

Introduction to the Historical Books

I. The Jewish Canon of Scripture

- A. The Hebrew canon is divided differently from that of the *Septuagint* (the latter arrangement is followed by English Bibles). There are three divisions:
1. **Torah** (law)
 2. **Nebi'im** (prophets)
 3. **Kethubim** (writings)
- B. The *Prophets* divide into two groups:
1. **Former Prophets** (Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings) and
 2. **Latter Prophets** (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and “The Twelve” [our “minor prophets”])
- C. What we classify as the “**Historical Books**” are those of the “Former Prophets” as well as a few from the “Writings” (Ruth, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther)
1. The “Former Prophets” are so called because their authors were prophets, or preserved prophetic traditions
 2. Originally, Samuel, Kings and Chronicles (two volumes each in the LXX), existed as single volumes.

II. Old Testament History Divisions

- A. Conquest and occupation of Palestine as “amphictyony” (“a league of neighbors”)—355 years**
1. Joshua (1451–1425 B.C. — 25 years?)
 2. Judges (1425-1095 B.C. — 330 years)
- B. The Monarchy Period—510 years**
1. Samuel / 1 Chronicles (United 1095-975 B.C. —120 years)
 2. Kings / 2 Chronicles (Divided 975-586 B.C. — 390 years)
- C. Babylonian servitude** (606-536 B.C. — 70 years)
- D. Restoration Period—94 years**
1. Ezra (536-467 B.C. — 69 years)
 2. Nehemiah (455-442 B.C. 13 years)
 3. Esther (519–508 B.C. — 11 years; fits within the time covered in Ezra)

III. Supplemental and parallel sources mentioned in the books

- The Book of Jashar (Josh. 10:13)
The Book of the Acts of Solomon (1 Kings 11:41)
The Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel (1 Kings 14:19; 2 Chron. 33:18)
The Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah (1 Kings 14:29)
The Book of the Kings of Israel (1 Chron. 9:1 / 2 Chron.20:34)
The Account of the Chronicles of King David (1 Chron. 27:24)
The Book of Samuel the Seer (1 Chron. 29:29)
The Book of Nathan the Prophet (1 Chron. 29:29/ 2 Chron.9:29)
The Book of Gad the Seer (1 Chron. 29:29)
The Prophecy of Ahijah the Shilonite (2 Chron. 9:29)
The Visions of Iddo the Seer (2 Chron. 9:29)
The Book of Shemaiah the Prophet and of Iddo the Seer (2 Chron. 12:15)
The Annals of the Prophet Iddo (2 Chron. 13:22)
The Book of the Kings of Judah and Israel (2 Chron. 16:11)
The Book of Jehu the son of Hanani (2 Chron. 20:34)
The Annals of the Book of the Kings (2 Chron. 24:27)
The Book of the Kings of Israel and Judah (2 Chron. 27:7)
The Sayings of Hozai (LXX: “the Seers”) (2 Chron. 33:19)
The Laments (2 Chron. 35:25)
The Book of the Chronicles (Neh. 12:23)
The Book of the Records of the Chronicles (Esther 6:1)
The Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Media and Persia (Esther 10:2)

IV. Truthfulness and Objectivity of the records

A. Warts and All

“The Bible does not idealize people or events, but sternly and impartially evaluates everything, including great national heroes, thus helping the reader to learn from both good and bad examples. It tells us what to do, and what to avoid.” (Bishop Alexander)

The historical books provide “excellent examples of God’s Providence by showing how He exalts and rewards the righteous for their virtue, has mercy on repentant sinners, while at the same time punishing stubborn sinners as their righteous Judge. In Biblical description of individual lives and events, the reader is able to see qualities of the Great God Whose mercy is endless, Whose wisdom is incomprehensible, Whose power is infinite, and Whose righteous judgment is inescapable. No secular book about history is able to convey such spiritual perspective on events.” (Bishop Alexander)

B. Archaeological confirmation

Babylonian Chronicle: a collection of clay tablets inscribed with Babylonian cuneiform script, telling of events between 615 and 595 B.C. They tell of Nebuchadnezzar’s conquest of Palestine, his receiving of tribute, his capture of Jerusalem, and the deportation of Jehoiachin (2 Kings 24).

Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III: A record of the military victories of Shalmaneser III (859-829 B.C.), prepared about 841 B.C. It reports his conquering Jehu king of Israel. It depicts Jehu bringing tribute and kissing Shalmaneser’s foot (2 Kings 17:3; 18:9).

Cylinder of Cyrus: now displayed in the British Museum, this 9-inch cylinder is dated at 538 B.C. It reports Cyrus’ conquest of Nabonidas and the capture of Babylon. It also tells how Cyrus returned captives to their homelands. It says, “I gathered all their former inhabitants and restored to them their homelands” (2 Chron.36:22-23 / Ezra 1:1-4).

Hezekiah’s Tunnel: This 1748-foot-long tunnel was constructed in approximately 701 B.C. , connecting Jerusalem’s only fresh water source, the Gihon Spring (outside the city walls) to the Siloam Pool inside the city (2 Kings 20:20 / 2 Chronicles 32:30).

