

I. INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORICAL BOOKS

- A. A major difference between our arrangement of the Historical Books of the OT and the Hebrew is the books of Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, and 1–2 Kings make up the Former Prophets.¹ What this suggests is that although these books are grouped into the ‘historical’ category, they were understood as being primarily theological from the Jewish perspective. The prophets play a central role in most of them, not least of which includes their involvement in the writing of the books (e.g., 1–2 Kings). Even more importantly, they view and understand history through the covenantal lens of blessings and curses (i.e., Duet. 30:15–18).
- B. In this session we will be looking at the historical books and their place in the metanarrative of the OT. Although authors, dates, geographical locations, and biblical characters will be mentioned, it will not be our objective to give a survey of each of these points within the individual books. Alternatively, we will be addressing their theological significance as God continues to seek a people and a place in which He can dwell. With that said, it will behoove us to first understand how history was written in the ancient world.

II. HISTORY AND THE OLD TESTAMENT

- A. The subject of history writing in the ancient Near East (ANE)—known as historiography—is a significant part of understanding the literature of the OT. When we know how to interpret the OT, we will, in turn, know how to best respond to its message. For a lay-reader, one of the foundational practices for biblical interpretation is to allow the Bible to speak for itself.² By applying this principle, one will find a cursory reading of the text reveals deeply profound spiritual truths. Nonetheless, those who speak of the OT as nothing more than mythology or an expression of an antiquated, fantastical, primitive religion, miss the historiographical disposition of the OT—i.e., they overlook the way the ANE recorded history.
- B. When broadly examining historical writings from the ANE it is essential to understand that the authors are not writing in the twenty-first century. During this time, an author’s objectives were different than a modern-day historian. For instance, in the Western world, we have opted to follow a chronological, sequential model for documenting historical events. We have a naturalistic (empirical) perspective that drives us to record events based on the way they happened and there is no supernatural element to the documentation. In the ANE, history was viewed from almost an entirely supernatural approach. In fact, “even when natural cause and effect was evident or obvious, it was judged insignificant compared with the supernatural aspect.”³ This means that for those of the ANE, which includes the biblical authors, theology and history were deeply intertwined, if not synonymous.⁴
- C. There are both similarities and differences between the way history was generally documented in the ANE and the way in which OT does it.⁵

1. First, when compared to the polytheistic religions of the ANE, the Israelites were monotheistic in their faith. This simplified their situation because they did not have to worry about which god in a polytheistic pantheon might influence their history.

For God had made His constant, unchanging character known to them, and He pledged to fulfill specific commitments through His covenant. Israel’s history was not determined through incantations or omens, but through either following or deviating from the covenant.

2. Second, like other literature in the ANE, the cycles in the book of Judges and the constant apostasy seen in the book of Kings “bear witness to the principle of recurrence.”⁶ The cyclical pattern of sin and judgment was an important rhetorical discipline for the biblical historians.
 3. Third, the historical texts of the ANE rarely had an objective view. It was propagandistic in nature to benefit the king and the societal elite—i.e., the exaggerating of the positive, paying no attention to the negative, and taking credit for the accomplishments of a predecessor was not an odd practice. Interestingly, instead of making significant figures look good, the biblical narrative addresses and even highlights the failures of Israel’s kings and its people. Moreover, it is mostly concerned with glorifying God, His covenantal promises, and the execution of His plan, rather than the exalting of humans.⁷
- D. In conclusion, there are a few key elements one should be sensitive to when studying the OT. First, the authors were not unbiased. They were documenting events through a lens of divine covenantal promises that were given by a single God. This means the historical books (and the entire Bible) are primarily theological—i.e., theological history. Second, this does not mean what is documented is a fabrication of the truth but is instead an accurate historiographical account articulated in a way that can be foreign to the modern Westerner. This means the practice of deciphering what is being communicated should at times look different than the way we study a history book on the Civil War. Finally, it is these two points held together in tension (subjectivity and accuracy) that reveal to us the biblical narrative is best understood as a whole, before attempting to navigate its details. Although we may have differing genres that are separated by a chasm of cultures and a few millennia, when we take a step back and look at the tapestry as a whole, a consistent narrative unfolds across the canonical record—the God of Israel is intimately and relationally involved with humanity, and He will let nothing prevent His covenantal promises from being realized.

III. THE MESSAGE AND STRUCTURE OF THE HISTORICAL BOOKS

- A. The Historical Books are historical stories of faith and fighting. The Israelites must trust God on one hand and fight on the other. They are, in essence, documenting the lively connection between the sacred and the sword. There are a total of twelve books in this section. They go from Joshua and the time of the conquest of Canaan to the days of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther following the Babylonian captivity (a timeframe of c. one thousand years).

