

OVERVIEW OF THE OLD TESTAMENT
in Eight Lessons

for
2018 Adult Curriculum
First United Methodist Church, Tulsa, OK

by
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An Overview of the Old Testament

Introduction

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This is your story. The Old Testament is your story, and that's why you need to know it. Many Christians have too little knowledge of the OT because they don't know how relevant it actually is. It appears so foreign, especially if a would-be reader gets bogged down in Leviticus! And, honestly, there are some historical and cultural hurdles that appear intimidating at first glance. But just a little historical understanding will open up vast resources for understanding the New Testament and understanding what it means to be a Christian.

You don't have to grasp all of the Old Testament to gain an appreciation for its continuing importance. You don't have to memorize the list of kings who ruled in Israel and Judah. You **do need** a sense of the **main storyline**. That involves knowing some key characters and a few key events. If, for example, you know the significance of Abraham, Moses, and David, you have a frame of reference for understanding the rest of OT history and prophecy as you have opportunity to study various parts of it.

Providing that frame of reference for persons in the adult classes will benefit them greatly. So, although the lessons will provide more than that framework, I encourage you to keep repeating the basic storyline each week, so that people will know where to situate the topic of that week's lesson. The aim is to show an order and purpose for the narrative and prophetic messages found in the OT. It will seem much less random (and irrelevant) when the readers and hearers of the OT know that this story is going somewhere. And if they know that this is *their story*—the story of *their* salvation and God's provision for *their* eternal life—they won't have to be persuaded that it's relevant.

And what is that basic storyline? Humanity strayed from God and his good purposes. Yet God is determined to fulfill his good purposes for humanity. So God called Abraham into covenant relationship with himself, for Abraham and his descendants to be a blessing and testimony to the world. God is so determined to fulfill his promises to Abraham that he brings Abraham's descendants out of slavery in Egypt (under Moses' leadership) to become a nation in covenant relationship with God. Their subsequent history as a nation teaches us what it means to be faithful and unfaithful to God.

To further his covenant purposes, God provided Israel with a king "after God's own heart." David was not perfect, but God sovereignly promised that David's heir would reign over a kingdom that would never end. The demise of (first) Israel and (then) Judah seems to negate the promises made to Abraham and David. But God brings a chastened Judah back from captivity, a mere shadow of their former glory. The Old Testament ends with the promises made to Abraham and David waiting for their time of fulfillment. But you can't appreciate the time of fulfillment (the New Testament) without understanding at least the basics of the time of promise (the Old Testament).

Those last two paragraphs may be too much to review each week. But here's the progression which can be repeated easily, once the basic story has been outlined:

From **Adam** to **Abraham** to **Moses** to **David** to **expectation** of future fulfillment.

An Overview of the Old Testament

Lesson 1: Creation and Calamity

God's Will for Humanity—Blessing
Rebellious Will Creates Conflict—Curse

Lesson 2: Called into Covenant

Promises to Abraham
Timeline from Abraham to Malachi

Lesson 3: Called out of Egypt, Sent into Canaan

From Slavery to Nationhood
Moses, Deliverance, Commandments
Organizing a Nation of Priests
God's Dwelling with Israel

Lesson 4: A Kingdom Rises and Falls

Chaos Increases in Era of Judges
First King, Second King (1 & 2 Samuel)
Promise to David
Promise of Solomon, His Later Failure
Divided Kingdom
 Judah Inconsistent at Best
 Israel Consistent at Worst
Elijah, Amos, Hosea
Both Judah and Israel Still Claimed by God,
Even When at Odds with One Another and
Scattered in Captivity

Lesson 5: Called Back to Covenant Faithfulness

The Role of the Prophets
Elijah, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah,
Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel

Lesson 6: Called to Worship and Wisdom

Psalms and Wisdom Literature,
God's Gifts to Israel and Us

Lesson 7: Captivity and Return

1 & 2 Kings
Jeremiah and Ezekiel
Ezra and Nehemiah

Lesson 8: Unfulfilled Promises

An Unfinished Story
Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi
Blessing for All the Families of the Earth?
A Kingdom that will Last?

Items on the right are key concepts, persons, or Books for each lesson. You cannot cover it all, but you can see the direction of things and make decisions on what to emphasize as you see fit.

Note: Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Bible (2001, 2016) unless otherwise designated.

Note: There are definite similarities between my “Big Ideas of the Bible” (see the last page of Lesson 1) and the outline suggested by the table of contents in *Living God's Word*, by J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays (Zondervan: Grand Rapids) 2012. That’s a book I discovered while searching for a suitable textbook for an introductory class in Bible for ORU. Even though the date I placed on my page “Big Ideas” in Lesson 1 is 2017, I want to assure you that I did not copy my outline from theirs. In fact, I developed the “Big Ideas” page around 2005 or earlier, and I’ve refined it over the years.

Part of the similarity between Duvall & Hays and my list is because words like “creation,” “call,” and “consummation” are commonly used in talking about the Bible. So I don’t think they copied my list any more than I copied theirs! I do recommend their book, however, as an excellent and very accessible overview of the whole Bible. I’ll be using it, Lord willing, at ORU starting in the fall of 2018.

Overview of the Old Testament
Lesson 1: Creation and Calamity
God's Will for Humanity—Blessing
Rebellious Will Creates Conflict—Curse

Creation

Every story has a beginning, including the story of the universe and the story of the human race. What is not so obvious to everyone is that this story has a Beginner. God began the story of the universe and the story of humanity on this planet as we read about it in Genesis 1-2.

We don't read this account to tell us **how** the universe came into existence (in terms of physical causation) nor for **how long** it has existed. Those who argue the Bible in this respect really miss the point. The Bible tells us **why** there is a universe and why there is a human race. Science can't touch those questions without straying beyond its borders of examining cause and effect and (where possible) attempting experimental repetition. The moment scientists start talking about *why* there is a universe (why there is something rather than nothing), they speak from a philosophical or religious standpoint (whether it's a biologist like Richard Dawkins or a physicist like Stephen Hawking). Scientific credentials don't disqualify you from having a viewpoint about why there is a universe, but neither do those credentials confer on you more authority than anyone else to speak on such subjects.

The more honest deniers of creation will admit they don't want to believe God is responsible for the existence of the universe and humanity because that would make *them* responsible to the One who is responsible for their existence. If everything is just a cosmic accident with **no divine will** bringing about the universe's existence, then we humans get to decide what our lives are for, and we are responsible to no one but ourselves (or to those who have some power over us). As F.M. Dostoyevsky said back in the 19th century, "If there is no God, then everything is permitted" (*The Brothers Karamazov*, 1880).

But the Bible declares there is one God who created everything. This starting point is found in Gen. 1:1, and the belief carries through to the end of Revelation. Even where creation is not being discussed, it is everywhere assumed. From this doctrine of creation flow several important implications that shape the biblical view of everything. Among the most important implications are the following:

1. Monotheism (belief in one God). One **will** is responsible for the existence of everything and everyone. The purpose of that one will should be served, not ignored or defied. Thus we have the basis for morality, not in human preferences or dispositions, but in the will of the Creator. If the Creator wants us to live and treat one another a certain way, we are not free to "change the rules" to suit ourselves. We may do so, but we will eventually have to answer to the Creator for how we have treated his purpose in creating us.

