

THE HISTORY BOOKS

Joshua · Judges · Ruth
First and Second Samuel
First and Second Kings
Ezra · Nehemiah · Esther



Tremper Longman III



introduction

Understanding the Bible

The History Books

Our life is a story that begins with our birth and ends with our death—at least in earthbound terms. When someone asks us to tell that story, we don't share every detail. Rather, we select and emphasize episodes that have significance to us and to the person to whom we are speaking. I will tell my life story differently to my

grandchildren than I will to my potential employer, yet my story will be accurate in either case.

Knowing our life story helps us understand who we are in the present. For instance, I decided to embark on a career teaching the Bible because the woman I fell in love with and married encouraged and supported me as I spent countless hours pursuing the necessary degrees.

This booklet will focus on those books that continue the story of Israel as they cross into the Promised Land (a period also known as the Conquest). We will follow the story through the time of the Judges, the United Monarchy (when Israel was a unified nation), the Divided Monarchy (when Israel was divided into Israel in the north and Judah in the south—two kingdoms), the exile, and the restoration of God's people from exile. In other words, we will explore the books of Joshua through Esther.

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one

Old Testament History

The Bible contains the grand redemptive story of God. It is vitally interested in history—events that actually happened in space and time. The first five books of the Old Testament, the Torah, begin the story with creation and carry it forward through the account of the Exodus from slavery in Egypt. It then continues on with the Wilderness Wanderings and ends with the Israelites on the eastern shore of the Jordan River as they listen to a sermon by Moses preparing them for their entry into the Promised Land.

Theological History

History writers must be selective and interpretive in

their account of the past. John 21:24–25 shows a clear awareness of this for the Gospel story. Some histories are interested primarily in politics and military or economic issues. While there are numerous kings and many battles in Joshua through Esther, the primary focus of these histories is on God's mighty deeds and his relationship with his people. For this reason, we can call the history of the Old Testament *theological* history. And because the focus of the story is on God's passionate desire to bring his sinful human creatures back into relationship with him, we can also call Joshua through Esther *redemptive* history. It is also possible to think of these books as *covenantal* history since God in his wisdom describes his relationship with his people by means of a succession of covenants.

▶ When we call biblical history “**theological**” (or “**redemptive**” or “**covenantal**”), we are simply naming what is most important for the biblical author. The label “**theological history**” reminds us that what is most significant is God and his relationship with his people, not military, political, or economic issues.

▶ **Redemptive** history emphasizes those divine actions in which God saves his people.

Though the focus is on God and his relationship with his people, it is deeply rooted in a reliable presentation of actual events. Our faith is a historical faith. God enters history to redeem his people. If we deny the historical nature of our faith, then, our faith is in vain.

Rooted in the Torah

The story does not begin in Joshua but in the very first chapters of Genesis. We cannot understand Joshua through Esther without recalling the background of the story.

The Torah opens, as the name of the book of Genesis implies, at the very beginning, with creation itself (GENESIS 1–2). Genesis, after all, is the Greek term for “origin.” God created the cosmos and all its creatures, including humanity. At the beginning, humans were morally innocent, but then they rebelled against God (GENESIS 3), fracturing their relationship with their Creator and with each other. The stories that follow in Genesis 4–11 (Cain and Abel, the Flood, and the Tower of Babel) show that humans keep sinning against God. God punishes them, but he also stays involved and seeks to restore relationship with them. God’s interest in reconciliation leads eventually to the call of Abraham through whom he seeks to bring a blessing to “all peoples on earth” (GENESIS 12:3). This promise—often called God’s *covenant* with Abraham—continues through the generations from Isaac to Jacob and then on to Jacob’s twelve sons. At the end of the book of Genesis, the descendants of Jacob are in the land of Egypt escaping the ravages of a famine.

