

The Old Testament: A Story of Love, Disobedience, Mercy, and Redemption

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Introduction

The Hebrew Bible, also referred to as the Old Testament, is a collection of 39 books that provide a historical account and proclaim a great story of God’s relationship with mankind. The books of the Old Testament were mostly written in Hebrew, the primary language of Israel. The Old Testament was written by more than 30 authors and the first writings were recorded around 1400 BC.¹ This collection of books were universally accepted from centuries of reflection as inspired by God and are authoritative for faith and life.² In this writing we will take a very brief historical tour, skimming the high points of God’s story of His chosen people that reveals God’s love for man, His mercy, and desire for redemption of His relationship with man.

Figure 1.0 will serve as a reference and picture of the time period of the Old Testament story with major divisions highlighted to illustrate the historical context of our brief tour.

OLD TESTAMENT TIMELINE

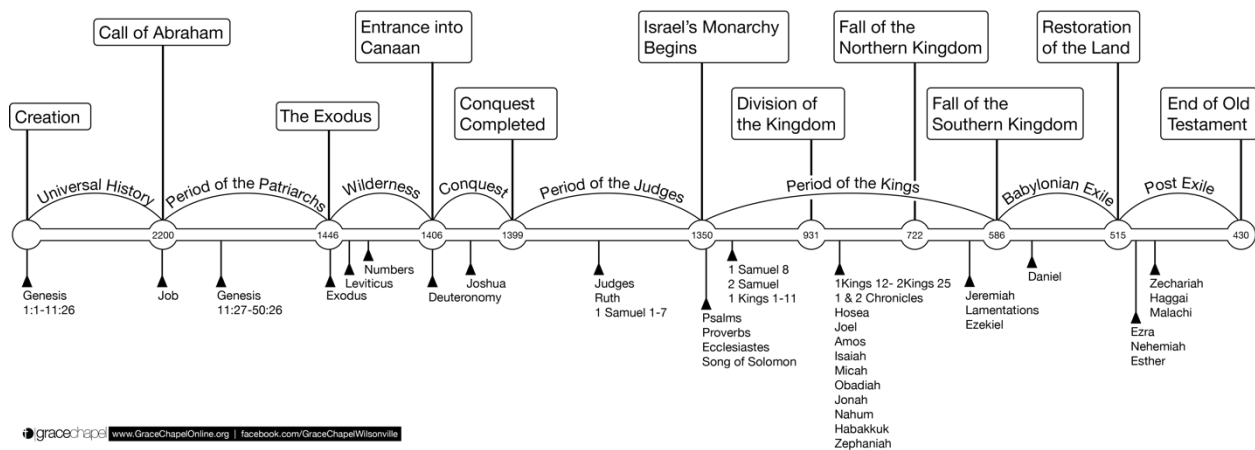


Figure 1.0 Old Testament Timeline. Source: Grace Chapel, www.gracechapelonline.org

¹ The International Bible Society, “When was the Bible Written?,” 2020, <https://www.biblica.com/resources/bible-faqs/when-was-the-bible-written/> (Accessed February 3, 2020)

² The International Bible Society, “How were the Books of the Bible Chosen?,” 2020, <https://www.biblica.com/resources/bible-faqs/how-were-the-books-of-the-bible-chosen/> (Accessed February 3, 2020)

Creation and the Fall of Man

The Bible begins with the account of God's creation of the heavens and earth, light from darkness, waters and dry ground, vegetation to cover the earth, the sun and the moon, and living creatures in six days. The seventh day God rested. Following the seventh day, from the dust of the earth God created man in His own likeness and gave him dominion over His creation. God planted a garden in Eden for man to tend and commanded the man saying "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat."³ Man enjoyed communion with God but did not have a helper, so God caused a deep sleep to fall on the man and God took of his ribs and formed a woman from his flesh. Woman was tempted by a serpent to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil so she would be "like God."⁴ She took and ate the fruit and shared it with man. Because of disobeying God's command, mankind is cursed and separated from God. This account of the original sin and separation of God is followed by a pattern of rebellion against God and wickedness of the descendants that resulted in God's judgment of mankind through a flood that covered the earth. All of creation that breathed on the earth at this time died in the flood except Noah, who was favored by God, built an ark, saved his family and two of each species to repopulate the earth.