2. The spiritual significance of the material world. God is spirit (John 4:24), but he created matter. So how we use or abuse physical matter (including our bodies) matters to God because he created it; it belongs to God (Psa. 24:1). It pleased God to create it; how we use it

should be to please him. God is not indifferent to what we do with his planet, the people he created, or with our bodies and minds (which we vainly think are ours to use as we please!).

3. An orderly, “lawful” world. The One Will responsible for the universe created it to have a certain “orderliness,” in the sense that plants produce seeds, which produce more plants and more seeds (Gen. 1:11-12), and the sun, moon, and stars have observable regular patterns (Gen. 1:14-18). Observation of the orderliness of the universe has advanced far beyond what could be seen when the Bible was written, but that orderliness makes scientific observation and discovery possible.

4. God's will to bless creation, especially through humanity. God wants what he made (otherwise he wouldn't have made it). God wants what he made to flourish. This is particularly true with God's will to bless humanity, created in God's image and with special responsibility for the other things God made.

The first mention of blessing in Scripture is Genesis 1:22, where God “blessed” the birds of the air and the creatures in the waters. The second mention of blessing is more detailed and directed toward us as God's stewards of his creation:

²⁶Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

²⁷So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

²⁸And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” [Gen. 1:26–28]

Many things could be said about the significance of being created in God's “image” and “likeness.” For our purposes here, suffice it to say that the context indicates that being in God's image gives us the capacity (and responsibility) to communicate with and receive communication from God. Humans were created in some sense to “correspond” and respond to God's good will for other creatures. The “dominion” given to us (vs. 28) is under God's authority. It is not dominion to do as we please but dominion to do as God pleases.

Human dominion over the other creatures of the planet is shown again in Genesis 2, when Adam exercises dominion by giving names to “every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens” (2:19). God “had formed” the beasts and the birds “out of the ground” (2:19), but Adam gets to name them.

Earlier in Genesis 2 we have a more detailed account of the first human's physical creation (compared to 1:26-27). Using “dust from the ground,” God shaped the human physical form. But that form was lifeless until God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man

became a living creature” (2:7, ESV; the KJV has “living soul”; modern translations tend to use terms such as “being” or “person”). This presentation of humanity’s creation shows the human connection to the earth (from which the beasts and birds derive their form, 2:19), but also humanity’s more intimate connection to God. Humanity’s form is of the earth, but humanity’s life is God’s impartation.

Having such a connection with God and being in God’s image confers on humans more responsibility than he gave to other creatures. With that responsibility comes also the capacity for relationship with God based on our willful response to his will as he makes it known. We know from other Scriptures (like 1 John 4:8), that “God is love.” In his image we have the capacity to receive that love, to say ‘yes’ to that love, but also the capacity to say ‘no’ to that love and God’s will. (Plants and animals, it would seem, do not have the capacity to disobey God.) That brings us to the second part of the beginning of the story—the story of “the Fall,” or what I call “the calamity” (because it starts with a ‘c’ and it’s a vivid word).

Before we move on to discuss “the calamity,” here are some other passages which highlight the doctrine of creation. You might want to use these in teaching to supplement the well-known creation story in Gen. 1-2, or you might just look at them for your own edification:

Old Testament

Nehemiah 9:6

Psalms 33:6

Psalms 90:2

Proverbs 3:19

Isaiah 44:24

Jeremiah 32:17

New Testament

John 1:3

Colossians 1:16

Hebrews 1:2

Hebrews 11:3

Revelation 4:11

Calamity (The Fall)

It might have been C. S. Lewis (he gets credit for a lot of things!) who first said there is more empirical evidence for the biblical doctrine of “the fall” than for any other Christian belief. There is certainly more than enough evidence that something is wrong with the human race! Even people who don’t believe in God think humans should behave better than we do. Even people who find no fault with their own behavior easily find fault with others.

“We should do better” is as close to a universal wish as we can imagine. Yet even those who subscribe to the Bible’s teaching about our alienation from God (e.g., Isa. 53:6) are still capable of being shocked by some fresh, violent atrocity. Perhaps we should be surprised (and grateful) that things aren’t worse than they are, given the pervasive effects of the fall on the human race.

Theologians argue about whether the image of God in humanity was fractured, blurred, erased, or lost entirely when Adam and Eve disobeyed God’s command and ate from “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen. 2:17; 3:1-6). What precisely happened to “the image” is an academic argument we don’t need to solve. More important are the observable effects of human disobedience, as seen in Gen. 3-4, the rest of the Bible, and in our own lives. Before enumerating some of those effects, let’s take note of the nature of the temptation.

The insinuation of “the serpent” is that God is less than generously disposed toward humanity. I could say “the devil” or “Satan” rather than “the serpent,” but I find it better to stick with the terms actually used in the text, even though that leaves some ambiguity in our minds. Ambiguity about the identity of “the serpent” is cleared up in later Scripture (Rev. 12:9; 20:2), but the ambiguity in Gen. 3 is there for a purpose, I believe. The focus is not on the serpent’s identity but rather on the thoughts and desires of humanity in responding to the serpent’s deception. Notice also that Gen. 3 gives no explanation for how “the serpent” came to be an agent of evil, trying to spread his rebellion against God’s will to other creatures (humans), inciting them (us) to join the rebellion.

The serpent’s first question seems to imply that God has made the whole garden off-limits (Gen. 3:1). “The woman” (who isn’t called “Eve” until 3:20) seems to come to God’s defense: God lets us eat of any of the trees, except for that one “in the midst of the garden . . . lest you die” (3:3). The serpent focuses on that one divine denial of access, and that one threat of retribution: “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:4-5). The implication is that God is less than honest for self-serving purposes, to keep the humans subservient to him. God does not have their best interest in mind, but only his. The implication is that if you want to fulfill all your potential, you have to defy God’s self-serving rule and promote your own self-interest.

Genesis 3:6 concisely yet comprehensively describes the woman’s decision-making process: “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.” Seeing “that the tree was good for food” was an act of imagination, since she had not previously tasted its fruit. But it was also “a delight to the eyes,” i.e., it was beautiful and attractive. But finally, and decisively, “the tree was to be desired to make one wise.” That was the main point of the serpent’s incitement to disobey—not “look how delicious it is” or “isn’t it beautiful?” but “you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (3:5). Equality with God, or at least independence from God, freedom to choose as one willed, based on one’s own evaluation of “good and evil”—that was what “the woman” desired; that was the decisive factor in taking the fruit and eating it.