When the book of Exodus opens, the descendants of Abraham have “multiplied greatly” (EXODUS 1:7) but are now enslaved by an unnamed pharaoh. God hears the cries of his people, and the reluctant pharaoh finally allows the Israelites to leave, but not until Egypt experienced a series of devastating

plagues. However, once Israel had departed under the leadership of Moses, Pharaoh changed his mind and overtook them as they camped on the shore of the Red Sea (also known as the Reed Sea). This was all part of God's plan to demonstrate his glory against this prideful human ruler. God opened the sea and the Israelites escape, but he closed it on the pursuing Egyptians.

The rest of the Torah describes the wanderings in the wilderness. At the start, God gave the law to Israel on Mount Sinai (EXODUS 19–24) and instructed them to build the tabernacle (EXODUS 25–31 AND 35–40). Far from being grateful, the Israelites continually complained and rebelled against God, as well as against Moses their divinely appointed leader. Eventually God condemned the Israelites whom he had saved from Egypt to spend forty years in the wilderness (NUMBERS 13–14). Thus, as the second generation gathered on the Plains of Moab across the Jordan from Jericho, Moses preached to them and demanded that they not repeat the sins of their ancestors as they entered the land. We know this sermon as the book of Deuteronomy. The last chapter of the Torah narrates the death of Moses. A new era is about to start.



two

Reading Joshua

Transitions from one leader to another can often lead to disastrous results, particularly when a new leader, like Joshua, follows a long-time strong and effective leader like Moses. But God had prepared Israel for this time by appointing Joshua, Moses's assistant (NUMBERS 11:28), as his successor even before that highly respected leader had died (NUMBERS 27:12–23).

Not much time passed between the death of Moses at the end of Deuteronomy and the start of Joshua, but a whole new period of time begins as God commissions Joshua to take Moses's place as leader of his people Israel. God calls Joshua "to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you" (JOSHUA 1:7) and assures him that he will be with him "wherever you go" (1:9).



As they crossed the Jordan to enter the Promised Land, God stopped the waters of the river just as the feet of the priests who were carrying the ark touched the water (JOSHUA 3-4). This act was not just a matter of convenience giving them easy access, but rather reminded them of the time forty years earlier when God separated the waters to allow their ancestors to escape the Egyptian army (EXODUS 14-15). God in essence was telling them that he, the God who defeated Egypt, was with them as they entered into the Promised Land to face an enemy greater than they were.

That enemy was the Canaanites. God had promised the land to Abraham but told him that his descendants would not possess the land for centuries because “the sin of the Amorites [another name for Canaanites] has not yet reached its full measure” (GENESIS 15:16). In other words, the battle to follow was not simply for the benefit of Israel. God was using Israel as an agent of his judgment against a sinful people. Noting this point is important because the book of Joshua has gained substantial criticism, even from Christians, because of all the divinely sanctioned violence. Some wrongly suggest that the Old Testament and the New Testament are not on the same wavelength when it comes to the nature of God. They pit an angry God of the Old Testament against the divine compassion in the New Testament. But God is both compassionate and a just judge in both the Old and New Testaments. Indeed, the conquest of Canaan can be seen as a preview (and a warning) of the final judgment described in the book of Revelation.

After the crossing, the Israelites fight Jericho first (JOSHUA 5:13-6:27). Jericho was known for its



fortification, but God brought the walls down with the result that this strong city easily fell to the Israelites. A critical part in this story is the role played by a prostitute named Rahab who helped the Israelite spies (JOSHUA 2). She and her family were spared, showing that the Canaanites could escape their fate simply by choosing to follow Israel's God.

➤ *God intended **Israel to be a light to the nations**. This in part is what he meant when he told Abraham, "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (GENESIS 12:3). Rahab and her family are among the earliest non-Hebrews to choose to follow the one true God. In God's grace, Rahab the prostitute becomes an ancestor of King David, and ultimately of Jesus himself (MATTHEW 1:5).*

After Jericho came the battle against Ai. From the story (JOSHUA 7–8), readers can quickly tell that Ai is nothing like the formidable Jericho. The Hebrew word Ai actually means "ruin," indicating it's not much of a place. That said, the people of Ai soundly defeat Israel. God then tells Joshua that it was because someone stole plunder from Jericho, something God prohibited (DEUTERONOMY 7:25–26). The culprit was a man named Achan who was then executed, showing that disobedient Israelites would be treated like Canaanites. After this, Israel could defeat "Ruin" city.

