

Introduction to the Bible

Week 2: Old Testament Historical Books & Wisdom Literature

Introduction

Review CHART.

This week we look at two of the four kinds of Old Testament books – the historical books and wisdom literature (BOOKCASE).

Before we look at these Old Testament books, consider two general points about reading the Old Testament:

On the one hand, we should (generally speaking) read the New Testament more than the Old Testament. Some Christians say that since the Old Testament is 75% of the Bible, we should devote 75% of our reading time to it. But the New Testament contains fuller revelation than the Old Testament (e.g., Jesus' First Coming; grace expounded). Also, it speaks to the period of salvation history in which we live (e.g., the Church Age).

On the other hand, the New Testament itself says that the Old Testament is important for Christians because:

It provides basic instruction on salvation by grace through faith through vivid pictures (e.g., Tabernacle & sacrificial system – see Heb. 7-10).

It provides a variety of faith-building predictions about Jesus' First Coming – especially His death and resurrection (Lk. 24:25-27,46; Isa. 53; MORE IN WEEKS #3 & #4).

It provides encouragement through its promises and examples of God's faithfulness, so that we might have hope (Rom. 15:4).

It provides warnings against ways of life that are contrary to God's design and destructive to us (1 Cor. 10:6,11; e.g. KADESH-BARNEA; SAMSON; SAUL).

It provides practical, real-life examples of living by faith in God (Heb. 11:1-12:1; e.g., ABRAHAM; ELIJAH).

NOTE: The above two are often combined in the same character (e.g., David; Gideon; Elijah). This means there is hope for us!

It can transform our characters and equip us to be effective servant-workers (2 Tim. 3:15-17).

Old Testament historical books

BOOKS INCLUDED: This includes Genesis, large portions of Exodus and Numbers, and Joshua through Esther. Sometimes people refer to the first five Old Testament books as the "Pentateuch" ("5 books"); they contain both historical narrative sections and the Law of Moses.

TYPE OF LITERATURE: These books are historical narrative. Like all historical narratives, biblical historical narrative is selective, not exhaustive. God includes what it is important to His priorities, and leaves out the rest. Specifically, biblical historical narrative emphasizes events that bear on God's plan to rescue humans from the effects of the Fall. As a result, it often ignores or gives light coverage to people and events that might seem important to a secular historian. It often focuses on other people and events that seem incidental because they disclose important features of God's plan.

EXAMPLE: Omri was king of Israel for a long time (881-859 BC). His reign began a 100+ year dynasty, to which Assyrians records refer as "the house of Omri." Yet the Bible spends on 8 verses on him (1 Kng. 16:21-28) and mentions on that he purchased the hill on which Samaria was built. By contrast, there are no extra-biblical records of Elijah. Yet the Bible devotes several chapters to him and the New Testament refers to him several times.

LESSON: That which is highly esteemed by man is often detestable or forgettable in the eyes of God (Lk. 16:15). Those whom the world calls weak, common, or nobodies are often used by God to shame the worldly powerful, noble, "somebodies." Which person will you be?

TIME PERIOD: We do not know the dates of the events prior to Gen. 12, because the genealogies in Gen. 4-11 are not exhaustive, and because archeological evidence is scarce. Abraham lived around 2100 BC. The historical books cover the history of Israel from then until around 400 BC (see summary below).

HUMAN AUTHORS: The historical books were written by Old Testament prophets. Prophets were God's official spokespersons, inspired by His Spirit to communicate His message to Israel and to record Israel's history in light of His covenants with them.

God gave a succession of prophets, beginning with Moses (~1400 BC) and ending with Malachi (~400 BC). Some (but not all) of these prophets also wrote their own books (Major and Minor Prophets – NEXT WEEK).

God gave two ways for Israelites to test those who claimed to be prophets. They had to give short-term predictions with enough detail that they could be confirmed as fulfilled (Deut. 18:18-21; see 1 Sam. 3:19,20). Their teaching content about God and how to live had to conform to what God had already revealed through Moses (Deut. 13:1-5). Those who failed these tests were to be put to death as false prophets. Sadly, because the Israelites continued to tolerate false prophets, they were seduced into apostasy.