The Period of the Patriarchs

In Genesis chapter 12 the Lord commanded Abram, a descendent of Noah married to Sarai, to leave his family and go to a land that God would show him. In faith, at ninety-nine years old, Abram obeyed and God appeared and said "As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you will be the father of a multitude of nations."⁵ God gives Abram a new name,

³ Gen. 2:16-17 NASB

⁴ Gen. 3:5 NASB

⁵ Gen. 17:4 NASB

Abraham, as a father of a multitude of nations. “I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings will come forth from you.”⁶ God promises to give Abraham and his descendants the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession. God commands Abraham to covenant with God that “every male among you shall be circumcised.”⁷ The ritual of circumcision is a physical outward sign to the covenant of the people with God. This covenant is of great significance as it establishes Abraham as the father of the covenant and father of a chosen nation, Israel.⁸ From Abraham come the patriarchs Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph who was sold into slavery in Egypt. While in Egypt, Joseph earns favor with Pharaoh and is elevated to ruler of Egypt. A famine struck the land and Joseph’s brothers traveled to Egypt where the family was reunited and redeemed by Joseph. Jacob, also named Israel by God, and his twelve sons settled in the land of Egypt and prospered. Jacob’s twelve sons and their descendants become the twelve tribes of Israel. Genesis concludes the period of the Patriarchs recording the death of Joseph.

Exodus, the Law and the Conquest of the Promised Land

The tribes of Israel multiplied and became mighty in Egypt. A new king arose that did not know Joseph and subjected the Israelites to forced labor and killed the male Hebrew children to limit the Israelite influence.⁹ During this period a daughter of Levi bore a son named Moses. To protect him from the Pharaoh’s command to kill the male children, she placed him in a wicker basket alongside the Nile river where he would be found by the Pharaoh’s daughter.¹⁰ Moses grew up in the house of Pharaoh and after a time of exile in the land of Midian, God called

⁶ Gen. 17:6 NASB

⁷ Gen. 17:10 NASB

⁸ Alister McGrath, *Christianity: An Introduction*, 3rd ed., (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015), 33.

⁹ Exod. 1:8-16 NASB

¹⁰ Exod. 2:1-10 NASB

Moses to return to Egypt to deliver the sons of Israel to the land promised.¹¹ The book of Exodus describes a series of miracles that plagued Egypt ending with God's judgment in striking of all the first born in the land of Egypt, sparing the Israelites who were instructed to take the blood from an unblemished lamb and put it on the doorposts of their home where they will eat the flesh and bitter herbs. Exodus 11 and 12 describe the last plague and the origins of the Passover feast that mark God's judgment of Egypt. Thus, Moses led the liberation of the Israelites from the oppression of Pharaoh and the Lord went before them in a cloud by day and fire by night.¹² While traveling in the wilderness on Mount Sinai, Moses received ten specific and unconditional commands by God to the Israelites known as "The Ten Commandments." For 40 years, the Israelites wandered through the wilderness of Sinai. During this time, we were given the book of Leviticus outlining the duties of the Priests and the book of Numbers describing Israel's preparation to enter the promised land. Following the death of Moses and under the leadership of Joshua, God allowed Israel to cross the Jordan river into the land of Canaan. The book of Joshua describes the conquest of Canaan and the settlement of the promised land that was accomplished by following the Law and worshipping the Lord in a way that ensured that the sons of Israel were not compromised by the Canaanite religions. Alister McGrath in his book *Christianity: An Introduction* tells us that Exodus introduces us to a new specific four-letter name used to identify God often referred to as the "Tetragrammaton." In English, the term "Lord" is specifically used to refer to the "God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" and only used in naming the God whom Israel worshipped.¹³