So far Israel has learned that they could defeat the strongest city if they followed God's instructions, but the weakest city would beat them if they were disobedient. In the next stage, Joshua entered into an alliance with the Gibeonites. God had told the

Israelites not to enter into any treaty with people in the land, but he could with nations outside the land (SEE DEUTERONOMY 20:10–18). However, Joshua thought they came from outside the land. The Gibeonites deceived him, and after he entered into the treaty he found out they were from just down the road! Joshua made the fateful mistake because he did not ask God beforehand (JOSHUA 9:14).

The narrative gives attention to these three episodes (Jericho, Ai, and Gibeon) at the end of which Israel now controlled the middle of the Promised Land. At this point the Canaanite city kings, despite being at odds with each other, banded together into two groups, one in the south and one in the north.▀ They took to the open battlefield, and the Israelites with God's help defeated both coalitions.

▀ *We also know of these city-kings from **archaeological discoveries** made from the time period. Known as the Amarna letters, they are clay tablets of correspondence between the Canaanite kings and Egypt, which wielded extensive power in the region.*

The conquest under Joshua was now done! The second half of the book of Joshua (CHAPS. 13–24) recounts how God distributes the land to the various tribes of Israel. While modern readers get bogged down in the many references to geographical features, small villages, and other boundary features, just imagine the excitement on the part of the Israelites at the time! Keep this in mind as you read the conclusion to Joshua. Abraham's descendants were finally getting the land that God had promised

so many centuries before. They were learning that God keeps his promises. We can bank on that too.

However, along with the excitement, we learn something else when reading the book of Joshua: the conquest was just the beginning of the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. There were still plenty of Canaanites around (JOSHUA 13:1-7). More fighting loomed ahead.

Joshua contains a vital message for future Israel. God the warrior, who had long ago promised that Abraham's descendants would become a "great nation" (GENESIS 12:2), has conquered the land. Through the casting of the sacred lots to determine his will (JOSHUA 14:2), God distributed the land to the tribes. He has provided them with a home where they could rest.

The New Testament tells us that Jesus is a warrior against evil, but he has heightened and intensified the battle so that it is now directed toward the spiritual powers and authorities. He defeats these powers, not by killing, but by dying (COLOSSIANS 2:13-15). And he will return again to complete the victory over evil in his second coming (REVELATION 19:11-21).



three

Reading the Books of Judges and Ruth

The book of **Joshua** tells an exciting and encouraging story of the beginning of the fulfillment of God's centuries-earlier promise that his descendants would become a "great nation" (GENESIS 12:2). Abraham's descendants are now numerous. For the first time they possess the land, though many Canaanites yet remained. Near the end of his life, Joshua led the people in a reaffirmation of their covenant commitment to God (JOSHUA 24).

So how did they do after Joshua? According to the book of Judges, which tells us about God's people "after the death of Joshua" (1:1), not well at all. Indeed, in the book of Judges, we hear story after story illustrating the moral depravity, the spiritual

confusion, and the political division of the people of God. In the first part of the book, we hear repeated stories of God turning Israel over to oppressors because of their sin. The people then cry out to God for help. He sends them a judge who rescues them and establishes a period of peace. After a while the people sink into sin again and the cycle starts over.

One gets the impression of going around in circles: sin followed by oppression followed by crying to God followed by the appearance of a judge followed by deliverance and a period of peace. However, as we look more closely, we see it swirling into a death spiral. This is especially true as we look at the judges themselves, who begin as relatively decent people (Othniel [JUDGES 3:7–11]; Ehud [3:12–30]; Deborah [CHAPS. 4–5]) but prove themselves to be morally suspect (Gideon and his golden ephod [CHAPS. 6–8]; Jephthah and his rash vow [10:6–12:7], Samson and his self-indulgent lusts [CHAPS. 13–16]). Then, to cap it off, the book concludes with two stories that underline just how bad things are—stories that begin with a dysfunctional family and move to describe a dysfunctional nation. A man named Micah builds an illegitimate shrine with his personal priest only to have the items stolen and set up in Dan as a regional shrine (CHAPS. 17–18). Then, a Levite's horrific actions toward his concubine leads to a civil war among God's people (CHAPS. 19–21).