HISTORICAL ACCURACY: Critics have long attacked the historical accuracy of these books, but actual evidence (including archeological evidence) has consistently confirmed their reliability. **EXAMPLE:**

Critics used to say that Gen. 14 (which refers to Sodom and Gomorrah and many local city-kings) was fictitious and/or legendary.

In 1968, the statue of King Ibbit-Lim of Ebla Kingdom was discovered in northern Syria (part of Moses' world). This kingdom's power flourished between 2500-2200 B.C. Since 1974, 17,000 tablets have been unearthed (see below). These tablets contain detailed descriptions of laws, customs, and historical events of that

kingdom. Their commercial texts mention the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. They also mention Chedorloamer and the other city-kings mentioned in Gen. 14. They also describe the wealth and affluence of their society before the calamity described in Gen. 14, which supports the biblical account.



WHY THE HISTORICAL BOOKS ARE IMPORTANT:

They are a huge part of the Old Testament. God teaches through redemptive ACTS and redemptive WORDS. The narrative portions of the Bible show God's redemptive acts. Stories are a key way we learn.

God builds our faith as we learn about His past faithfulness. Read Ps. 77:7-15. The logic is clear: Asaph urges us to REMEMBER these stories and RETELL them our children that they would trust God. These stories aren't just part of the Jews' national heritage. They are for us as well. (See more below.)

Some of the events they describe point to Jesus. See for example Num. 21:4-9. The people were being bitten by snakes as God's judgment for sin. God told Moses to make a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. Whoever looked to the bronze serpent would live. Their way out of judgment was simply to gaze upon the agent of judgment. In Jn. 3:14, Jesus said that He would be lifted up like the serpent, and simply looking to Him will save you. In this way, Jesus "became a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13) to deliver us from the curse of God's judgment. He who knew no sin became sin (2 Cor. 5:21).

KEY THEME:

God is faithful to preserve His people and fulfill His promises. In spite of human opposition and weakness, neither the enemies of God nor His own sinful people can thwart His plan. Specifically:

He is faithful to fulfill the promise He made to Abraham – especially "nation" and "land" portions (WEEK 1). EXAMPLE: See extent of land promised to Abraham in Gen. 15:18-10, and the fulfillment to Solomon in 1 Kings 4:21.

He is faithful to enforce the Law He gave through Moses – especially the "nation" and "land" portions (WEEK 1). EXAMPLE: See God's warning to observe

land Sabbaths in Lev. 25:1-3; 26:33-35, and the enforcement in 2 Chron. 36:21.

He promises David to bring His Messiah from his descendants (2 Sam. 7; 1 Chron. 17), and He preserves David's kingly line.

Read 2 Pet. 1:3,4. God has made precious and magnificent promises to you (New Testament EXAMPLES)! God can radically transform your life through these promises! Prioritize learning them, recalling them, and trusting them!

TIPS FOR READING:

Look for the tension between what God promised and the circumstances of the main characters. Are there perceived obstacles? How does God overcome them?

EXAMPLE: The promise of descendants in Gen. 12:1-3 versus the obstacles in Gen. 15-18 (Abraham's old age and Sarah's barrenness; their disobedient plan with Hagar). Everything in Abraham and Sarah's experience argued against God's promise – yet He fulfilled it in Gen. 21.

LESSON: God has made promises to you (2 Pet. 1:3,4). Do you know them? Do you believe them, even when there are obstacles? How has this changed your life (Eph. 3:12 FOR ME; DISCUSS).

Look for the priority of faith and how God builds individuals' faith:

PROMISE/COMMAND >> FAITH RESPONSE >> PROMISE FULFILLED.

EXAMPLE: See this pattern in Elijah's ministry in 1 Kings 17,18..

Cherith: PROMISE/COMMAND (17:3,4); FAITH RESPONSE (17:5);
PROMISE FULFILLED (17:6)

Zarephath: PROMISE/COMMAND (17:9); FAITH RESPONSE (17:10a);
PROMISE FULFILLED (17:10b-16)

These incidents prepared Elijah for trusting God during the showdown with the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18 (PROMISE/COMMAND: 18:1; FAITH RESPONSE: 18:2; PROMISE FULFILLED: 18:45).

