as William Blake found in the style as well as the content of the *Old Testament* a powerful model for their own mystical and visionary philosophy. Even a poet we think of as almost pagan in his emphasis on sensuality – Keats – could refer most movingly to the story of Ruth the exile

in his *Ode to a Nightingale*, where her imagined response to the song of the nightingale brings the ancient and modern worlds together: 'Perhaps the self-same song that found a path/ Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,/ She stood in tears amid the alien corn...' In the twentieth century, Wilfred Owen makes powerful use of the story of Abraham's imminent sacrifice of Isaac to stress the horrific destruction of a generation in the First World War: Owen, his religious faith by now a fragile thing, dreadfully replaces the original 'happy ending' with Abraham's refusal to give up the murderous sacrifice – 'But the old man would not so, but slew his son,/ And half the seed of Europe, one by one.'

The *Old Testament* has offered composers of choral music wonderful opportunities for oratorios of the most dramatic kind – Handel is an obvious example, with many works besides the incomparable *Messiah* (which includes much use of *Old Testament* texts), but in our own century we find also, for example, the vivid brilliance of Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast* to confirm that the tradition is not yet dead. The truth is that our language, our literature, our art and our music are saturated with a sense of the book which, before all others, formed our culture in pre-secular ages.

Notes by Perry Keenlyside



Philip Madoc's extensive theatre work has encompassed many principal Shakespearean roles, including Iago and Antony as well as nineteenth and twentieth-century drama. His TV credits include *Fortunes of War*, *Brookside* and his own detective series, *A Mind To Kill*. He is regularly heard on radio and also reads *The Death of Arthur*, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, *Canterbury Tales* and *The Arabian Nights* for Naxos AudioBooks.



Anton Lesser has played many of the principal Shakespearean roles for the Royal Shakespeare Company, including Petruchio, Romeo and Richard III. He has starred in the Royal National Theatre production of *Wild Oats*. Appearances in major TV drama productions include *The Mill on the Floss* and *The Politician's Wife*. His readings for Naxos AudioBooks include *Paradise Lost*, *The Odyssey*, *The Iliad*, *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Great Expectations*.



Michael Sheen is one of Britain's most exciting actors – since leaving RADA he has played parts as varied as Romeo, Jimmy Porter and Peer Gynt in London, Japan and throughout Europe. His film credits include *Mary Reilly* and *Othello* with Kenneth Branagh. He also reads *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the role of Valmont in *Dangerous Liaisons* for Naxos AudioBooks.



Josette Simon has performed major roles for the RSC including Isabella in *Measure for Measure* and Rosaline in *Love's Labours Lost*. She won several awards (including the Evening Standard Best Actress Award) for the role of Maggie in the Royal National Theatre's production of *After The Fall* as well as two more for her work in the film *Milk and Honey*. Other film credits include *Cry Freedom* and *A Child from the South*.

The music on this recording is taken from the NAXOS catalogue

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Music programming by Nicolas Soames

Cover picture: The Ancient of Days by William Blake (1757–1828).
Courtesy of The Bridgeman Art Library, London.

The Old Testament

Selections from **The Bible** (The Authorized Version)

Read by **Philip Madoc • Anton Lesser**
Michael Sheen • Josette Simon

Here are the greatest and best-loved stories from the Old Testament of the Bible, stories which can be read as much for their human, literary and historical appeal as for their religious meaning.

The selection ranges from childhood favourites like David and Goliath, to key moments in Jewish history (such as the Exodus), and also includes some of the finest poetry in the Old Testament (the Song of Solomon, for example). Until the invention of the printing press and the coming of the Reformation, the Bible was effectively the preserve of the clergy. Now you can enjoy on CD some of the most important and compelling writings known to man.

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