Why tell this bleak story? To point us to something better. We can see this in the constant refrain of the book: “In those days Israel had no king,” occasionally adding “everyone did as they saw fit” (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). The story of the judges drives us to kingship, which is held up as a solution to the problem of moral

depravity, spiritual confusion, and political division. The historical books will now turn to the story of the rise of kingship in 1 Samuel.

But before we go to that part of the story, we need to take a quick look at the book of Ruth. After all, the book of Ruth is set during the period of the judges (RUTH 1:1). But rather than a dark story of sin and judgment, we read an uplifting account of loving loyalty.

The book begins as three women journey from Moab to Bethlehem. The older woman, Naomi, had left Bethlehem with her husband and sons to escape the ravages of a famine. There the sons had married Moabite girls, but then both the sons and their father had died. Naomi, whose name means “pleasant,” asked to be called Marah (“bitter”) because of her horrible life circumstances. She feels life is meaningless for her now and urges her daughters-in-law to return home. One tearfully does, but Ruth expresses her loyal love for her mother-in-law with words that proclaim, “Your people will be my people and your God my God” (1:16).

The two women arrive in Bethlehem, their situation bleak. The Torah mandates that growers leave some of the crops so that the poor can come and glean enough to sustain themselves (LEVITICUS 19:9–10; 23:22). Her choice of a field turns out to be owned by Boaz, later identified as her guardian-redeemer (RUTH 2:20). Again, appealing to the Torah, the closest relative was responsible to take care of the needs of a widowed woman who had no sons (LEVITICUS 25:25–30, 47–55) even marrying her to produce such an heir. When Ruth approached Boaz on the threshing floor, she was offering herself to him in marriage. He proclaimed

her a “woman of noble character” (3:11; SEE PROVERBS 31:29–30), but also revealed there was a closer relative than he. That person, happily for Boaz, was unwilling to fulfill his responsibility, so Boaz and Ruth got married and had children.

What a heartwarming story particularly after reading the book of Judges! Ruth shows her loyal love toward Naomi, and Boaz his loyal love toward Ruth. But we miss the point if we don’t see an even deeper loyal love, namely that of God. Though God does not take direct action, no one can miss seeing God’s guiding hand in the action, particularly in the “coincidence” of Ruth choosing to glean in the field of Boaz. The book of Ruth reminds us that God is with us, showing us his loyal love, even in the everyday events of life.

While Judges and Ruth are different in so many ways, they share one similarity. The book ends with a genealogy that shows that Ruth and Boaz are ancestors to none other than King David (RUTH 4:18–22). Just as the book of Judges leads us to think about the kingship, so does Ruth—in this case King David specifically. And Christian readers today understand that kingship in general and David in particular will eventually take us to Jesus, David’s greater son. We will return to this point later.



four

Reading Samuel–Kings and Chronicles

First and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings pick up the story where Judges leaves it and carry it all the way to the Babylonian exile, a time period of over five hundred years. Presently divided into four books, they are actually one connected book divided into four parts.

First and 2 Chronicles—one book divided into two parts—have an even longer time frame in view. The genealogies that open the book start with Adam and take us to the end of King Saul's reign and the beginning of David's (1 CHRONICLES 1–9). Then, starting in 1 Chronicles 10, the story continues from the death of Saul beyond the Babylonian exile to the

time when the Persian king Cyrus allows the Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem.

While Chronicles stretches over a substantially longer time period than does Samuel–Kings, the largest part of it covers the exact same time period as the earlier work does. Why the repetition?

Before we answer this question, we should raise a second one. As we read and compare these books' coverage of the same time period, we see that they have a significantly different take on the same events. Samuel–Kings presents a highly negative view of Israel and Judah during this time. Israel and its kings constantly disobey God. Chronicles, on the other hand, has a predominantly positive view of Israel and Judah. Only occasionally are sins mentioned. Why the radically different perspectives?