LESSON: This is how you become a Christian (EXPLAIN Rev. 3:20 WITH THIS PATTERN). This is how you grow as a Christian (e.g., Matt. 6:33). Like Elijah, you don't know at the time how God is preparing you for much greater work in the future.

OVERVIEW OF OLD TESTAMENT (DATEABLE) HISTORY:

Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his sons live in Canaan from 2100 – 1850 BC.

Nation develops in Egypt (1850- 1440): Jacob and his sons relocate to Egypt to avoid a famine, and develop into a nation of 12 tribes over the next 400 years. During this time, Egypt's pharaohs enslave the Israelites – and they cry out to God for deliverance.

Exodus from Egypt & Wilderness Wanderings (1440 – 1400 BC): Moses delivers the Israelites from Egypt. They wander in the Sinai desert for 40 year.

Conquest of Canaan (1400 – 1350 BC): Joshua leads the invasion and substantial conquest of Canaan. But because some Canaanites are allowed to remain in the land, their idolatry eventually infects the Israelites.

Judges lead Israel (1350 – 1050 BC): God periodically raises up military deliverers (“judges”) to rescue the Israelites from their enemies.

United Monarchy (1050 – 950 BC): The Israelites reject God’s deliverers and insist on a monarchy dynasty. The last judge (Samuel) anoints Saul as Israel’s first king, who is a failure. Samuel anoints David, a man after God’s own heart. Saul eventually dies and David begins his kingdom and defeats Israel’s enemies. His son Solomon builds the Temple, extends Israel’s borders, and rules in peace and prosperity.

Divided Monarchy (950 – 590 BC): After Solomon dies, the northern 10 tribes rebel against Solomon’s son and form their own nation (Israel). The 2 tribes of the southern kingdom are called Judah. Israel’s kings lead the nation to defect from God and worship the Canaanite gods (including child-sacrifice). God warns them repeatedly through His prophets that this disobedience to the Law of Moses will result in their expulsion from the land. Finally (722 BC), God allows Assyria to conquer Israel and carry most of the 10 tribes away into exile, from which they do not return. The remaining Israelites intermarry with non-Jewish peoples and become the “Samaritans.”

Judah (the southern kingdom) has a few godly kings, so they do not defect from God into idolatry as quickly as Israel. God also warns them repeatedly through His prophets that exile awaits them unless they return to Him. But they refuse, and God allows the Babylonians to carry them into exile (586 BC).

Return from exile (~500 – 400 BC): Since God promised to bring His Messiah from David’s descendants, He preserves that line and ultimately brings many Jews back to Israel (~500 BC). The returning Jews rebuild the Temple and the city of Jerusalem. Their prophets continue to predict the eventual coming of the Messiah and His kingdom.

Wisdom literature

WHICH BOOKS?

Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon

TYPE OF LITERATURE: Old Testament wisdom literature obviously focuses on wisdom (see below), but its books utilize several different literary styles: poetry/song (Psalms), dialogue (Job & Song of Solomon), and pithy observations and maxims (Proverbs; Ecclesiastes).

WHAT TIME PERIOD?

Except for Job and a few Psalms, the wisdom books were written around 1000 BC.

WHO WROTE THEM?

Job was a probably contemporary with Abraham (2100 BC). David wrote most of the Psalms. Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon. Moses, David and Solomon were prophets.

WHY THE WISDOM BOOKS ARE IMPORTANT:

They are inspired responses to God's revelation in the Law and the Prophets. Most of the Psalms are inspired prayers. Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are inspired reflections on the moral structure of human life in a fallen world. The Song of Solomon is an inspired celebration of sexual love (*contra* "God hates sex/pleasure") within God's design of heterosexual monogamy (*contra* sexual promiscuity; "committed partners" regardless of marriage; adultery; same-sex).

KEY THEMES:

The key overall themes are God's wisdom and the fear of God (Job 28:28; Ps. 111:10; Prov. 15:33; Eccles. 12:13). God's wisdom is a philosophy of life that is rooted in God's revelation and lived before Him, versus philosophies of life rooted in fallen human autonomy and speculation (folly; the wisdom of the world). "In Scripture, wisdom is a moral as well as an intellectual quality . . . For us to be truly wise . . . our intelligence and cleverness must be harnessed to a right end. *Wisdom is the power to see, and the inclination to choose, the best and highest goal, together with the surest means to attain it.*"¹ The key means to gaining God's wisdom is fearing God, which means humbly trusting God and obeying His revelation (versus prideful self-sufficiency and self-exaltation).