“She also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate” (end of 3:6). Had he heard the serpent’s suggestions? Was he oblivious to what had transpired before the woman handed him the fruit? Did he ask—did she say—where the fruit came from? The Bible provides no answers to such intriguing questions, other than these later words of God to Adam in 3:17: “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife,” i.e., instead of heeding God, he went along with Eve’s disobedience. She must have said something to Adam, perhaps repeating the serpent’s lines, or giving her own opinion about the benefits of the fruit. Whatever she said, one thing is clear, Adam and Eve are held equally accountable, even though they try to blame someone or something else for their misdeed.

One part of the serpent’s promise proved true: “the eyes of both were opened” (3:7; cf. 3:5). But now that they see more, do they think of themselves more highly? Do they feel like God’s equal now? Quite to the contrary, they perceived that “they were naked” (3:7). Sewing “fig leaves

together” to make “loincloths” for themselves shows embarrassment, not the exaltation Eve might have imagined would be hers if only she could be “like God, knowing good and evil” (3:5).

Even more troubling is their next perception: God is approaching! Where can we hide? (3:8). Do they feel like God’s equals? Why are they terrified of their Creator, who has provided for them so generously? Because of doubting his generosity and defying his one prohibition (in their foolish attempt to elevate themselves), they now run to hide from the one whose will gave them life.

Of course no one can hide from God, and God confronts the fallen pair: “Where are you?” (3:9) Adam admits that he “was afraid, because I was naked” (3:10). God asks, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” (3:11) God knows what happened, of course, but he wants the man to confess his disobedience. Instead, Adam blames Eve and God for his newly-discovered shame: “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate” (3:12). When God asks Eve, “What is this that you have done?” she likewise blames another: “The serpent deceived me, and I ate” (3:13).

So we see the first results of humanity’s disobedience: communion between God and humanity is broken; the relationship is now fraught with distrust and fear (of the wrong kind). The communion between the man and the woman has likewise suffered from their mutual failure—not only in disobeying the command about the tree but also blaming others rather than taking direct responsibility and repenting. It scarcely needs to be said, but this reflexive blaming of others has plagued us ever since!

Pointing the finger of blame at another did not work the first time it was tried. God speaks solemn words of consequences that will fall on all those involved in this rebellion. “The serpent” is “cursed” (3:14) and will have “enmity” with the woman “and her offspring.” “He [the woman’s offspring] shall bruise” the serpent’s head, who will “bruise his heel” (3:15).

If we knew nothing of the Bible’s later revelations, we could only draw from this prediction the expectation of perpetual animosity between the serpent and humans through all their generations. Seen in that narrow context, the expectation would be only negative. We can look at Gen. 3:15 as the “*protevangeliium*,” or “proto-good news” only because of knowing the gospel of Jesus, who would and now has defeated the powers of evil and death arrayed against us (see Col. 2:15; Heb. 2:14).

The woman is told to expect “pain” in bringing forth children, greater pain that would otherwise have been the case (we can only imagine the “what-ifs”). She is told that her relationship with her husband will also be problematic: “And you will desire to control your husband, but he will rule over you” (3:16, New Living Translation). Whether that is the best translation among the variety available, every version indicates the husband-wife relationship will be more challenging because of the consequences of sin.

Adam’s future is pictured as one of pain and ongoing frustration with working the soil (or any attempt to secure sufficient food). The ground out of which Adam was formed is now “cursed”

and will be difficult to manage (3:17-19). And, since Adam and Eve have created a calamitous breach between themselves and God, the Giver of life, they will inevitably return to the “dust” from which their physical forms were derived (3:19). This seems to be a complete reversal of the blessing pronounced over humanity in Gen. 1:28.

The humans aren't directly cursed in Gen. 3, but their environment and their efforts are, in the sense of facing pain and futility. Nothing is said here about what will happen to the non-earthly aspects of their being. The physical death predicted in 3:19 does not happen immediately, but their spiritual alienation from God—what Paul would later describe as being “dead in trespasses and sins,” Eph. 2:1)—that has already happened.

The deadly “virus” of sin has infected the parents of us all (see Rom. 5:12; 1 Cor. 15:22). That the infection was passed on is evident in the fact that the first recorded physical death was a homicide, indeed a fratricide—murder of one's brother (Gen. 4). Cain's murder of Abel was the first in countless fratricides, since in fact every murderer kills his or her brother or sister in the created order. God created a good universe. By our rebellion we have created a little hell on earth.

The story of humanity, of the earth, and even the universe took a decisive turn in Gen. 3, away from the blessing God intended into the futility that plagues all creation to this day (see Rom. 8:19-22). Thank God, this is not the end of the story, but it's a necessary explanation of how we got into the troubles that pervade human societies everywhere and at all times, since time immemorial. The story of humanity became a story of loss, which can be reversed only by a powerful Redeemer. We'll find clearer promises (than Gen. 3:15) of such a Redeemer in later lessons.

Other passages for your possible use in thinking about “the calamity” and our struggles with the consequences:

Psalm 51:5
Romans 3:3
Romans 5:12, 18-19
Romans 7:14-15
Romans 8:7-8
Galatians 5:19-21
Ephesians 4:17-19
1 John 1:8

P.S. In teaching about creation and the fall, be prepared to de-fuse questions about “historicity.” Some think Adam and Eve lived 6000 years ago. Some think they lived hundreds of thousands of years ago. Some consider them symbolic and (in that sense) mythical. Proving one's point on this issue is impossible. These narratives are older than written history. (So some call Gen. 1-11 “pre-history.”) Whether taken “literally” or “symbolically,” the point is that these narratives explain **why** we (and things) are the way we are. **Why** we exist is explained by creation. **Why** we need a Savior is explained by the fall. That is why the Holy Spirit guided Moses to record these ancient narratives. We might *like* to know more, but we *need* to know these **whys**.

“The Big Ideas of the Bible” (Arden C. Autry, PhD, July 2017)

Creation

- monotheism (one will as Source of all)
- spiritual significance of material world; God's will to bless creation
- humanity in God's image, with capacity for relationships of love and will
- orderly, “lawful” world (e.g., sowing & reaping) [purposeful narrative]

Calamity

- The Fall; brokenness, corruption
- created wills choosing against the Creator's will [narrative of loss]

Call

- redemption, atonement, reclaiming, healing of broken relationships
- remnant saved to reach the rest (evangelistic imperative)
- promise of Creator's purpose being realized [narrative of promise]
(God's promise elicits faith, hope, and love.)

Covenant

- ordered relationship between sovereign God and responsible humanity
- God's initiative in election; human response of faith and obedience
- redeeming relationships, provided by grace, dependent on faithfulness
- revealed and lived out in history of Israel and the church
- life of purpose; Creator/Redeemer's intention revealed (revelation)
- context of promise/fulfillment
- context of love/grace and commitment/faithfulness [journey narrative]

Christ

- God's Word made flesh, definitive revelation, covenant embodied; kingdom present
 - fully God, fully human (Emmanuel, God and humanity reconciled)
 - He makes our story his story, so that he can make his story our story.
 - fulfillment of creation/redemption narrative assured
 - What Adam was *created* to be,
 - What Abraham/Israel was *called* to be,
 - That's what *Christ incarnate* is.
 - That's what we are *in Christ* (the body of Christ).
- [credit N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*]

Communion Community

- It takes the whole covenant people of God to inherit and exhibit the promises and fulfillment of God focused in Christ. [His narrative becomes ours.]
 - love within the church; love for the world (from God)
 - belonging to God and one another in the Holy Spirit, who makes Jesus known
- *The Holy Spirit is recognized (1) by whom he makes known: God as “Father” and Jesus as “Lord”; and (2) by the connections he creates: “adoption.”

