

An Overview of the Old Testament Story¹

Keep in mind that the Old Testament is also known as the Hebrew Bible, the Tanakh, the Jewish Scriptures, and the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.

I. Adam & the Fall

The Bible opens by telling that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and that everything God made was good. Sin enters the story when Adam & Eve want to become like God, and disobey God's command by eating fruit that God had told them not to eat. The effects of sin become evident when their son Cain slays his brother Abel out of anger toward God. Violence multiplies until God determines to purge the earth by a flood. God commanded Noah to build a boat that could preserve animals from every species from destruction. After the flood, God put the rainbow in the sky to assure people that he would not destroy the earth again. Sin persisted, however, and people sought to make themselves great by building a tower that could reach to heaven. God responded by making people speak different languages, so that they could no longer understand each other, and they scattered over the face of the earth.

II. Abraham & the Patriarchs

A new phase of the story begins when God calls a man named Abraham, who lived in the area near the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (modern day Iraq and Syria). God told Abraham to go to a land that God would show him., promising that Abraham would have many descendants and that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through him. Abraham responded to God's call, and with Sarah, his wife, he finally settled in the land of Canaan (modern-day Palestine or Israel). There they tended their flocks and herds. The period was about 2000-1700 B.C. Abraham and Sarah became old and had no children until God gave them a son, whose name was Isaac. Isaac in turn had two sons, Jacob and Esau. By means of trickery, Jacob obtained a special blessing from his father. When his brother, Esau, became angry, Jacob fled to the home of an uncle, where he married and became wealthy before returning to Canaan. Jacob--whose name was changed to "Israel"--had twelve sons, but because of family rivalry, his son Joseph was sold as a slave and taken to Egypt. There Joseph managed to become a high-ranking official, and when famine drove the rest of the family into Egypt, the brothers became reconciled and settled there permanently.

III. Moses & the Exodus

The descendants of Jacob, who were called Hebrews or "children of Israel," continued to live in Egypt from about 1700 to 1275 B.C. During that time they were enslaved by the Egyptians and forced to make bricks and mortar. A Hebrew named Moses saw an Egyptian beating one of his kinsmen. Moses killed the Egyptian and fled to the desert regions east of Egypt. There he was called by God to return to Egypt and deliver his people from slavery.

Israel's deliverance from Egypt is commonly known as the "Exodus" and is one of the pivotal events in the Old Testament. The biblical account says that Moses returned to Egypt and told the king that the Hebrew people must be freed. When the king of Egypt refused, the Egyptians were afflicted with various plagues. The water of the Nile River became foul, frogs and insects

¹ The summary below has been adapted from "An Overview of the Bible" by Craig Koester at BibleTutor.com. It is accessible at <http://demo.lutherproductions.com/bibletutor/level1/program/start/story.htm>.

multiplied, and diseases and darkness made life miserable for the Egyptians. Finally, after the firstborn children and animals of each Egyptian household suddenly died, the Egyptians momentarily relented and the people of Israel fled eastward by night. The Egyptians pursued them, but the Israelites escaped recapture by miraculously crossing a sea while the Egyptian chariots were swept away by the water.

The people of Israel began their new life of freedom by remaining in the desert regions east of Egypt for about forty years, from approximately 1275 to 1235 B.C. The central event of this period was establishing a covenant relationship between God and Israel at Mt. Sinai. The covenant reminded the people that it was God who had brought them "out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exodus 20:2), and called upon them to honor God alone and reject the deities of other nations. The primary provisions of this covenant, known as the Ten Commandments, became Israel's charter as a nation. After departing from Mt. Sinai, the people gradually moved north and east into what is now the kingdom of Jordan. The generation that escaped out of Egypt, including Moses himself, died out as the people of Israel approached the Jordan River and prepared to enter the land of Canaan once again.

IV. The Conquest & the Judges

The details of Israel's entry into the land are unclear, but the biblical account suggests that conquest began about 1235 B.C. under the leadership of Joshua. Military victories apparently helped Israel gain possession of part of the land, but the westward movement of the Israelites was halted by the Philistines, who held sizable portions of the country. For generations the twelve tribes of Israel led a precarious existence in Canaan, often subjugated by neighboring peoples until a leader arose to liberate them. One of these leaders or "judges" was Deborah, a prophetess who led the people to victory over the Canaanites. Another judge was the strong man Samson, who fraternized with Philistine women and then avenged himself against Philistine villages when the relationships turned sour.

V. The United Kingdom of Israel

The continued threat of being dominated by other nations finally led the people of Israel to clamor for a king who could lead them. Samuel, the last of the judges, designated a man named Saul as Israel's first king. Saul was a tall and handsome man who was sometimes swept up into spiritual ecstasy. Soon after becoming king, Saul demonstrated his ability by leading the Israelite army to victory. But later Saul was plagued by sharp mood swings and became jealous of the popularity enjoyed by David, a promising young man from Bethlehem who was a member of his court. David fled for his life and lived as the leader of an outlaw band at the periphery of the country until Saul was wounded in battle and committed suicide.

