

# “Old Testament History”

Joshua-Esther; 2 Chronicles 7:14, 36:15-16 <sup>1</sup>

The second group of books in our Bible is “Old Testament History,” which records the events of nearly a thousand years. In general, these twelve books discuss six topics:

1. Israel’s entry into the Promised Land under Joshua;
2. Israel’s life in the Land under the judges and the transition from theocracy to monarchy;
3. The division of the nation into the rival kingdoms of Israel and Judah;
4. The decline and downfall of both kingdoms;
5. Judah’s life in Babylonian exile; and
6. Judah’s return from exile.

Whereas the Torah took us through the first four of God’s seven covenants, the historical books take us through God’s fifth covenant, the covenant with David and his successors for all time. Let’s jump right in . . . .

## JOSHUA

Whereas **Numbers** gives the history of the wilderness wandering under Moses, **Joshua** gives the account of the conquest of Canaan under Joshua, Moses’ assistant and successor. Opinions vary about whether this conquest was sudden and cataclysmic or more gradual and infiltrative. Whichever it was, Israel never did succeed in expelling the previous occupants of the land completely, nor did Israel ever truly serve the Lord with all their hearts.

### **Joshua 3:15-17**

<sup>15</sup> Now the Jordan is at flood stage all during harvest. Yet as soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water’s edge, <sup>16</sup> the water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap a great distance away, at a town called Adam in the vicinity of Zarethan, while the water flowing down to the Sea of the Arabah (that is, the Dead Sea) was completely cut off. So the people crossed over opposite Jericho. <sup>17</sup> The priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD stopped in the middle of the Jordan and stood on dry ground, while all Israel passed by until the whole nation had completed the crossing on dry ground.

Just as God affirmed Moses’ leadership by the miracle of crossing the Red Sea, God affirmed Joshua’s leadership by a similarly miraculous crossing of the Jordan River at flood stage as Israel entered the Promised Land at last.

### **Joshua 5:12**

<sup>12</sup> The manna stopped the day after they ate this food from the land; there was no longer any manna for the Israelites, but that year they ate the produce of Canaan.

The manna in the wilderness, whatever it was, was truly miraculous. On every day but the Sabbath, the manna would become filled with maggots by the next morning, such that fresh manna was needed every day;<sup>2</sup> but on the Sabbath, that same manna would remain good for two days . . . and then the manna ceased altogether as soon as Israel entered the land “flowing with milk and honey.”

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on June 30, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> The manna placed in the Ark at God’s command was similarly preserved (Exodus 16:11-35).

**Joshua 6:20**

*<sup>20</sup> When the trumpets sounded, the army shouted, and at the sound of the trumpet, when the men gave a loud shout, the wall collapsed; so everyone charged straight in, and they took the city.*

The miraculous conquest of Jericho is probably the best-known event in Joshua.

**Joshua 24:15, 23**

*<sup>15</sup> But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”*  
*<sup>23</sup> “Now then,” said Joshua, “throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.”*

One of the sad things that recurs again and again in Israel’s story is their reluctance and refusal to put away their idols and serve the Lord alone. We, too, serve the Lord with divided hearts far more often than not.

**JUDGES**

Between the death of Joshua and the establishment of Israel’s monarchy, there intervened a period of about 350 years during which the nation’s leadership consisted of a succession of twelve Judges who represented God with widely-varying degrees of holiness and effectiveness. You’ve likely heard of Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson, but how familiar are you with Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon?

The basic outline of **Judges** repeats a four-fold cycle over and over: (1) the people commit spiritual rebellion and apostasy; (2) God exercises judgment on the people in various ways; (3) God raises up a judge who leads the people to repentance and renewal; (4) the people live under God’s blessing for a time but soon lapse into rebellion and apostasy once more (Judges 2:18-19).

**Judges 2:10**

*<sup>10</sup> After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel.*

In this one sentence is reflected the failure of an entire generation to pass faith and obedience on to their children. In our day, as well, we are never more than one generation away from spiritual collapse . . . and I fear that we are well on our way.

**Judges 6:36-40**

*<sup>36</sup> Gideon said to God, “If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised—<sup>37</sup> look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you said.”<sup>38</sup> And that is what happened. Gideon rose early the next day; he squeezed the fleece and wrung out the dew—a bowlful of water. . . .*

**Judges 16:28**

*<sup>28</sup> Then Samson prayed to the LORD, “Sovereign LORD, remember me. Please, God, strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes.”*

Gideon’s fleece and Samson’s escapades are probably the best-known events in Judges.

**Judges 21:25**

<sup>25</sup> *In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.*

This sentence represents not only the last words in Judges but also a fitting summary of its message.