We get our answer when we realize when these two books (Samuel–Kings and Chronicles) were written. And we find out *when* they were written by looking at the very last events they mention. Samuel–Kings mentions the release of King Jehoiachin from a Babylonian prison (2 KINGS 25:27–30), which took place smack-dab in the middle of the exile; thus the book was written during the exile. (While the exile lasts from 586–539 BC, this episode took place between 562 and 560 BC.) Chronicles, as we mentioned, goes on and describes the start of the return from the exile (2 CHRONICLES 36:22–23), so it was written during the period after the exile (sometime after 539 BC).

Once we realize this, we can understand why two histories of such different perspectives are not only possible, but important. After all, they are speaking to different audiences who have different questions.

God's people who live during the exile have one burning question: "Why are we in exile?" Samuel-Kings answers that question by recounting their many sins through their history. In particular, Samuel-Kings uses the book of Deuteronomy as a standard for their behavior. Deuteronomy contains Moses's final sermon to the Israelites who were about to go into the Promised Land, and he laid out God's requirements (CHS. 5-26) along with warnings about punishments (CHS. 27-28). Samuel-Kings tells the sad story of how Israel constantly broke the covenant, in particular the law mandating that sacrifice could only take place at the Temple (DEUTERONOMY 12). They did not listen to the true prophets that God sent them, but only the false ones (DEUTERONOMY 13:1-5 AND 18:14-22). Their kings did not live up to the standard God set for them (DEUTERONOMY 17:14-20). Thus, God allowed the Babylonians to defeat them and take them into exile.

At the time of the writing of Chronicles the exile was already over, so the question "Why are we in exile?" no longer pressed upon the people. Rather, after experiencing the tremendous disruption of the exile, God's people are asking questions such as "What is our connection to the past?" and "How should we live now?" Chronicles answers these questions with genealogies showing their connection to the past (1 CHRONICLES 1-9). The book puts a big emphasis on David's preparation for and Solomon's building of the temple because the first order of business for those who returned from the exile was to rebuild the temple. And the reason why there is an emphasis on positive stories is to give God's people

good role models for their future life with God.

Now we can see the importance of reading both histories. Chronicles is not simply saying the same thing as Samuel–Kings but using the history of Israel to teach God’s people new things. And they are important not only for the original audiences but also for us.

So what is important about Samuel–Kings and Chronicles for us today?

We need to keep our eyes focused on our relationship with God. We don’t earn our way into the kingdom of heaven. God saves us; we don’t save ourselves. We find meaning and purpose in our lives as we respond to God’s grace with our worship and obedience. We may suffer in this fallen world, but we can flourish even in the midst of our struggles if we turn to God to comfort us.

Perhaps most importantly Samuel–Kings and Chronicles tell the continuing story of God’s passionate pursuit of our redemption in spite of our sin. Remember that Judges looked to kingship as a solution to the problem of moral depravity, spiritual confusion, and political division. From Samuel–Kings and Chronicles, we learn that indeed kingship held great promise, particularly as we look at David, who was a king after God’s own heart—so much so that God made a covenant with him that promised that he would have a descendant on the throne forever (2 SAMUEL 7:11–16). Yet David himself was far from perfect, and most of his descendants did not rule in a way that reflected the divine King’s hopes for Israel.

Both histories, however, tell us the monarchy came to an end when Zedekiah was taken in chains

to Babylon. Samuel–Kings ends with a glimmer of hope with the release of David’s descendant from prison. Chronicles tells about the end of the Babylonian captivity. But how will this story continue? For that we turn first to three books that talk more about the period after the exile, but ultimately we will need to turn to the New Testament. While Judges pushes us toward kingship as something better, Samuel–Kings shows how these all-too-human kings are themselves deeply flawed, even David and his line. Samuel–Kings makes us yearn for something better, and later we will see that these sinful human kings prepare us for Jesus the Christ (Messiah), our anointed king. By emphasizing the positive picture of the kings of Judah, we get an even clearer picture of the coming Messiah.



five

Reading Ezra and Nehemiah

The books of **Ezra and Nehemiah** are really one book that describes the period after the exile from the perspective of the return to Jerusalem. Ezra 1–6 speaks about the early return beginning with the Cyrus Decree (539 BC) through the building of the second temple (515 BC). The key figures are Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel.

Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13 focuses on Ezra (who returns to Jerusalem in 458 BC) and Nehemiah (who returns in 445 BC). God uses them to restore the Law of Moses and then rebuild the wall. Their story is told largely through the memoirs of Ezra (EZRA 7–10; NEHEMIAH 8–10) and Nehemiah (NEHEMIAH 1–7 AND 11–13). After the

temple and wall are rebuilt and the law restored, they renew the covenant (NEHEMIAH 9–12).

One might think that at this point the book would end on a harmonious note. But no, it concludes with continuing unfaithfulness among the people of God. In the final chapter (13), Nehemiah comes back to Jerusalem from Persia where he had returned for a period of time. What he finds is deeply disturbing. A room at the temple had been given to a dubious man named Tobiah. The Levites had not been paid. People were working on the Sabbath. And more! Nehemiah works hard to set things right, but the people of God are still sinning. Not only that, but in a very important sense the exile is not really over. While the people of God can return home if they choose, Judah with its capital in Jerusalem is not an independent kingdom with a descendant of David on the throne. They still live under the thumb of an oppressive empire, namely Persia. This cannot be the conclusion of the story begun in Genesis. More must be coming. And we will see that that “more” is Jesus.

When we read Ezra and Nehemiah in their historical context, we learn something amazing about how God works in history. Notice how King Cyrus encourages the Jewish people to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple (EZRA 1:1–4) and how later King Artaxerxes instructs Ezra to go back to Judah and reestablish the law (EZRA 7:11–28). Even later he urges his cupbearer Nehemiah to go back to rebuild the fallen wall of Jerusalem (NEHEMIAH 1–2). Why do these pagan kings care? Persian records (like the Cyrus Cylinder that speaks of that king’s great deeds) mention that he was interested in creating loyal subjects by telling

all of them, not just the Jewish people, to rebuild their temples destroyed by the Babylonians. Isn't it encouraging to know that our God is not blocked in his purposes but even uses pagan kings to accomplish them in spite of their different motives?

➤ **The Cyrus Cylinder**, discovered in 1879, is a cylindrical clay tablet describing the accomplishments and greatness of King Cyrus.

The depictions of Ezra and Nehemiah also inform us that God has more than one model for leadership among his people. Study both of them closely and we notice that Ezra is a reflective and sensitive leader, while Nehemiah is a take-charge person who acts intuitively and decisively. God uses them both in dramatic ways and shows us that he can use our personality traits to lead his people to great accomplishments for the glory of God.

Ezra and Nehemiah show us that God continues to love and work with his people even after the judgment of the Babylonian empire. At the beginning of the book, the exiles begin trickling back to Jerusalem. In the face of local hostility, they rebuild the temple under Zerubbabel. Decades later they reestablish the law under Ezra and finally restore the wall under Nehemiah. The book ends with celebration (NEHEMIAH 9–12), but also disappointment (NEHEMIAH 13).



six

Reading Esther

But before we get to Jesus and his role in fulfilling this story, we need to take a look at the book of Esther to see the continuing threat that faces the people of God in the period after the exile, which as we said, is not really “after” the exile in an important sense.

Esther, like Ezra–Nehemiah, is set during the period after the exile and during the reign of the Persian King Xerxes (486–465 BC), placing it chronologically between the events of Ezra 1–6 (539–515 BC) and Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13 (458–c. 425 BC). While Ezra–Nehemiah gives us a window on what is going on in Jerusalem among those who returned to the city, the book of Esther gives us a glimpse of what is happening among those who decided not to

return but to stay in Persia. These people are part of the Diaspora or “scattering” of Jewish people outside their homeland.