Consummation

- Kingdom of God (God's purposes by his power), already and not yet
- hope energizing the present faith/fulness (future shaping the present)
- resurrection life now and future
- judgment, ultimate resolution of justice
- glory of God manifested; creation healed
- One will realized and glorified by all [creation/redemption narrative complete]

Overview of the Old Testament
Lesson 2: Called into Covenant
Promises to Abraham
Timeline from Abraham to Malachi

Lesson 1 dealt with creation and the calamity of “the fall,” humanity’s first disobedience to God. That was a long lesson on a few chapters of Genesis. But the doctrines of God’s creation and humanity’s sin are so fundamental to the story of the Bible that the attention was necessary.

In this lesson we look at God’s call of Abram (later named Abraham) as the next big event in the development of the Old Testament story. As part of that call, we also look at the covenantal nature of the relationship between God and Abraham. God’s call and promises to Abraham, and the accompanying covenant, are as foundational to the Bible as the matters covered in Lesson 1.

One measure of the importance of “call” and “covenant” in the Bible is the amount of space devoted to these on the last page of Lesson One, “The Big Ideas of the Bible.” Under the headings of “call” and “covenant” are a significant number of theological and spiritual implications. We’ll expand on some of those in this lesson, without going into as much detail as the topics deserve.

The Call of Abram/Abraham in its Biblical Context

The first two chapters of Genesis establish the perspective that God created everything and everyone. Chapters 3-11 display the consequences of human rebellion against God’s good will. Our brokenness is shown by Adam and Eve’s pathetic attempt to hide from God (Gen. 3:8). Our brokenness is shown in the violence of the first murder (Gen. 4:8)—brother killing brother, fratricide. Cain’s violence against Abel is followed by Abel’s snide reply to God: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (3:9). Even without the violence, the disowning of responsibility for the welfare of others is a picture of our human brokenness.

God’s disappointment with humanity (Gen. 6:5-7) is dramatically portrayed in the story of the Flood (Gen. 6-8). God was willing to destroy this world and our race, “but Noah found favor [grace] in the eyes of the LORD” (Gen. 6:8). By the slender thread of one family, the human race continued, but things did not get better. Indeed, the Tower of Babel expresses continuing human arrogance and rebellion: “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth” (Gen. 11:4). This was rebellion against God’s repeated command for humanity to fill the earth (Gen. 1:28; 9:1, 7). God forced humanity’s dispersal through disruption of human communication (Gen. 11:7-9).

With human affairs going from bad to worse, and with no human possibility of reversing directions, God does the most amazing thing: He **calls** one man and his family into a special relationship with himself (**covenant**) to become God’s means of blessing every family on earth (Gen. 12:1-3). Despite the still-growing tangle of human sin (which brings with it the **curse** of death, and untold misery for the living until they die), God still wants to **bless** “all the families of the earth” (12:3).

We deserve the curse, but God remains intent on blessing. It won't be a quick fix, and it won't be painless. In fact we'll see that God's intention remains largely unfulfilled at the end of the Old Testament. If we know the NT story, we know the curse will ultimately have to be defeated by Christ on the cross, so that God's desired blessing can be ours (Gal. 3:13-14). But the point for now, for this lesson, is that **God's will to bless** humanity has remained constant, despite all that we've done to deserve and spread the **curse**. God's **call** of Abram was an act of **grace** directed toward blessing the human race.

This is a new and important turn in the story of the Bible, a turn impossible to exaggerate. **Creation** is a story about God's **good purposes**. The "**calamity**" of "the fall" is a story of comprehensive and ever-growing **loss** and **alienation** from God's purposes. From this point going forward, however, the narrative speaks of **promise**. God will **reclaim** what is his by creation (this planet), but he starts with one man, Abram. This begins the story of **redemption** (in a more articulate sense than the evocative but mysterious Gen. 3:15). And everyone who has a story of loss needs a story of redemption (that would be everyone).

Until Abram the human story is a story of brokenness, particularly **broken relationships**—with God and with one another (recall Gen. 3 and 4). Now God establishes a special relationship with one man and his family for the sake of healing all relationships. From this point forward, we have a narrative of **promise** and **hope** (even through times of great loss). God makes promises that give Abram and us reason to hope. God makes promises, and Abram responds with **faith** that God will do what he promises (Gen. 15:6). This faith response becomes the model for how to be in right relationship with God (Rom. 4:3)—believe his word and trust God's "follow-through" on his promises (even if it takes longer than your earthly lifetime).

Abram is first mentioned in Gen. 11:26, as one of the sons of Terah, a descendant of Shem, one of Noah's sons. That slender thread saved from the Flood has grown in numbers, but the thread is still slender: One man and his descendants will eventually, after many generations, bring the Savior, Jesus Christ, into the world, for the whole world to be offered God's blessing (see Matt. 1:1-17, especially vs. 1; see also John 3:16).

The Call and the Promise (Gen. 12:1-3)

The story of Abram becomes personally relevant (for you, me, and everyone on earth) only when we get into Gen. 12. (Of course, the chapter divisions were inserted centuries later).

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

This command and this promise are the first recorded message from God directly to Abram. Actually Abram had started out from Ur of the Chaldeans years before, traveling with his father, Terah, his nephew Lot, and his barren wife, Sarai (later called Sarah). Their family intention had been to go to Canaan, but they stopped short of that and settled in Haran, east of the Euphrates River, as their new home (Gen. 11:31). (When I say "home," don't think "house"; think "tents.")

Abram's family was nomadic or semi-nomadic. As nomads, they would consider a region their "home.")

If we read from chapter 11 into chapter 12, it might seem that Terah's death (11:32) was the occasion for God to say what we read in 12:1-3. But note the beginning of Stephen's speech in Acts 7:2-4: God had spoken to Abram some years before, while Terah's family was still living in Ur of the Chaldeans. Perhaps Abram was submissive to his father as the "clan leader" in stopping in Haran. If Terah said, "We stop here," Abram stopped with him. We're speculating a bit here, but such behavior would have been expected in that culture. That doesn't entirely justify it, but on the other hand God had not said specifically where they were to go (as reported in both Acts 7:2-4 and Gen. 12:1-3). The only indication of an original intention to go to Canaan is found in Gen. 11:31, but it does not say God had *told* them to go to Canaan.