**RUTH**

The book of **Ruth** is a lovely short love story whose chief function in Scripture is to identify some of the ancestry of King David.

**Ruth 4:21-22**

<sup>21</sup> *Salmon the father of Boaz, Boaz the father of Obed,*

<sup>22</sup> *Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David.*

Ruth and Boaz were the great-grandparents of King David, through whose line the Covenant Promise and the Messiah would come.

**Ruth 1:16-17**

<sup>16</sup> *But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. <sup>17</sup> Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me."*

This may be the most famous affirmation of devotion known to the world.

**1 & 2 SAMUEL**

In the original Hebrew versions of the Old Testament, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, and Ezra-Nehemiah were all single books instead of pairs of books. Current English versions of the Hebrew Scriptures divide the books in the ways in which we are accustomed to seeing them, although they appear in a different order.

The book of **1 Samuel** records the life and ministry of Samuel, the last of Israel's judges, and the reign of Saul, Israel's first king, recording the nation's shift from theocracy to monarchy.

**1 Samuel 2:26**

<sup>26</sup> *And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the LORD and with people.*

Luke 2:52 uses almost the exact same words to describe Jesus.

**1 Samuel 3:1-10**

<sup>1</sup> *The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions. . . . <sup>7</sup> Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. <sup>8</sup> A third time the LORD called, "Samuel!"*

*And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." Then Eli realized that the LORD was calling the boy. <sup>9</sup> So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.' " So Samuel went and lay down in his place.*

<sup>10</sup> *The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."*

Samuel's first word from the Lord is one of the better-known events in 1 Samuel. While Samuel had to learn to recognize the Lord's voice, as do we all, it's important to recognize that when God speaks to us, the content is often quite specific (cp. 1 Samuel 9:15-17, 16:7).

### **1 Samuel 17:45-47**

<sup>45</sup> *David said to the Philistine, “You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. <sup>46</sup> This day the LORD will deliver you into my hands, and I’ll strike you down and cut off your head. This very day I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds and the wild animals, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. <sup>47</sup> All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves; for the battle is the LORD’s, and he will give all of you into our hands.”*

David’s destruction of Goliath, the Philistine giant, is a powerful example of courage and of trust in God.

The sequel of **2 Samuel** tells the story of David’s reign as a powerful warrior king who united the nation and considerably extended its borders and influence. Although the Bible says that David was “a man after God’s own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14), it was true then, as it is now, that power wields a powerfully corrupting influence over the human heart. David’s story can perhaps be told in just two verses, the first of which speaks of his power, the second of his arrogance and sin:

### **2 Samuel 5:4**

<sup>4</sup> *David was thirty years old when he became king, and he reigned forty years.*

### **2 Samuel 12:7**

<sup>7</sup> *Then Nathan said to David, “You are the man!”*

## **1 & 2 KINGS**

While David was exemplary in many ways, he was not effective as either a husband or as a father. Jealousy, intrigue, immorality and murder were never far from his household.

Solomon, David’s second child with Bathsheba, became king after him, and Solomon enjoyed both prosperity and wealth, extending the kingdom to its farthest reaches and building the first Temple in Jerusalem to replace the Tabernacle that had been in use since the Exodus. Even so, Solomon followed in his father’s philandering ways and seems to have been equally ineffective as a father.

Very shortly after Solomon’s death, the United Kingdom split in two, with the ten northern tribes rejecting the Davidic dynasty and creating their own kingdom of Israel. The two southern tribes, Judah and Benjamin, remained under Davidic kings.

The book of **1 Kings** records Solomon’s reign, the division of the kingdom, and the powerful ministry of the prophet Elijah in the northern kingdom, ministry that included such memorable scenes as the showdown with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel and the confrontation with God shortly thereafter at Mount Sinai (chapters 18-19).

### **1 Kings 9:4-5**

<sup>4</sup> *“As for you, if you walk before me faithfully with integrity of heart and uprightness, as David your father did, and do all I command and observe my decrees and laws, <sup>5</sup> I will establish your royal throne over Israel forever, as I promised David your father when I said, ‘You shall never fail to have a successor on the throne of Israel.’*

This is God’s reaffirmation of the Davidic Covenant that would eventually be fulfilled in Jesus.

The sequel of **2 Kings** begins with Elijah's transport to heaven in a chariot of fire and continues with the prophetic ministry of Elisha. The book includes the famous story of Naaman's healing of leprosy and more horses and chariots of fire that protect Elisha from enemy attack; but the preponderance of the book chronicles the sad stories of three hundred years of wicked leadership in both Israel and Judah.

The seventeen prophetic books at the end of the Old Testament record God's many efforts to turn the people back from rebellion and destruction during the period recorded in 2 Kings, but such reform was not to be. In the end, the northern kingdom was exiled to Assyria in 722 B.C., never to be heard from again. The southern kingdom would last a little longer, but would go into exile in Babylon in 587 B.C.