B. Contained within this section are real stories with real histories, real people, and real places. It is for this reason our version of the Bible has them in the division of the historical books. Most of the books in this section are pre-exilic, meaning they were written before the Babylonian exile (c. 605–538 B.C.). The history presented, as noted by one scholar, is a grand theological survey of Israel’s approximately 650 years in her land, to show how God once gave the land as a tangible token of the covenant relationship, at the time of Joshua, and how a history of persistent covenant breaking made God take it away again through Nebuchadnezzar in the year 587 B.C.⁸

C. **Joshua** is predominantly about the realization of God’s promise to give the Israelites the land of promise and their innate inability to not seek after other gods.

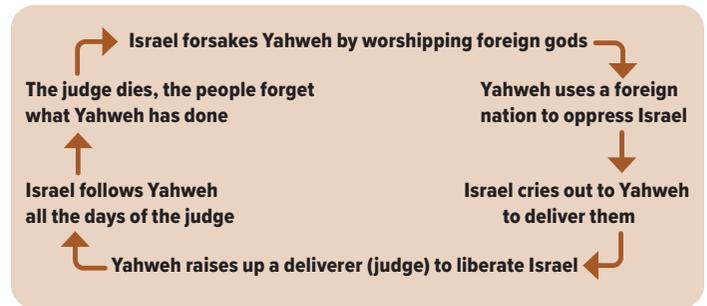
1. The book is best structured in the following manner: Josh. 1–5 (“passing over” [ābar] the Jordan River to enter Promised Land); Josh. 6–11 (“taking the land” [lāqah]); Josh. 12–22 (“dividing” [hālak] the land); Josh 23–24 (they are to “serve” [ābad] Yahweh with the entirety of their hearts). In the middle of this progression is the installation of Yahweh’s dwelling place in the midst of the people.

Then the whole congregation of the Israelites assembled at Shiloh, and set up the tent of meeting there. The land lay subdued before them. Joshua 18:1

2. This harkens back to the promise of Gen. 3:15—that the seed of the woman would triumph over the seed of the serpent and restore humanity to its lost royal glory as those who live with God (cf. Gen 1:28; Josh. 10:24–26; 18:1). Nonetheless, their success, or lack thereof, would be commensurate to their commitment to God’s Word/Law. God’s covenant is to be the foundation of all they do (Josh. 1:7–8; 23:6–8). But what we see at the end of the book is an ominous statement that points to the earlier prophetic declarations concerning their lack of ability to live with and belong to God (Exod. 32; Lev. 10; Num. 10–25; Deut. 4:23–28; 29:21–27). As noted by one scholar, the end of Joshua emphasizes that “the capacity that Israel lacks is a heart that will keep” His commandments (Deut. 30:6; resulting in them being driven from the land, cf. Josh 23:14–16).⁹

D. In **Judges** we see the beginnings of why the Lord will bring forth the Deuteronomic curses within the nation (cf. Deut 28). There is a predominant cycle found throughout the first sixteen chapters of the book, and it is highlighted in summary form in Judges 2:1-23.

1. It is in these six cycles that we see the essence of the book. Every cycle starts the same way and ends the same way. It starts with oppression and ends with peace. It starts with sin and ends with deliverance. It is worth noting that in these cycles it is nowhere mentioned the people repented. They would cry for help but, apart from 10:10–16, there is no evidence that a desire for spiritual reformation or repentance was included in that cry.¹⁰



2. Judges ends with this cycle having taken place for almost 300 years. By this point, they are essentially far worse than their pagan neighbors. At the beginning of the Book of Samuel, we can see that the darkness at the end of Judges has crept in to the holiest aspect of the nation, the priesthood at Shiloh. Israel is ripe for a king whose life exemplifies righteousness in accordance with the Law of the King (Deut. 17:14-20).

E. **Ruth** is the only narrative in the commentary section of the Hebrew Bible (i.e., Isaiah–Lamentations).¹¹ It’s setting, which is within the period of the Judges, focuses on information that is relevant to those exiled in Babylon. Not least of which is the absence of a Davidic king sitting upon Jerusalem’s throne (1 Sam. 16:4). The narrative of Ruth tells of a family from Bethlehem who go into exile and return greatly depleted to the Promised Land with no males.

1. The central focus of the story is on genealogy and geography (both of which are deeply intertwined). The narrative begins with the questionable state of Elimelech’s lineage (1:3). Moreover, in the context of Israel being exiled and God’s intentions for them being put on hold, we see an answer as Ruth marries a relative of Elimelech, resulting in the land of her dead father-in-law remaining in the family. The result is Ruth and Boaz continuing to build both the house of Israel and the royal line of David.

Now these are the descendants of Perez: Perez became the father of Hezron, ¹⁹Hezron of Ram, Ram of Amminadab, ²⁰Amminadab of Nahshon, Nahshon of Salmon, ²¹Salmon of Boaz, Boaz of Obed, ²²Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David. Ruth 4:18–22.