2000	1900	1800	1700	1600	1500	1400	1300	1200	1100	1000	900	800	700	600	500	400 BC
ABRAHAM and the PATRIARCHS (ca. 2000–1750)																
MOSES (15th <i>or</i> 13th century)																
JOSHUA (Following Moses, 1400–1200)																
JUDGES (Following Joshua, up to anointing Saul, ca. 1020)																
UNITED MONARCHY (Saul, David, Solomon, ca. 1020–928)																
DIVIDED MONARCHY (928–585)																
<i>The Northern Kingdom of Israel</i> (928–722)																
<i>The Southern Kingdom of Israel</i> (928–586)																
BABYLONIAN EXILE (586–539)																
POST-EXILIC PERIOD (539 and following)																
<i>From the Cyrus Decree to the Completion of the Second Temple</i> (539–515)																
<i>Ezra Returns to Jerusalem</i> (458) ▲																
<i>Nehemiah Returns to Jerusalem</i> (445) ▲																

As we read the book of Esther, we are struck by the fact that God is never mentioned in this book and also by the role that banquets serve as frequent settings for the action. What are we to make of these features?

We are first introduced to King Xerxes who is throwing a huge banquet for all his leaders. However, when he calls for his wife Vashti to make an

appearance, she refuses and he deposes her for challenging his authority. To find a new queen, a number of beautiful women were added to his harem and then from these women he would choose one who pleased him to assume the role of queen.

We are now introduced to Mordecai and his beautiful cousin Esther. From their names we know that they are Jewish people who are well integrated into Persian society. Both their names are related to the name of Mesopotamian gods. Not that they worshiped them (they are clearly worshipers of the true God), but they have names of their adopted country. Mordecai is also described as a Benjamite and “son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish” (2:5), an important detail we will explain later. Mordecai may be part of the palace security and as such he uncovers an assassination plot on the king’s life.

Finally, we are introduced to Haman who is called “the Agagite” (3:1), also an important detail of the story. Right away we learn that Mordecai and Haman hate each other. We are not told why, at least not explicitly (see below). Haman’s hate extends beyond Mordecai to include all the Jewish people, so he makes an arrangement that they all be killed on a date chosen by lots, here called “Purim.”

But Mordecai discovers the plot and enlists Esther to help her people. At first she is reluctant because not even the queen can easily approach the king without invitation. But after Mordecai warns her that she herself would not escape the fate of her people, she then agrees to go to the king.

When the king grants her an audience, she invites him and Haman to a banquet. Haman, thinking

this a great honor, accepts and brags about it to his wife and friends, but also expresses his anger about Mordecai. They in turn convince him to build a tall impaling pole on which to hang Mordecai.

While at this point it looks like Haman and the enemies of God's people will win, the story now experiences a series of ironic reversals in which we see the hidden providence of God. It just so happens that one sleepless night, the king's servants read him the story of how Mordecai foiled the assassination plot. The next morning the king asks Haman what he should do for the man he wants to honor more than any other. Haman, of course, thinks the king is speaking about him and so lays it on thick, saying that this favored person should sit on the king's horse and wear the king's robe and then have one of the king's officials lead him through the streets of the city announcing, "This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!" (ESTHER 6:11). Imagine Haman's reaction when he was told to so honor his enemy Mordecai!

But this is just the beginning. When he goes to the banquet with Esther and the king, the former reveals the plot against the Jewish people to the king, who then orders that Haman be impaled on the pole that he built to execute Mordecai.

But there is still a problem. The king, whose decrees cannot be reversed, had already set a date for the enemies of God's people to exterminate them. However, the king can and did issue a second decree, one that allowed God's people to arm themselves and fight for themselves. On the fateful date chosen by the "Purim," God's people defeated and killed their enemies.