God simply tells Abram to go to "the land that I will show you" (12:1). Only after he arrives in Canaan does God say, "This is the place" (12:7). But before Abram begins the journey, God makes great promises to him: "I will make of you a great nation" (12:2). This means many descendants, when as yet Abram and Sarai had none (and Abram was already 75 years old).

Abram had to wait many years before the promised son, Isaac, was born. But even if Isaac had been born when Abram was 75 (rather than 100), Abram would not have lived long enough to see enough descendants to call them "a great nation." The only sense in which Abram could "see" this promise fulfilled was "by faith," exactly what he did when he believed God's promise. Gen. 15:6 is the text most often cited (in the NT) concerning Abraham's faith, but his faith is evident in Gen. 12 by his obedience to God's command to leave where he was and go to a place God would show him (see Heb. 11:8).

God promised also to "bless" Abram (Gen. 12:2). One way to define "bless" is simply "to do good" for someone. This can be understood in the widest possible way. God was going to provide protection and provision for Abram, even to the point of making Abram's "name great," which could be taken (in a rather crass way) as making Abram famous. But the greatness of Abram's name is explained in this context in a very specific way: Abram "will be a blessing." A lot of villains and tyrants have been "famous" (or infamous) in the sense that people still remember their names centuries later ("Nero" comes to mind, but pick your favorite, perhaps Hitler or Stalin). Abram will be famous for the blessing connected with his name and significance in the history of humanity. Abram will "do good" for humanity, and he will be part of a blessing larger than his earthly life could contain.

God makes further promises to Abram in Gen. 12:3: "I will bless those who bless you," i.e., those who "do good" for Abram will receive good from God. And the reverse is also true: "him who dishonors you I will curse," i.e., those who speak or act with enmity toward Abram will have God as their adversary! To oppose the one who carries the blessing is to invite the curse! And, finally, in verse three, God makes this remarkable, incomprehensible promise: "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed," i.e., through Abram, God's blessing will be extended toward the entire human race! God will "do good" for all humanity through Abram!

This last promise can also be translated as “all the families of the earth will bless themselves by you,” but it is not understood that way in the NT (see Acts 3:25-26). The translation as we quoted it from the ESV (agreeing with the KJV, NKJV, NIV, and NRSV) is surely correct: “all the families of the earth” will *receive* a blessing (a good thing) through Abram. Paul refers to this promise made to Abram as Scripture proclaiming “the gospel beforehand” (Gal. 3:8). Indeed God’s promises to Abram were “good news” for the whole world, although it would take centuries for the message to reach the world (and the job isn’t finished yet! See Matt. 24:14.). Later this promise to Abram is explained by the additional phrasing “through your offspring” (Gen. 22:18), a point that Paul emphasizes (Gal. 3:16).

In faithful response to God’s promise and command (“Go . . . to the land that I will show you,” Gen. 12:1), Abram journeys into Canaan. There the LORD appears to Abram and says, “To your offspring I will give this land” (Gen. 12:7). Indeed, Abram/Abraham lived in the land of Canaan for decades as a nomad. Even after Isaac was finally born, Abraham owned none of the land. When Sarah died (Gen. 23), Abraham had to buy some land that contained a cave where he could bury her body. This became the family burial grounds for the coming generations, and it was the only real estate in Canaan which Abraham could legally claim as “his.”

Given the time that Abraham and Sarah had to wait for the birth of Isaac (about 25 years between Gen. 12:1-3 and Gen. 21:1-7), and given their nomadic status in the land that God promised to their descendants, it’s easy to see why Abraham is called the “father” of those who believe (Rom. 4:16; Gal. 3:16, 18, 28-29). It would also be easy to place so much emphasis on Abraham’s faith that we forget what prompted it!

Abraham’s faith was an ongoing **response** to the **grace** of God, in which God made the first move in speaking to Abraham, calling him into a relationship of trust and obedience. The story of Abraham also teaches us that *living* faith is *persisting* faith. Day after day, month after month, year after year, Abraham believed God would do something that he could not live long enough to see here on earth. He wasn’t perfect; we can’t forget the misadventure of trying to “help” God fulfill his promise of an heir by having a child through Sarah’s maid, Hagar (Gen. 16). In the culture of the time (around 2000-1800 B.C.), this was an accepted practice. But it was not God’s plan; God’s plan was just as focused on Sarah as it was on Abraham (see Gen. 17:15-21). Really, does God need our help to fulfill his promises? He wants our faith and our obedience. But God is perfectly capable of fulfilling his Word!

Covenant

The concept of covenant is not introduced for the first time in the narrative of Abram/Abraham, since God had earlier used the word in his promise to save Noah’s family from the impending Flood (Gen. 6:18). Later God designated the rainbow as his covenant sign that he would not destroy the earth by another watery deluge (Gen. 9:8-17). This covenant includes all humanity and all animal life on earth. Its universal scope makes it important, but in a different way than the covenant God makes with Abraham.

The covenant God announced to Noah was God’s promise **not to destroy** the earth and its inhabitants by water (cf. 2 Pet. 3:6-7). The covenant God made with Abraham is a more positive commitment **to bless** all the families of the earth through a descendant of Abraham (cf. Gen.

12:3; 22:18; Acts 3:25; Gal. 3:8, 16, 26-29). The outworking of this “Abrahamic covenant” will ultimately require the events of the New Testament and, indeed, the ongoing mission work of the church today.

Before we go further, we need to distinguish between an **unconditional covenant** and a **conditional covenant**. An unconditional covenant is established and guaranteed by **God’s unilateral promise**. A conditional covenant is established by the agreement of two parties, even though it is initiated by one of the parties. Both are called “covenants” in the Old Testament, but the different contents and contexts reflect fundamental differences between the two types.

The Covenant-Call of Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3; Gen. 15:1-21)

In Genesis 12:1-3, God’s promise to Abraham to bless all the families of the earth through him (and his offspring) established an **unconditional covenant**. That covenant was later ritually confirmed by **God’s unilateral** action in passing between the parts of the sacrificed animals (see Gen. 15:7-20). If God and Abraham had been equal partners in pledging to uphold the covenant, God and Abraham would have taken that walk together. But this covenant was based on **God’s unilateral promise**; Abraham’s part was simply to trust that God would fulfill his promise (Gen. 15:6).

In Rom. 4:10, Paul carefully points out that Abraham was justified in God’s eyes based on his faith in God’s promise (Gen. 15:6) **before** the introduction of circumcision in Gen. 17:10. Genesis 17 is an important chapter for a number of reasons besides circumcision: God gives Abram (“exalted father”) the new name of “Abraham,” meaning “father of a multitude.” God also gives Sarai the new name of “Sarah,” although both spellings apparently mean “princess.” Note that the fulfillment of Abraham’s new name could not be contained in Abraham’s earthly lifetime, although perhaps we could say it was fulfilled by the time Israel exited Egypt. But the earlier promise to bless all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:3) would require more than numerical growth (and even more than Israel’s eventual conquest and settlement in Canaan).