2. This is the only genealogy found at the end of a book in the OT. The resultative effect is the knitting of the micro-story of Ruth with the much larger macro-story of the biblical canon. There are two other genealogies in the OT that also list ten members. The first is that of Adam to Noah (Gen. 5:1–32) and the second is that of Shem to Abram (Gen. 11:10–26). Fascinatingly, each of the three “have soteriological implications for the human race.”¹¹ Furthermore, it ensures that God is continuing to move history toward a divine goal.¹³

- F. The **Books of Samuel** commence where the book of Judges ends. The conclusion of Judges is set at the town of Shiloh with God's people living in a state of moral anarchy and spiritual corruption (Judg. 21:5). 1 Samuel 1:1–5's narrative begins here, with a family making their yearly pilgrimage to one of the feasts. Hannah's prayer of desperation for a child at the beginning of 1 Samuel (1:9–11) is bookended with David's petition to God to spare Israel from judgment because of his sin (2 Sam 24:10–17). In the former, Hannah's child becomes a kingmaker (e.g., Samuel anoints Saul and David), and in the latter it is the king whose prayer is answered; allowing David to purchase the location for God's dwelling place in Jerusalem.
1. Furthermore, the result of Hannah's answered prayer and David's deliverance from his enemies are songs of thanksgiving that focus on a messianic king (1 Sam. 2:1–10; 2 Sam. 22:1–23:7). The prayers and songs of these two figures are crucial to understanding the book(s) of Samuel. Summarily, they communicate the following three points:
 - (1) Geographically, their temporary site of worship (Shiloh) shifts to the location that will become the permanent site for the temple.
 - (2) Genealogically, there is now a king in Israel who is a messianic type that will give Israel rest in the land lead them down God's chosen path of righteousness.
 - (3) Messianically, they both look forward to a time when God will overthrow the tyrannical dominion of Israel's enemies and put in place His just King from the line of David (1 Sam. 2:10; 2 Sam. 22:51).
- G. 1 & 2 Kings and 1 & 2 Chronicles both focus on the kings of Israel and Judah.
1. After reigning forty years David passed the kingdom on to his son Solomon. It was during the time of these two kings that Israel was in their golden age. Due to David's great skill as a military commander and his willingness to be a man after God's own heart, he was able to sustain the Kingdom of the Promised Land from the constant threat of foreign invasion.
So if you (Solomon) walk in My ways, to keep My statutes and My commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your days." 1 Kings 3:14
 2. Solomon's diplomatic skill maintained this empire without the need for further war. Solomon was prolific in art and science, having written three biblical books (i.e., Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, and most of the Book of Proverbs). Early in his reign God promised him great wisdom, which he became legendary for possessing. However, despite the great advantages of his heritage from David, wisdom from God, and his prosperity and security, late in life Solomon fell away from God and lived a life full of sin. As a result, the glory days of Israel were short-lived. As soon as Solomon died, the kingdom was split under his son Rehoboam, which was the result of his refusal to lessen the tax burden on the people (1 Kings 12:6–5).
3. The Northern Kingdom would initially place their capital in Shechem in 931 B.C. Assyria would then come from Nineveh and overtake the nation in 722 B.C. under Shalmaneser. Prior to the invasion they had nineteen kings who *all* did wickedly in the sight of the Lord.
 4. Due to Rehoboam's mistake, they lost the northern territory of Israel and now possessed a much smaller geographical area. They would eventually fall to the nation of Babylon as a result of their national sin (605 B.C.). The Kings of Judah were all descendants of David. One of their main objectives was to preserve the Davidic line. They had twenty kings and only eight good in the eyes of the Lord.
- H. **Ezra** and **Nehemiah** are arguably the most important post-exilic books. They are pivotal. Ezra deals with the religious restoration of Israel while Nehemiah is primarily concerned with Judah's political and geographical restoration.
1. The Book of Ezra continues the biblical narrative where 2 Chronicles ends. The book shows how God fulfills His promise after of restoration after their seventy years in exile (cf. Daniel 9). He is returning eighty-one years after Zerubbabel came with the first Jews (538–457 B.C.).
 2. Nehemiah was a contemporary of Ezra. He was the cupbearer to Artaxerxes I and in about 445 B.C. he asked the king if he could return to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls of the city. At this point we are long past the Babylonian captivity and are getting to the very end of OT history. It would be under his leadership that everything in Judah would be restored except the king and his throne. His return takes place thirteen years after Ezra and some ninety-four years after the return lead by Zerubbabel. Malachi would be ministering as a contemporary of Nehemiah.
- I. Many have debated as to whether the Book of Esther should be in the Bible. We do not know who wrote the book and the name of God is found nowhere within its text. So why is Esther a part of the OT? We must understand that Esther has more going for it than just needing to fall into the normal scrutiny that determines the canonicity of other books of the Bible.
1. First, there is a feast as a result of what took place in the life of Esther. The account that we have in these pages is what launched a yearly feast for the Jewish people to remember God's deliverance from a potential Persian holocaust.
 2. Secondly, although it may not have the name of God, the active hand of God cannot be denied. Even though God is never directly mentioned in the book, His providence is distinctly evidenced in the deliverance of the Jews in the face of great opposition and terrible odds. It is a witness of God's mindfulness of His people, His recognition of their faith, and His direct intervention in their lives.