### **2 Kings 17:23**

<sup>23</sup> *So the people of Israel were taken from their homeland into exile in Assyria, and they are still there.*

### **2 Kings 25:21**

<sup>21</sup> *So Judah went into captivity, away from her land.*

## **1 & 2 CHRONICLES**

If Leviticus doesn't derail your journey through the Scriptures, the genealogies with which **1 Chronicles** begins are often sufficient to bring such progress to a halt. The eyes of most Westerners begin to glaze over after just a few verses of what we perceive to be genealogical trivia; and yet there is method to such madness.

Unlike the books thus far, the remainder of the historical books were written after the Exile, and not before it, and that changes everything. For the most part, 1 Chronicles parallels 2 Samuel and serves as a commentary on it, while 2 Chronicles parallels 1 & 2 Kings and serves as a commentary on those books.

The Chronicler wrote to address some urgent questions concerning the identity of Israel and to instill fresh confidence in the people. After being away from their homeland for several generations, the returning exiles found themselves unwelcome interlopers in a political system that had learned to get along without them very well indeed. Jerusalem and its magnificent Temple were in ruins, and the returning exiles were refugees in nearly every sense of the word.

The genealogies that begin the work trace Israel's ancestry all the way back to Adam, reminding the discouraged repatriates that their nation has been at the center of God's purpose from the very beginning of creation. Although they were now no more than a shadow of Israel's former glory, the genealogies reminded them of their divinely-blessed heritage and of God's covenant that has given the land to Abraham's descendants forever (2 Chronicles 20:6-7).

The Chronicler's retelling of Israel's glory and rebellion served to remind the returning exiles that, while they were demonstrably the heirs of David and were still God's Chosen People, obedience to God's covenant requirements was still essential if they were to succeed:

### **2 Chronicles 7:14**

<sup>14</sup> *If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.*

It is also in Chronicles that we learn that Solomon's Temple (and the Second Temple, parts of which remain to this day) was built on Mount Moriah, that mountain where Abraham had been prepared to sacrifice Isaac, but God provided a sacrifice in Isaac's place (2 Chronicles 3:1).

Indeed, the entire sacrificial structure was designed from the first to point to the Lamb of God who had already been “*slain from the creation of the world*” (Revelation 13:8).

## EZRA

We know of three significant groups of Jews who returned to Palestine after the Babylonian Captivity. One group, led by Zerubbabel, returned in 538 B.C. Ezra led the second group that returned in 458 B.C., and Nehemiah led a third return in 445 B.C.

These repatriates returned as strangers to a land that had a population of Jews who had not been taken into exile together with persons of other ethnic origins who had begun to settle there. In addition, the leaders in Samaria (the old northern capital) who now held power resented the resurgence of Jerusalem as a separate administrative and political center.

The returnees therefore found themselves in a hostile political environment in which their ethnic distinctiveness as a people uniquely dedicated to Yahweh was greatly compromised. The major post-exilic emphases, then, had to do with racial and ethnic purity (hence the genealogies), faithfulness in worship (hence the rebuilding of the Temple), and faithfulness in keeping God’s Law (so as not to come under God’s judgment yet again).

### Ezra 3:10-12

<sup>10</sup> *When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites (the sons of Asaph) with cymbals, took their places to praise the LORD, as prescribed by David king of Israel. . . .* <sup>12</sup> *But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy.*

Because it was essentially built by poor refugees in a hostile environment, the Second Temple was not much compared with the grandeur of Solomon’s Temple. Herod would later curry favor with the Jews by investing huge sums of government money in making the Temple glorious once again.

### Ezra 6:14-15

<sup>14</sup> *So the elders of the Jews continued to build and prosper under the preaching of **Haggai** the prophet and **Zechariah**, a descendant of Iddo. They finished building the temple according to the command of the God of Israel and the decrees of Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes, kings of Persia.* <sup>15</sup> *The temple was completed on the third day of the month Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.*

Of all the prophets, only Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi were post-exilic. Like the prophets before the exile, these three continued to call the people back to the true and wholehearted worship of God. The second Temple was dedicated in the spring of 516 B.C.

## NEHEMIAH

Nehemiah was a Jewish exile who rose to high position in the court of Artaxerxes I, the Emperor of Persia (the Persians had conquered the Babylonians). Although the repatriates in Palestine had rebuilt the Temple some seventy years before, their failure to repair the protective walls of Jerusalem left them still vulnerable to their hostile neighbors.