Now it is time to dig deeper into the animosity

between Mordecai and his people, the Jews, and Haman and his people the Agagites. Mordecai was a Benjamite, and the names of his relatives reveal that he was a descendant of Saul, the first king. Once we realize this (something well known to the original readers), we are taken back to 1 Samuel 13 where Saul had just defeated King Agag the Amalekite. However, when Samuel the prophet arrived in the camp, he was not happy since Saul had not only kept some of the plunder for himself, but also had not completely destroyed the Amalekites. The destruction of the Amalekites was ordered by God in the Torah (DEUTERONOMY 25:17–19) because they had attacked the Israelites as soon as they left Egypt (EXODUS 17:8–16). No wonder Haman and Mordecai hated each other! But the story of Esther is the account of God's justice being rendered against these people who wanted to destroy God's people. And to commemorate this saving of God's people, the book of Esther establishes a festival named after the lots used by the king to determine the date of this event called Purim, still celebrated by the Jewish community every year.

The story of Esther and the victory of God's people over their long-standing enemies provide both encouragement and a warning to us today. Even when God seems absent, he is operating behind the scenes in order to care for his people and protect them from their enemies. The survival of his people also means the continuance of the hope for the Messiah who will come from this people. We also learn that God's judgment cannot be hindered by anyone.



seven

Pointing to Jesus

The historical books pick up the story of God's passionate pursuit of his sinful people that began in the Torah. God had promised Abraham he would make his descendants "a great nation," and that he would bless them and "all peoples" through them (GENESIS 12:1–3). In the book of Exodus, we saw that through God's blessing Abraham's descendants had become a numerous people (EXODUS 1:6–7), and at the end of the book of Deuteronomy, they were poised to enter the Promised Land.

The historical books pick up the story with the conquest and settlement of the land in the book of Joshua, and then we hear about the period of time between the death of Joshua and the rise of kingship, a period of great moral depravity, spiritual confusion, and political division (the book of Judges), but not devoid of examples of covenant loyalty (the book of

Ruth). In Samuel and Kings, as well as Chronicles, we hear about the rise of kingship, so promising during the time of David and the early reign of Solomon, but then going downhill. God made a covenant with David that he would have a descendant on the throne “forever,” but because of the sins of his descendants, the last king to rule in Jerusalem was carried off in chains to Babylon in 586 BC.

Ezra–Nehemiah and Esther tell us that even so, God was not done with his people.▮ The former tells us about the return of some Jewish leaders to Jerusalem and the building of the temple and a wall as well as the reestablishment of the Law. Esther tells us that God through his providence still watches over his people who chose not to return to the land. But at the end of the story, God’s people are still living under an oppressive government. As we saw in Nehemiah 13, the story of the Old Testament ends on a note of discord not celebration. As the last prophets of the Old Testament announced, more was yet to come (SEE DANIEL 7, ZECHARIAH 14, MALACHI 4, AND MORE).

▮ *God likes to make **covenants**—formal relationships—with his people. He began with Noah (GENESIS 9), Abraham (GENESIS 12:1–3; 15; 17), and Moses (EXODUS 19–24).*

Of course, Jesus is that “more”! The story of God’s pursuit of his sinful people culminates and climaxes in the work of Jesus on the cross. He is the Christ, the Messiah, the fulfillment of the promise to David that he would have a son on the throne forever. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise that God would reach the world through his descendants (SEE GALATIANS

3:15–29). As Christians, the story of the Old Testament historical books takes us ultimately to the gospel.

History is told in such a way as to teach God's people life lessons. As we read the stories in Joshua through Esther, we should be warned, encouraged, inspired, and motivated in our relationship with God through Jesus Christ as we live out our faith empowered by the Spirit.

Some Things to Keep in Mind as You Read and Study the Historical Books

Joshua through Esther—the historical books of the Old Testament—are a rich mine of theological insight and guidance for life.

From the time of the entry into the Promised Land through the period of Judges and into the monarchy and finally in exile and restoration, God worked in history to form a people for himself. Second, we need to remember that the retelling of these stories is shaped in order to make a point about God and ourselves. We highlighted the big themes, but always ask what purpose a particular event plays in light of the overall story. Third, keep in mind that these stories intend to impact our lives. After summarizing some Old Testament events (1 CORINTHIANS 10:1–5), Paul tells the reader “these things occurred as examples” for Christian life today.

Ask yourself what lesson you can learn from the Old Testament stories. But most importantly, keep in mind that these stories are an integral part of a much bigger drama that leads us to Jesus. ☞