¹¹ Exod. 3:7-10 NASB

¹² Exod. 13:21 NASB

¹³ Alister McGrath, *Christianity: An Introduction*, 3rd ed., (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015), 33

The Period of the Judges

Following the death of Joshua there was a leadership vacuum in Israel and the Israelites fell away from strict obedience to the Lord and did not completely eliminate their enemies. This led to intermarriage, idolatry and further individual compromise. “In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes.”¹⁴ Soon, Israel was taken captive and out of desperation they cried out to the Lord to rescue them. Out of the Lord’s faithfulness and in accordance to His promise, God would raise up a judge to deliver His people. For a time, there would be peace, then compromise, disobedience, and oppression by captors. This cycle of rebellion, mercy and redemption continued over 325 years where Israel would succumb under six different oppressors and be redeemed by God through twelve different Judges.¹⁵ Samuel appointed his sons as judges over Israel, but they did not follow after Samuel and were corrupt, so the people said to Samuel, “Behold, you have grown old, and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint a king for us to judge us like all the nations.”¹⁶ Samuel anoints Saul as the first King of Israel who reigned from 1020 – 1080 BC.¹⁷

The Period of the Kings

King Saul disobeyed God and lost favor with God, so He “regretted that He had made Saul king over Israel.”¹⁸ The Lord commanded Samuel to go to Bethlehem where He had selected David as a king for Himself. David, reigning from 100-961 BC, conquered Jerusalem and led to Jerusalem becoming the center of Israel’s religious life.¹⁹ David became God’s leader

¹⁴ Josh 17:6 NASB

¹⁵ Life Application Study Bible. Ronald A. Beers, ed., (La Habra, CA: Zondervan, 2000), 376.

¹⁶ 1 Sam. 8:5

¹⁷ Alister McGrath, *Christianity: An Introduction*, 3rd ed., (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015), 36

¹⁸ 1 Sam. 8:5 NASB

¹⁹ Alister McGrath, *Christianity: An Introduction*, 3rd ed., (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015), 36

for all Israel and the hope that a future successor of David would become the Messiah.²⁰ David charged his son, Solomon, to obey God and follow His laws. Solomon reigned from 961-922 BC and constructed the first temple in Jerusalem as a permanent place for worship for the Lord.²¹ God blessed Solomon and he was known for his great wealth and wisdom.

During the period from Moses through the period of kings we are given the books of Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Songs and Lamentations; also referred to as the Poetic Books of the Bible.²² These are a collection of hymns, praises, words of wisdom, poetry and stories of love for God's people and suffering that comes from disobedience.

Following the death of Solomon, Rehoboam succeeded Solomon as king of Israel. He was a harsh ruler and the people rebelled resulting in a split in the kingdom. The northern kingdom, known as "Israel", would include 10 tribes and was ruled by Jeroboam. The southern kingdom, known as "Judah" would include the remaining tribes of Judah and Benjamin. Corrupt and evil kings, idolatry and turning away from God leads to the fall of Israel to when the Assyrian's captured Samaria in 722 BC.²³ The Assyrians were a brutal regime who killed, tortured, divided and scattered their enemies to destroy them. Judah stood for another 136 years before king Jehoiakim rebelled against Babylon. Judah was invaded and Jerusalem fell to king Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian empire in 586 BC.²⁴ The temple was destroyed by fire, the treasures of the house of the Lord were removed and the Israelites were deported to Babylon. Thus ends the period of the kings.

²⁰ Ibid, 36

²¹ Alister McGrath, *Christianity: An Introduction*, 3rd ed., (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015), 36

²² Felisi Sorgwe, Introduction to Biblical Texts and Doctrines, CHRI 5300, Class lecture at Houston Baptist University, Houston, Texas, January 28, 2020

²³ Life Application Study Bible. Ronald A. Beers, ed., (La Habra, CA: Zondervan, 2000), 606.