God’s **promise-covenant with Abraham** in Genesis 12 is reiterated in chapters 15, 17, 18, and 22 (and later underlined with God’s promises to Isaac and Jacob). But Genesis 12:1-3 remains the fundamental promise on which the subsequent history of salvation depends. Genesis 12 provides background and context for the later covenant established between God and the *nation* of Israel at Mt. Sinai (Exod. 24:7-8). But God’s covenant with Abraham was not replaced or over-shadowed by the covenant to which Israel agreed at Sinai (see Gal. 3:15-18). The Sinai covenant-making ritual involved God’s promises to Israel but also Israel’s promises to God—their commitment to live by the Law given through Moses (Exod. 24:3-8). The “Mosaic covenant” was a **conditional covenant**: God promised to bless Israel *if* they kept their promises to worship the LORD alone and to obey his commandments. In this conditional covenant God also promised he would punish Israel if they did not keep their commitment. There would be **blessings** for covenant-keeping but **curses** for covenant-breaking. That central message was reinforced repeatedly through the long line of prophets who followed Moses (e.g., from Samuel, Elijah, Micah, Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and on through Malachi). Eventually, Israel’s covenant-breaking brings increasing trouble and even exile from the land.

Keep in mind the difference between two kinds of covenant—**conditional** and **unconditional**—when we later consider God’s promise to David, after he had become king of all Israel (about 1000 B.C.). **God unilaterally promised David** that his heir would rule over an everlasting kingdom (2 Sam. 7:1-17, esp. verses 12-13). As we know from David’s story, he was not perfectly faithful to all of God’s commands all the time! But God never threatened to rescind his promise about David’s heir having an everlasting kingdom. God had given David an **unconditional promise**.

The difference between conditional and unconditional covenant shows up in the larger narrative of Scripture in an interesting way. During the days of Jeremiah (about 600 B.C. and following), Judah was on a rapid downhill slide into domination by the Babylonians and, eventually, destruction and captivity by the Babylonians. Jeremiah himself lived through those dark days, which included the destruction of Solomon’s magnificent temple in 587 or 586 B.C. Jeremiah was taken by some rebellious Jews, against his will, into the land of Egypt, in a vain attempt to escape the Babylonians’ reach. Presumably, Jeremiah died in Egypt, himself an exile like the Jews who had been taken captive far to the east of Judah.

While Jeremiah was experiencing all these horrors that happened to his nation (and the cruel mistreatment of himself by the rulers of Judah before they were defeated definitively by Nebuchadnezzar), Jeremiah naturally had words of lament over the plight of his homeland (thus the Book of Lamentations, believed to be his words). But Jeremiah also had words of hope and encouragement. One example is the letter he sent to the exiles in Babylon, in which he assured them that God still had good plans for his people, to bless them and give them a future (Jere. 29:1-14, especially verse 11). But another example of a positive, encouraging word is his prophecy that God would one day establish a “new covenant” with his people.

In Jeremiah 31:31-34, God promises to make “a new covenant” at some point in the future. The new covenant will **not** be “like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt” (Jere. 31:32). The promised new covenant will be written on the hearts of God’s people, each one will know God personally, and they will have assurance of forgiveness.

Possibly we can look at Jeremiah 31 in more detail later, but for now the point is that the Mosaic or Sinai covenant was **replaceable** because it was **conditional** (and the people had not lived up to the conditions, which is why they were in exile). It’s also important to notice that the promised new covenant will not replace the **unconditional promise-covenant** God gave to Abraham. Indeed, the new covenant will prove to be the means by which God will keep that unconditional promise, through Jesus, whose blessing is for “all the families of the earth.”

The divine intention to bless “all the families of the earth” (Gen. 12:3) is stated at the starting point of God’s dealings with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Samuel, David, Isaiah, and all the people of Israel. Although God’s global intention is there from the beginning of the story of redemption, that intention has an interesting history of (mostly) being neglected by the people of Israel as a whole in the OT. One commentator on Genesis 12 summarized it this way:

Blessing for the world was a vision fitfully seen at first (it disappears between the patriarchs and the kings, apart from a reminder of Israel's priestly role in Exod. 19:5, 6). Later it reappeared in the psalms and prophets, and perhaps even at its faintest it always imparted some sense of mission to Israel; yet it never became a programme of concerted action until the ascension [of Christ].¹

Timeline from Abraham to Malachi

You don't need to know exact dates to understand the OT, but it helps to have at least a rough timeline for the major persons and events. Approximate dates are sufficient, but the **chronological order** is vital to following the story.

From **Adam** to **Abraham** to **Moses** to **David** to **expectation** of future fulfillment.

Adam? (impossible to date with certainty due to incomplete records and the difficulty of understanding the ages of people, especially before the Flood)

Abraham—approximately 2000 or 1800 B.C.

Moses—possibly about 1500-1400 B.C.
(although dated by some as around 1300-1250 B.C.)

David—around 1000 B.C.

Solomon's Temple and Jerusalem destroyed by Babylonians in 587 B.C.

Second Temple built after return from captivity about 520-516 B.C.

Malachi—about 460 B.C. or possibly a little later

The high and low points listed above show a story left unfinished, and we will look at this further in future lessons. For right now, it's enough to see that God made an **unconditional promise to Abraham** to bless all the families of the earth through him, but that seemed most unlikely by the time of Malachi.

And the **unconditional promise to David** of an **everlasting kingdom** for his heir? In Malachi's time, Judah did not have their own king, Davidic or otherwise. From the time of Cyrus the Great in 538 B.C. until the coming of Alexander the Great in about 333 B.C., Judah was under a governor appointed by the Persian Empire. Would God's promise to David go unfulfilled?

¹ Kidner, D. (1967). [*Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*](#) (Vol. 1, p. 125). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Overview of the Old Testament
Lesson 3: Called out of Egypt and Sent into Canaan
From Slavery to Nationhood
Moses, Deliverance, Commandments
Organizing a Nation of Priests
God's Dwelling with Israel

Review and a consideration of Israel's prospects

In Lesson 2 we looked at God's **call** of Abram/Abraham and his family (especially beginning with Gen. 12), and we looked at God's **covenant** with Abraham (especially Gen. 15). An important point in that lesson concerned the fact that some aspects of the covenant were unconditional; other aspects had conditions attached to them. God's promise to bless all the families of the earth was **unconditional** (Gen. 12:3): God never threatened Abraham or his descendants with possibly revoking that promise. God was and remains determined to make this a blessed planet with a blessed population (even though that requires purging the earth of things that cannot be blessed). On the other hand, God promised Abraham that his descendants would inherit the land of the Canaanites (Gen. 12:7); this promise, however, was **conditional**, as subsequent prophetic threats and eventual expulsion from the land showed.