David became king about 1000 B.C. and ushered in Israel's golden age. He helped to unify Israel by capturing the city of Jerusalem, which was in the middle of the country, and making it his capital. Under David's leadership a series of successful military campaigns secured Israel's borders against the neighboring peoples. One of David's own sons tried to seize his throne, driving him into temporary exile, but David managed to regain power. Another son named Solomon was designated as David's successor.

Solomon's outstanding achievement was the construction of a temple in Jerusalem, which became the religious as well as the political center of the country. International commerce was expanded, the arts flourished, and an opulent palace was built for the king. To carry out his

building projects, Solomon enslaved some of the non-Israelite peoples within his realm, and to secure his political position, he entered into several foreign alliances. He sealed these pacts by marrying women from the various allied peoples, and he permitted shrines to foreign deities in Jerusalem, even though worship of other gods had traditionally been condemned in Israel.

VI. The Divided Kingdom of Israel & Judah

After Solomon died, his son Rehoboam ruled harshly and the kingdom split in two in 922 B.C. The northern part was still called Israel, the southern part was called Judah, and relations between the two kingdoms shifted between uneasy coexistence and open hostility. The northern kingdom entered into close relations with the nations to the north, and the worship of the god Baal and goddess Astarte became common. The prophet Elijah protested the worship of these deities and challenged the priests of Baal to demonstrate the power of their gods by calling down fire from heaven. When they were unable to do so, Elijah prayed to the God of Israel, fire fell from heaven, and Elijah's followers slaughtered the prophets of Baal (I Kings 18:17-40).

VII. Invasion and Exile

In the eighth century B.C., the prophets Amos and Hosea joined the protest against the idolatrous and unjust practices of the northern kingdom. Finally, in 721 B.C., the army of Assyria, a powerful nation to the northeast, conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and exiled its leaders.

Meanwhile the southern kingdom of Judah also struggled with issues of idolatry and injustice. The oppressive practices of Judah's leaders were denounced by prophets such as Micah, who came from a village in the foothills, and Isaiah, a resident of Jerusalem. Some reforms were undertaken by King Hezekiah in the late eighth century B.C., but his successors reverted to patterns of corruption. The prophet Jeremiah, who came from a priestly family, railed against Israel's attraction to foreign cults, some of which included child sacrifice. He warned that if Judah did not repent, it would be devastated like the northern kingdom had been. Major reforms were made in the late seventh century B. C., during the reign of King Josiah. Pagan practices were rejected and worship was centralized at Jerusalem, but in the decades after Josiah's death, the Babylonians brought Judean sovereignty to an end.

The Babylonians destroyed the Jerusalem Temple in 586 B.C.. Judah's leading citizens were exiled to Babylonia far to the northeast, leaving only a remnant in the country. The Babylonian exile was one of the great crises in Israel's history. People questioned how God could permit the brutal destruction of Jerusalem and the loss of Israel's homeland. Nevertheless, the prophet Ezekiel told the exiles that even though Israel seemed as lifeless as a field of dry bones, God would revitalize the people and take them home again (Ezekiel 37:1-14).