With the Emperor’s blessing, Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem in 445 B.C., thirteen years after Ezra’s return. Marshalling the Jews to concerted effort, Nehemiah was able to get the walls back to passable shape in just fifty-two days of herculean labor “*from the first light of dawn until the stars came out*” (Nehemiah 4:21).

Once the wall was completed, Nehemiah worked with Ezra to call the people back to holy living. It was especially problematic that the people had begun once again to intermarry with the local pagans and were no longer diligent about keeping the Sabbath.

### **Nehemiah 8:5, 8, 10**

<sup>5</sup> *Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. . . .* <sup>8</sup> *They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read. . . .*

<sup>10</sup> *Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, **for the joy of the LORD is your strength.**”*

This passage records the reading of the Law to the people and their covenant to take its provisions more seriously. This passage is also the origin of the practice in some congregations to stand when God’s Word is read.

## **ESTHER**

Although **Esther** follows Nehemiah in biblical order, the events recorded in Esther precede the events in Nehemiah by about thirty years. The book of Esther explains the origins of the Feast of Purim, which celebrates the rescue of the Jews from attempted genocide. If the proposed genocide had succeeded, the Jewish people as a whole would have been destroyed, and the story of God’s saving work in and through Abraham’s descendants would have come to an end.

Esther is one of only two biblical books named for women (the other is **Ruth**). The book is unusual in that in its original form, there is no name, title, or pronoun referring to God.

“The book of Esther is a story par excellence. It has virtually all the ingredients that people through the ages have most loved in a story—a beautiful and courageous heroine, a romantic love thread, a dire threat to the good characters, a thoroughly evil villain, suspense, dramatic irony, evocative descriptions of exotic places, sudden reversal of action, poetic justice, and a happy ending.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Esther 4:12-16**

<sup>12</sup> *When Esther’s words were reported to Mordecai, <sup>13</sup> he sent back this answer: “Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews will escape. <sup>14</sup> For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. **And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?**”*

<sup>15</sup> *Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: <sup>16</sup> “Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. **When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.**”*

Mordecai’s famous challenge and Esther’s courageous response continue to inspire courageous obedience among God’s people to this very day.

After this quick overview of the historical books, I invite your attention now to the three verses that actually are the text for the morning:

<sup>3</sup> *ESV Study Bible*, p. 852.

<sup>14</sup> *“If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land”* (2 Chronicles 7:14).

<sup>15</sup> *The LORD, the God of their ancestors, sent word to them through his messengers again and again, because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling place.* <sup>16</sup> *But they mocked God’s messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the LORD was aroused against his people and there was no remedy* (2 Chronicles 36:15-16).

Now fast forward to Ezra’s return to Jerusalem after the exile. When Ezra returned to Judah from Babylon, he was told,

<sup>1</sup> *The leaders came to me and said, “The people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples with their detestable practices, like those of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites.* <sup>2</sup> *They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness”* (Ezra 9:1-2).

Ezra himself was not guilty of the particular sin in question, but he recognized it as a huge problem for the nation. Here’s how he responded: <sup>3</sup> *When I heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled.* <sup>4</sup> *Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel gathered around me because of this unfaithfulness of the exiles. And I sat there appalled until the evening sacrifice.* <sup>5</sup> *Then, at the evening sacrifice, I rose from my self-abasement, with my tunic and cloak torn, and fell on my knees with my hands spread out to the LORD my God* <sup>6</sup> *and prayed: “I am too ashamed and disgraced, my God, to lift up my face to you, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens”* (Ezra 9:3-6).

<sup>1</sup> *While Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a large crowd of Israelites—men, women and children—gathered around him. They too wept bitterly* (Ezra 10:1).

There’s a lot more to the text than this, but here’s the picture: when Ezra learned about the sins of his people, he fell to his knees, recognizing their sin to be a very serious matter. He knew that “a little leaven leavens the whole loaf,” and sin in any part of an individual’s life, or sin in any part of a nation’s life, will, in time, contaminate the whole.

Identifying with the sins of his people, Ezra expressed shame for their sin, fear of the consequences of that sin, yearning that his people would come to their senses and repent, and hope that God would have mercy on them rather than send the judgment they obviously deserved. Ezra saw the danger and called his people to a time of fasting, prayer, and repentance.

Doubtlessly, there were many in the nation who did not respond to Ezra’s call to prayer, but those who did “stood in the gap” for the rest. The metaphor of “standing in the gap” comes from Ezekiel, where God said, *“I looked for someone who might rebuild the wall of righteousness that guards the land. I searched for someone to stand in the gap in the wall so I wouldn’t have to destroy the land, but I found no one”* (Ezekiel 22:30, NLT).

It doesn’t necessarily take a lot of people to stand in the gap for a nation. God told Abraham that Sodom would be spared if only ten righteous people were to be found in it (Genesis 18:32). May God help us to be those people!