The promise that Israel would dwell in the land promised to Abraham ("the Promised Land") is characterized as **conditional** even before Israel crossed the Jordan River into Canaan. In Deuteronomy, the people are warned by God through Moses himself that, just as God could give them the land, he could also take it away. Deuteronomy 28 mentions many blessings for obedience and many curses for disobedience, including being "consumed . . . off the land that you are entering to take possession of it" (vs. 21; see also 28:36, 45). The reader of that chapter encounters many gruesome images of suffering, capped by this dire warning:

⁶³ And as the LORD took delight in doing you good and multiplying you, so the LORD will take delight in bringing ruin upon you and destroying you. **And you shall be plucked off the land that you are entering to take possession of it.**

⁶⁴ And the LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other, and there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known. [Deut. 28:63-64, emphasis added]

So when later prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah warn about exile from the land of Israel, they echo warnings that pre-date the conquest under Joshua!

In making this distinction between conditional and unconditional, let it be emphasized: Israel's failures to meet the conditions of the conditional promises/covenants cannot invalidate the unconditional promises/covenants. But the obverse is also true: having unconditional promises/covenants does not cancel those aspects which are conditional. Being natural heirs to God's unconditional promise to bless all the families of the earth through Abraham's descendants does not secure Israel's immunity from suffering the consequences of unfaithfulness to God and his purposes.

From slavery to nationhood: God sends Moses to lead and organize Israel

Before discussing Moses' surprising call to lead Israel out of Egypt, we may need reminding how they came to need such a deliverance. The final chapters of Genesis (37-50) mostly focus on one individual son of Jacob. Joseph has one of the most interesting stories in all the Bible. But for purposes of our overview of the OT, we can only trace the outline of his career.

Joseph's dreams, his immature sharing of his dreams with resentful siblings, and their accurate perception that their father, Jacob, preferred Joseph to them—all these factors led them to consider killing him. For his survival (and eventually their own!), instead of killing him they sold him into slavery (Gen. 37). Through his faithfulness to God in the foreign land of Egypt, Joseph eventually rose to a key position in which God used him to save the lives of countless Egyptians but also his own family, who moved to Egypt to escape famine and be sustained by Joseph's wise planning (Gen. 39-50). It's worth noting that God thus blessed the descendants of Abraham but also a foreign nation through one of Abraham's descendants.

But Joseph's vital role in blessing Egypt was not remembered when (some indefinite time later) "there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph" (Exod. 1:8). Possibly a change in dynasties led to a change in official attitudes toward the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. At some point not precisely datable, the ruling powers made slaves of the Hebrews living among them. (Numbers 26:57-59 would indicate that Moses, Aaron, and Miriam were fourth-generation descendants of Levi, one of the twelve sons of Jacob who became the Twelve Tribes of Israel.)

The work demanded of the Israelites was difficult, and it seems the Egyptian Pharaoh meant for it to be cruel. The Egyptian rulers did not want Israel to prosper and increase in numbers. They even ordered the Israelites to kill any newborn sons (Exod. 1:8-21). This is the point at which Moses is introduced into the narrative. First by stealth, then by providential miracle, the baby Moses' life was spared, and he grew up in the royal household, with all the advantages that powerful nation could afford (Exod. 2:1-10).

Moses, however, did not identify with the royal house of Egypt but with his Israelite kinsmen, who suffered terribly while he lived in luxury. In his heart he wanted to help them, but he brought trouble for himself when he killed an Egyptian for beating an Israelite. This prompted the Pharaoh's desire to kill Moses, and even his Israelite kinsmen did not appreciate him: "Who made you a prince and judge over us?" (Exod. 2:11-15; this judgmental question is quoted by Stephen in Acts 7:27-28). Hunted by Pharaoh and not wanted by his Israelite kinsmen, Moses fled to Midian, where he settled down (Exod. 2:15-22). No doubt he expected never to see Egypt or his Israelite kinsmen again.

Meanwhile, back in Egypt, even when that Pharaoh died, the new Pharaoh brought no relief for the oppressed Israelite slaves. They cried out to God for rescue (Exod. 2:23). Then comes this dramatic statement (written down by Moses after the events of deliverance): "²⁴ And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. ²⁵ God saw the people of Israel—and God knew" (Exod. 2:24-25).

When God “remembered his covenant,” it does not mean he had ever forgotten it. Rather it means he took action at this time to fulfill his covenant promise to Abraham (which God repeated to Isaac and Jacob in their own personal encounters with God; see Gen. 12:1-3; 26:2-5, 24; 28:12-15; 35:9-12). God was going to give them the land he had promised generations earlier—the “Promised Land” of Canaan. But first he had to get them out of the land of slavery.

Certainly Moses had never forgotten Israel and their plight in Egypt. It’s obvious, however, by his conversation with God in Exodus 3, that Moses had not been entertaining ideas about how to return to Egypt and improve the plight of his people. After all, by this time, he’s about 80 years old!

In the “burning bush” event, God first identifies himself with these words: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Exod. 3:6). God’s more mysterious self-identification in 3:14 usually gets more attention (“I AM WHO I AM”), but his first identifying words in 3:6 connect God to the history and the promises the Israelites had passed down from generation to generation. God is saying, “I’m the God who made covenant commitments to your ancestors and your family.”

God tells Moses that he knows how Israel is suffering and that now is the time for them to be delivered from Egypt and led into the long-promised land of Canaan (3:7-9). God says, “I have **come down** to deliver them . . . and to **bring them up** . . . to the place of the Canaanites” (3:8, emphasis added). Moses would welcome that news, but what God says next intimidates Moses: “Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt” (Exod. 3:10).

Moses’ immediate response is to ask, “Who am I” to do such a thing? (3:11). Notice that God doesn’t tell Moses who Moses is, his qualifications, his suitability for the job, or anything that would encourage Moses to say, “I’m your guy!” No, God says, “I will be with you” (3:12). It’s more important who God is than who Moses is. Moses needs to change his focus from his human inadequacy to the overflowing adequacy of the God who addresses him!

Then God gives him a sign (not the last one, but the first one) that God really is sending Moses on this mission and that God really will be with him: “This shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve [worship] God on this mountain” (3:12). It’s like saying, “You’ll know that it’s really God who is with you when you come back to this place with a liberated people and worship me.” Or perhaps it could be put more simply like this: “Just obey, Moses, and I’ll prove to you that I have sent you.”

Moses is not convinced that a “sign” *after* the mission is an adequate sign that he should be the one sent on the mission. He still remembers how untrusted he was when he last tried to help an Israelite: “Who made you a prince and a judge over us?” (2:14). So Moses asks a further question, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” (Exod. 3:13).

God’s answer in 3:14 is capable of being translated and interpreted in a variety of ways. “I AM WHO I AM” is perhaps the most common rendering, but it could also be understood as “I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE.” In that light, God may not be revealing a *philosophical explanation* of himself (“I AM THE SELF-EXISTING ONE” or “I AM THE GROUND OF ALL BEING, THE

SOURCE AND REASON FOR EVERYTHING THAT EXISTS”); rather, God is saying something like, “I AM THE GOD WHO SHOWS WHO I AM BY WHAT I DO.”