Because God's wisdom accords with His design for life, following His wisdom often leads to positive results in this life (Proverbs – e.g., Prov. 15:1; 22:6; some Psalms – e.g., Ps. 19:10,11).

Because the world is fallen and because people have free will, following God's wisdom does not always lead to positive results in this life (Job's sufferings; see Ecclesiastes section below; many Psalms of lament; Prov. 15:1 and 22:6 do not always happen).

Communing personally with God takes various forms because of life's complexity (e.g., lament, praise, confession, thanksgiving, supplication, intercession, etc.). Psalms and Job provide many examples of such inspired prayers (see Ps 3). Different kinds of these prayer will be more relevant to you at certain times, and full-orbed communication with God is healthy (e.g., Phil. 4:6).

Meditation on God's Word is crucial for becoming wise. Meditation involves memorizing portions of scripture, prayerfully speaking them to yourself, and pondering their application to your life. The Psalms begin with a call to meditate on God's Word (Ps. 1) and contain many exhortations to meditate (e.g., Ps. 63:6; 77:12; 143:5). Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are examples of the wisdom resulting from biblical meditation.

ANTITHESES: Excessive I.T. usage confuses access to information with memorization. It also over-stimulates and makes meditation boring.

¹ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 90.

PRIVATE MEDITATION: Choose a small passage that grabs your attention, memorize it, recite it to God and ask for illumination, and recurrently ponder it for at least one day. **EXAMPLE:** Matt. 6:6 reflections:

Reinforced the conviction to build more of a “secret life” with God by spending regular time in private prayer to God

Motivated by the promise of reward: freedom from seeking human-approval (6:1); answers to kingdom-advancing prayers (6:9-13); greater security in God’s love and provision (6:8)

GROUP PRACTICE: When your cell group is transitioning between biblical books or other topics, spend a week doing this:

Each person chooses to memorize and meditate on a new verse or passage.

Share why you chose this passage.

Recite the passage.

Share how memorizing and meditating on it affected you.

Others share anything relevant.

TIPS FOR READING:

Job: Focus on the early and late chapters and skim the middle chapters to get the main message. God never answers “Why?” – but He does reveal more of Himself, which is enough for Job. Is this enough for you?

Psalms:

Ask “What does this Psalm teach about God’s character/trusting God?”

Some Psalms are Messianic (Lk. 24:44) – predictive descriptions of both Comings (Ps. 22; 2; 118). Don’t be dogmatic about this unless the New Testament quotes them as Messianic.

Proverbs: Consider studying them by topic (**HANDOUT; HUMILITY EXAMPLE**).

Ecclesiastes: “Everything under the sun is vanity” (Eccles. 1:14) means that life in this fallen world is both fleeting and inscrutable. **APPLICATIONS:**

In this fallen world, nothing in it will ever completely fulfill us. God has placed within us the desire for complete fulfillment that He will fulfill only in eternity. He gives us many earthly blessings (e.g., knowledge; work accomplishment; pleasure and beauty; romance; prosperity; human acclaim; etc.). Enjoy these things when they come to you, but don’t expect them to fulfill you (**GOSPEL:** see Jn. 4:10; 6:27; 7:37), don’t try to hold on to them, and don’t seek more of them as your goal. Ask God for the gift of being able to do this.

In this fallen world, much doesn’t make sense. The righteous don’t always prosper, and the wicked don’t always get put down. Good plans (family; ministry; etc.) don’t always work out the way we planned. God has placed within us the sense that justice should prevail, and He will cause it to prevail ultimately only when His kingdom comes. So don’t expect all of life to make sense. Accept

this mystery without becoming cynical about life. Keep holding to what God has revealed and obeying it, while trusting Him to sort out the mysterious part (Deut. 29:29). Accept adversity as part of God's mysterious plan (vs. resenting God for it), and let Him use it to teach you to fear/trust Him.