Moabite Stone (or Stele): Measuring 2’ X 3’ , and shaped like a tombstone, this monument memorializes the military achievements of King Mesha of Moab. Mesha’s revolt against Israel, and Omri king of Israel (cf. 1 Kings 16:23; 2 Kings 1:1; 3:4-5) are mentioned in it.

Sennacherib’s Prism: This six-sided clay prism records Sennacherib’s siege of Jerusalem, and his conquest of forty-six towns and villages of Judah (2 Kings 18:13). It says that Sennacherib shut up Hezekiah as a caged bird in Jerusalem (2 Kings 19:8ff).

Shishak’s Inscription: Inscribed on the wall of the courtyard of the temple at Thebes, this inscription lists a number of towns that Shishak conquered in Palestine. Shishak ruled Egypt from about 945-924 B.C., and Scripture tells of his invasion of Judah in Rehoboam’s time (1 Kings 14:25 / 2 Chron.12:9).

Tel Dan Stele: This stele fragment is associated with King Hazael of Syria (2 Kings 8:7-15) in the late eighth century B.C. and is about 12 inches tall. It contains a reference to “the house [i.e., dynasty] of David.”

Warren’s Shaft: A passageway from the Gihon Spring, apparently to bring water inside the city walls when the Jebusites occupied Jerusalem. The Shaft is probably the access route used by David’s men, led by Joab, to invade and conquer Jerusalem (2 Sam.5:8 / 1 Chron.11:6).

Unlike the pagan religions, which are built upon mythologies, the religion of Yahweh is based upon concrete historical figures and occurrences, which interlink and interact with other known historical entities, persons and events. This is also the case with Christianity. Both Judaism and Christianity are faith-systems that believe in the actual historical events that prove their authenticity. The Historical Books of the Old Testament bear testimony to those events.

“The Biblical account is first of all the record of the nation’s encounter with God and the response of its people to that encounter. These books are, therefore, much more than a compilation of historical facts. They offer inspiration, instruction in the ways of God, lifestyle models to follow and to avoid, extensive moral and spiritual lessons, and faith-building insights into God’s faithfulness to His people.” (L. Thomas Holdcroft)

V. Historical Setting

A. International Scene

Egypt — Though formerly a major power, went into a period of decline after the exodus. In the 1000 years covered in the historical books, Egypt rarely figured into the story. The Egyptian king Shishak invaded Judah once in the reign of Rehoboam (1 Kings 14:25-26). Later kings of Judah sometimes were inclined to trust Egypt as an ally against other major powers that threatened them. Josiah was killed in battle while trying to interfere with an Egyptian attack on Carchemish (2 Chron. 35:20-22).

Aram (Syria) — Though never a major world power, the Arameans were significant, both as nearby adversaries of Israel's, and as the catalyst that sparked Assyrian expansion into a world empire. It was in reaction against invasions by Aramean nomads that Assyria finally struck back, and moved to annex the neighboring Aramean countries, in the ninth century B.C.

The first foreign power to invade Israel, in the Book of Judges, was the king of Aram. Having their capital city in Damascus, multiple Aramean rulers made trouble for Israel in the reigns of Saul, David, Solomon, and many of the kings of Israel and Judah. During the reign of Ahaz (of Judah), Aram and Israel joined forces, desiring to conquer Judah, and force the formation of a three-nation alliance against Assyria.

Assyrian Empire — The Assyrians expanded into world empire status in three stages:

- 1) Tiglath-Pileser (1115-1076 B.C.) made certain aggressive encroachments on neighboring territories, but his gains were not permanent;
- 2) Ashurnasirpal II and Shalmaneser III (884-824 B.C.) expanded Assyria's borders to the Mediterranean, conquering Israel, but not Aram;
- 3) Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727 B.C.) adopted a strategy of conquest, deportation and colonization which expanded Assyria's control. His successor, Shalmaneser V (727-722 B.C.), conquered Israel's capital city, Samaria, and deported the population—ending the history of Israel as a separate kingdom from Judah. Sargon II (722-705 B.C.) carried out further campaigns in Palestine (Isa. 20:1). Sennacherib (705-681 B.C.) established Nineveh as the capital of the empire, and staged an abortive siege of Jerusalem. Esarhaddon (681-669 B.C.) subdued Egypt and declared himself to be “King of kings of Egypt.” Six decades later, the empire ended when the Medes captured and totally destroyed Nineveh (612 B.C.).

Babylonian Empire — Having been a major world power in earlier times (i.e., the time of Abraham), Babylon was restricted, in the era of the judges, by conflicts with Assyria. Chaldean Babylonians came to power in Babylon in the ninth century, and the empire that ensued (also known as Chaldea) eventually displaced the Assyrian Empire, in the reign of Nabopolassar (626-605 B.C.). Nebuchadnezzar II (605-562 B.C.) defeated the Egyptians at Carchemish, but did not annex Egypt. He established Babylon as “the Mistress of the World.” He destroyed Jerusalem, in 586 B.C., and took most of the Jews into captivity.