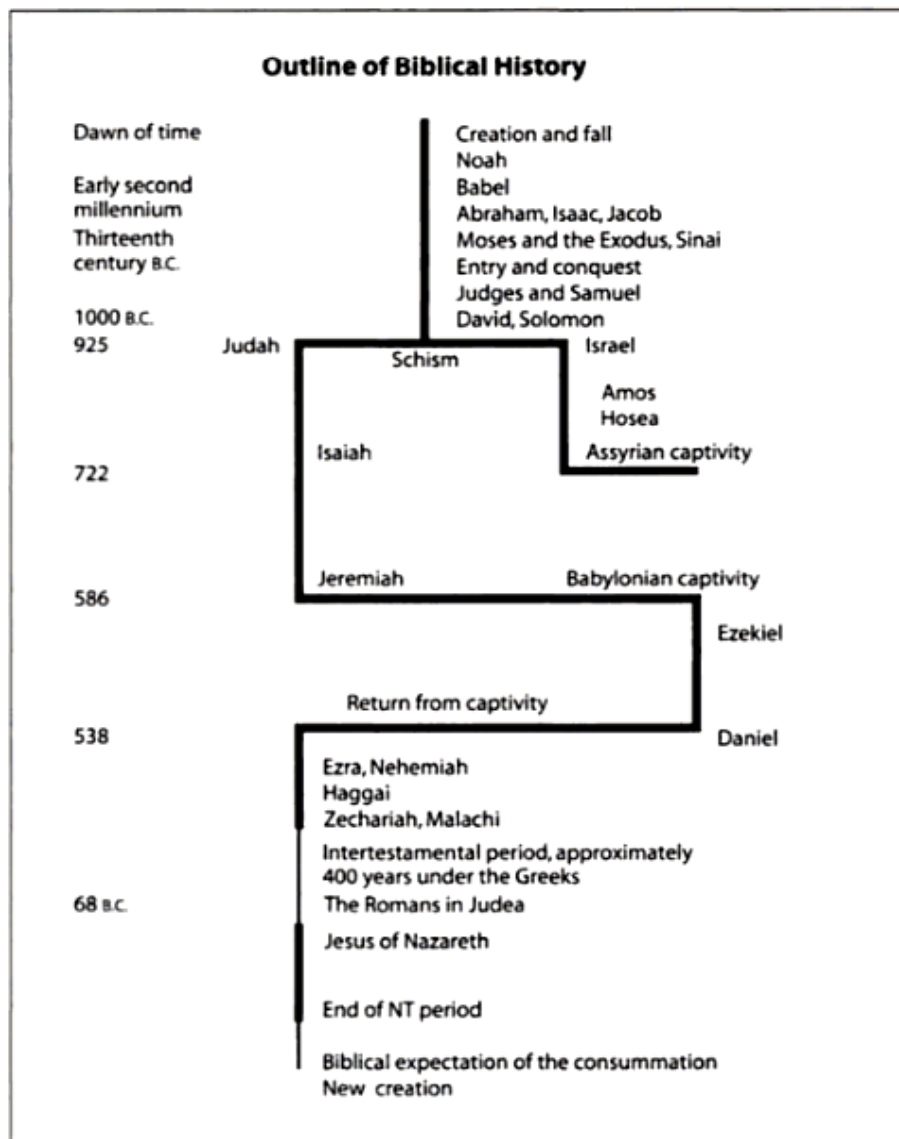
VIII. Return from Exile

A turning point came when Cyrus, king of Persia, conquered Babylonia. In 538 B.C., Cyrus declared that the exiles, now known as Judeans or Jews, could return to their country. Some of the exiles chose to remain in Babylonia, but others returned and began the slow task of reconstruction. Urged on by prophets such as Haggai and Zechariah, whose writings appear in the Old Testament, the people eventually established a new temple and rebuilt Jerusalem. The scribes Ezra and Nehemiah called for renewed commitment to the laws and traditions of Israel that were being assembled into the form in which we now have them in the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). Together, the temple and the law became the

two institutions that gave the people their distinct identity while living under Persian domination.

IX. Summary

1. Adam & the Fall
2. Abraham & the Patriarchs
3. Moses & the Exodus
4. The Conquest & the Judges
5. The United Kingdom of Israel
6. The Divided Kingdom of Israel & Judah
7. Invasion and Exile
8. Return from Exile



Above chart is from *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* by Graeme Goldsworthy, p.101

Patriarchs to Judges (c. 2166–1030)

	1446 Date for Exodus**	1260 Date for Exodus**
Abraham	2166–1991	2000–1825
Isaac	2066–1886	1900–1720
Jacob	2006–1859	1840–1693
Joseph	1915–1805	1749–1639
Moses' birth	1526	1340
Exodus	1446	1260
Desert wanderings	1446–1406	1260–1220
Entrance into Canaan	1406	1220
Period of the judges	1375 to 1050–1030	1210 to 1050–1030

United Monarchy (c. 1050–931)

	Dates	Notes
Saul's reign	1050–1030 to 1010	Numerals relating to Saul's age and length of reign are missing in the Hebrew text (see 1 Sam. 13:1)***
David's reign	1010–971	
Solomon's reign	971–931	

Divided Monarchy to Exile (931–586)

Kingdom divided	931	See The Divided Kingdom: Kings of Judah and The Divided Kingdom: Kings of Israel
Syro-Ephraimite war	740–732	Pekah (Israel) and Rezin (Samaria) pressure Jotham and Ahaz (Judah) to join their opposition to Tiglath-pileser III (Assyria)
Fall of Samaria (Israel)	722	Shalmaneser V (727–722) and Sargon II (722–705) of Assyria
Josiah's reforms	628	
Battle of Carchemish	605	Daniel and three friends exiled to Babylon
Jerusalem attacked	597	Nebuchadnezzar II takes exiles to Babylon including Jehoiachin and Ezekiel
Fall of Jerusalem (Judah)	586	Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon

Return from Exile (539–445)

Fall of Babylon	539	Cyrus of Persia (539–530)
1st return of exiles to Jerusalem	538	
Temple building begins	536	
Temple completed	516	Darius I (522–486)
Esther in palace of Xerxes	478	Xerxes I/Ahasuerus (485–464)
2nd return of exiles to Jerusalem under Ezra	458	Artaxerxes I (464–423)
3rd return of exiles to Jerusalem under Nehemiah	445	