²⁴ Felisi Sorgwe, Introduction to Biblical Texts and Doctrines, CHRI 5300, Class lecture at Houston Baptist University, Houston, Texas, January 28, 2020

Exile and Restoration

The prophets interpret this period of exile in Babylon as judgment against Judah for following the pagan beliefs and practices of their society and as a period of national repentance.

²⁵ The book of Daniel provides the account of the faithful Israelites who lived in captivity. In 538 BC the Persian empire led by King Cyrus conquered Babylon.²⁶ One year following the conquest, Cyrus issued an edict to allow the captives to return to their homelands and rebuild their temple.²⁷ The book of Daniel demonstrates how God is in control of the forces of nature and the destiny of nations. God is faithful to His promises for His people.

As recorded in Ezra and Nehemiah, there were three waves of Jews returning from exile. Zerubbabel led the first group back to Jerusalem where they settled their homes. Their first work was to begin the work of rebuilding the altar and celebrating the feasts. The second temple was completed in 516 BC.²⁸ With the permission of King Artaxerxes, the second wave was led by Ezra, a priest and scribe, 80 years after Zerubbabel.²⁹ Thirteen years later, with the permission of King Artaxerxes, the third wave was led by Nehemiah. Nehemiah was a cup bearer to the king and faithful to the Lord. Hearing that the walls of Jerusalem were in ruins, he left Babylon to rebuild the walls. Overcoming resistance, they were able to complete the wall in 52 days.³⁰

Returning the Israelites to their homeland, rebuilding of the temple, and restoration of the walls of Jerusalem concluded the exile in Babylon.

²⁵ Alister McGrath, *Christianity An Introduction*, page 38

²⁶ Felisi Sorgwe, *Introduction to Biblical Texts and Doctrines*, CHRI 5300, Class lecture at Houston Baptist University, Houston, Texas, January 28, 2020

²⁷ *Ibid.* Felisi Sorgwe

²⁸ *Ibid.* Felisi Sorgwe

²⁹ *Life Application Study Bible*. Ronald A. Beers, ed., (La Habra, CA: Zondervan, 2000), 781.

³⁰ Felisi Sorgwe, *Introduction to Biblical Texts and Doctrines*, CHRI 5300, Class lecture at Houston Baptist University, Houston, Texas, January 28, 2020

Woven throughout the history of Israel, the priests and prophets played a significant role in establishing and maintaining the laws given by God and reminding them of God's will for His people during the turbulent period of the kings, exile and restoration. In the book of Leviticus, the priests established Megilloth which were five scrolls to be read at the specified Jewish feasts.³¹ On one level these feasts were given as appointed times by God telling the story of God's faithfulness to His promise and the nation of Israel. On a greater level, the feasts proclaim the story of God's faithfulness to His chosen people and also proclaims His redemption story for all mankind.

The Bible contains 16 books of the prophets. The books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel are known as the "major prophets" because of the length of the text. The remaining 12 books are called the "minor prophets." The prophets reminded the people of God's will for them, affirmed His commitment to them and proclaimed warnings of repentance and impending judgment for their sin.

Personal Reflection

The theme consistently presented during my review of the Old Testament is a story of love, disobedience, mercy and redemption. God created mankind in His own image and desires to have a personal relationship with Him. God chose Israel's descendants for Himself. God provided the law and temporary path of redemption for those He loved through faith and a sacrificial system. Throughout history, Israel's descendants repeat a pattern of disobedience and judgment as a consequence of their sin, but in His great love, the Lord repeatedly offers mercy and grace by providing a path for repentance and redemption. I am personally amazed at the love, mercy and grace that God bestows on His chosen people and impressed with the cleverness

³¹ Felisi Sorgwe, Introduction to Biblical Texts and Doctrines, CHRI 5300, Class lecture at Houston Baptist University, Houston, Texas, January 28, 2020

God reveals in His redemption plan. It is a beautiful story cast during the creation of the heavens, lived out through the lives of God's chosen people, and passed from one generation to the next through the appointed festivals and feasts. It perfectly sets the stage for God to reveal His ultimate plan to redeem all mankind to Himself.

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