Persian Empire — Persia arose as a nation in the seventh century B.C., but was dominated by the Medes until 558 B.C. Cyrus the Great (550-529 B.C.), a Persian, emerged as the conqueror who would bring about dynamic growth of the Persian Empire. Cyrus conquered Babylon in 539 B.C., making Persia the new world power. Cyrus issued a decree allowing foreign captives in the empire to return to their native lands. This led to the return of the Jewish exiles who rebuilt Jerusalem, under Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah—the latter being sponsored by the Persian king Artaxerxes (465-429 B.C.). Esther was married to the king previous to Artaxerxes, known in scripture as Ahasuerus, but is better known as Xerxes I (486-465 B.C.).

B. Religious Scene

Dagon — Scholars once thought the name meant “Fish-god,” but now tend to think it means “Grain-god.” Though worshipped throughout the Fertile Crescent in earlier times, in the period of the historical books, Dagon was the god of the Philistines. Samson destroyed a temple of Dagon in bringing about his own death. At a later time, the Ark of the Covenant was captured by the Philistines, and stored, briefly, in a temple of Dagon—resulting in the supernatural decapitation of the Dagon image. Few specifics are known about Dagon worship.

Baal — The name means “Master,” “Possessor,” or “Husband.” Among the Canaanites, Baal was depicted as son of El, who was a nebulous supreme deity. Baal was a generic identification of various regional nature deities

responsible for agriculture and the fertility of livestock. In some contexts, he is said to be the son of Dagon. Worship of Baal involved immoral sexual rites.

Asherah / Ashtoreth — “The goddess of the Sidonians” (1 Kings 11:5). It is not clear whether Asherah and Ashtoreth were identified or were regarded as two separate goddesses, though scholars incline toward the latter view. Both are regarded as the consorts of Baal. Asherah poles were erected next to altars to Baal (Judges 6:25). These poles were carved of wood, and described as “obscene” (1 Kings 15:13). They are frequently mentioned in the same context with prostitution and sodomy. The name “Ashtoreth” is derived from Astarte, the Phoenician goddess of love, fertility and war—and is also identified with Venus, Aphrodite and Diana in the classical world. Usually depicted in statuettes as a nude woman, her worship involved lewd sexual cult rituals.

Molech (or Milcom) — “The abomination of the Ammonites” (1 Kings 11:5). A fire god commonly worshiped throughout the ancient near East and North Africa, by Canaanites and Philistines, Arameans and Semitic peoples and later, Phoenicians. Represented as a human figure with the head of a bull. It is thought that a bronze statue had a fire built within it to turn it red-hot. The practice of sacrificing children to this demon was called, in scripture, “causing [one’s] son or daughter to pass through the fire” (Lev.18:21 / Deut.18:10 / 2 Kings 16:3; 17:17; 21:6; 23:10; etc.).

Chemosh — “The abomination of the Moabites” (1 Kings 11:7). Chemosh was a god associated with the Semitic mother-goddess Ashtar. Like Molech, the worship of Chemosh involved the sacrifice of children. Based upon Judges 11:12, 24, some scholars believe Chemosh is the same god as Molech—though it is argued to the contrary by some, from 1 Kings 11:7.

VI. Correspondence between Old Testament History and Church History?

A. Lifetime of Moses (Pentateuch) = Lifetime of Founder (Jesus and the Gospels’ history)

1. Delivered his people from bondage
2. Established the Covenant
3. Original guide, prophet and priest to the people

B. Lifetime of Joshua = as the appointed successor to the Founder, corresponds to time of the Apostles.

1. Direct appointment continues authority in an undisputed successor
2. Implemented the spread of the movement, providing leadership in the second generation
3. Operated in the same miraculous power as their predecessors (Moses and Jesus)

C. Judges = the Theocratic Amphictyony (church prior to institutionalization)

1. No one appointed to succeed Joshua or the apostles in their office
2. No centralized political authority over God’s people—individuals and tribes were not answerable to each other, unless they committed crimes actionable under God’s Law;
3. Each was to follow the Word of God as he saw fit (Judges 17:6; 21:25)
4. When disobedience occurred, God Himself, as their King, would bring discipline
5. Human leadership was provided by *ad hoc* charismatic individuals, who served in the emergency
6. The death of a leader did not create a vacuum, and there was no mechanism for succession
7. Cycles of revival, testing, crisis, warfare

D. Monarchy = Institutionalized Authority in the church

1. Was viewed by God as a rejection of His Kingship
2. Introduced political machinery, and a levy (tax) to support it
3. Introduced hereditary succession, meaning charisma would no longer be the qualification for leadership

E. Divided Monarchy = Reformation Movement(s)

1. Retained all of the evils of the monarchial system
2. Introduced rivalry and warfare between factions

F. Babylonian Captivity = ???

Yet to come for the church? Or something experienced individually or as groups?

G. Restoration = ???

The church is to be restored to its original purity