How do we know we’re dealing with God? When God does what only God can do! Delivering Israel from Egyptian bondage will show over and over again that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Israel) is the one true God who makes a mockery of all the false gods of Egypt, who are powerless to stand in God’s way. Remember, besides the many gods worshiped in Egypt, the Pharaoh himself was regarded as a god, or as the son of Re, the Sun God (Ra is another spelling of that name).

Among commentators on Exodus 3:14-15, there is widespread agreement that “I AM WHO I AM” (however it is translated) is associated with the divine name “YHWH,” usually pronounced “Yahweh” by non-Jewish people. Devout Jews refuse to pronounce the sacred name and instead say “the LORD” or “Adonai,” another Hebrew word which means “lord” (as in “Lord and Master”). Whenever you see “the LORD” in all-caps in your English Old Testament, the underlying Hebrew is YHWH. In the OT, God is spoken of as “the LORD” but also as “the Lord” (not all caps). This is important to notice in texts such as Psalm 110:1: “The LORD says to my Lord.” (The Greek in which the NT was written does not have this distinctive spelling. You won’t see “the LORD” in the NT, only “the Lord,” whether referring to Jesus, the Father, or the Holy Spirit [for example, in 2 Cor. 3:17]).

After God gives Moses his name (“I AM”) in answer to Moses’ question, Moses still has doubts and excuses for why someone else would be a better choice. And this even after God shows Moses that he can use his ordinary staff as a miracle-working tool (4:1-5). In the prolonged conversation, the LORD finally gets angry with Moses (4:14). Perhaps God was always planning to use Aaron as Moses’ spokesman, but the wording in 4:14-16 sounds like a reluctant concession on God’s part.

Deliverance, commandments, and sealing a covenant

It’s worth pointing out that this “burning bush” encounter happened near Mt. Sinai, also known as Horeb. That’s the mountain God referred to when he said the “sign” that God was with Moses on his mission would be his success in liberating the Israelites and bringing them to “this mountain” (3:12). Between the revelation of the LORD to Moses at Sinai and Israel’s arrival at the same mountain we read an amazing account of Moses and Aaron speaking to the elders of Israel, then repeatedly to the Pharaoh, and a series of ten plagues. The plagues could be studied at length for their significance theologically.

As just one example, consider the darkness that descended and remained on Egypt three days, while the area in which Israel’s tribes lived had light (Exod. 10:21-23). This is the ninth plague in the series of ten. Now recall something mentioned earlier in this lesson: The Pharaoh was believed to embody the Sun God, “Re,” or to be the son of the Sun God. Each of the plagues demonstrated the LORD’s superiority to the so-called “gods” of Egypt.

Now with regard to all the plagues, ask yourself this question: What had Israel done to deserve such special treatment from God? Was the generation that walked through the Red Sea on dry land better than their fathers and grandfathers? Of course not! This has nothing to do with deserving deliverance; it has everything to do with God working out his plan over many generations. Those who passed through the Passover (Exod. 12) and the Red Sea (Exod. 14),

who ate the daily manna (Exod. 16), who witnessed miracle after miracle (like water from the rock, Exod. 17), and yet kept finding reasons to complain—they were not the best examples of faith-filled people, were they? No, they deserved God’s deliverance neither by their faith nor their careful keeping of God’s law. In fact, all the miracles mentioned above occurred before Israel reached Mt. Sinai. They didn’t even have the Ten Commandments until chapter 20.

Imagine if God had given Moses the Ten Commandments before sending him into Egypt to confront the Pharaoh and call Israel to follow him out of Egypt. It would be a very different story if God had said, “Give them the Law; see how they handle it; maybe I’ll set them free and give them a new home.” I say this to make a very important theological point, which people often get backwards. People will often say the OT is about Law and the NT is about grace. But the entire Bible is always about grace first.

God chose Abram/Abraham for no human reason that’s apparent in the text. His grandson, Jacob, acted like the last person I would pick to be the father of the Twelve Tribes of Israel! And if Moses resisted me the way he tried to resist God in Exodus 3-4, I might have gotten impatient with him as God did. Only I wouldn’t have said, “Fine, I’ll let your brother help you.” I would have said, “Fine, I’ll ask someone who wants to be part of the greatest deliverance in world history so far.”

Organizing a Nation of Priests

It’s not possible to exaggerate the transformation Israel’s Twelve Tribes needed to undergo *after* they were delivered from slavery. For organization they would have had only the rudimentary tribal loyalties reflected in having “elders” for each tribe (Exod. 4:29). The tribes weren’t *united*; they were only *related* by virtue of a common ancestor (Jacob) some four hundred years in the past. As long as they were under the oppressive rule of the Pharaoh and the taskmasters, the Israelites would have had suffering in common. But they had no single, common leader until Moses showed up and showed them the miraculous signs God gave him to perform in their sight as verification of his divine commission (4:30-31).

For purposes of this overview of the big picture we don’t have time to study all the signs that God performed through Moses in the sight of Pharaoh and in connection with the ten plagues and the dividing of the Red Sea. The Passover itself would be worthy of a lengthy study, since it becomes one of the most definitive annual observances for the Tribes to observe as a nation (in theory, at least; see Exod. 12:14). But for our purposes in this series, it is probably more important to note the mass of detailed instructions God gave to Israel beginning at Sinai.

The Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:1-17) were spoken audibly to the whole people of Israel (note carefully 20:1 but also 20:18-22). Moses would later descend from the mountain with God’s words engraved on tablets of stone (31:18), only to break them when he saw the golden calf (32:15-19). So that first engraving had to be repeated (34:1). But before God wrote on the tablets, he spoke the commandments directly to the people.

The people in fear confessed their incapacity to listen to the voice of God (20:19). Surely God knew that would be their reaction before it happened, but nonetheless God had already declared his purpose for the whole people to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (19:6). To be a

“kingdom of priests” would be in line with God’s promise to bless all the nations through this one nation (Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14). By their reaction to God’s voice at the foot of Mt. Sinai (Exod. 20:18-21), by the “golden calf” incident (32:1-6) at the foot of that same mountain (while Moses was receiving detailed instructions about the tabernacle, its furnishings and the priesthood, Exod. 24:15—31:18), and by their repeated failures to believe and obey in the coming years, the Israelites proved they were not in fact spiritually equipped to be a “kingdom of priests.” [Later, in Numbers 11:29, Moses wistfully says aloud, “Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!”]

Instead of having “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod. 19:6), God accommodates the weakness of the people by designating just one tribe (the Levites) to be in charge of all things concerned with worship. He further limits the priesthood to the descendants of Aaron.

God wanted a *people* who could serve him and other people as *priests* do—as “go-betweens,” as “intercessors” and “messengers” from God to people. God still wants his people to be such “a royal priesthood, a holy nation,” as 1 Peter 2:9 puts it (see also 1 Peter 2:5; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6). God’s desire for Israel as expressed in Exod. 19:6 seems like wishful thinking in view of their subsequent national history, until we find that Jesus fulfills the promises of “a kingdom” and a “priesthood” that mortals cannot approach without the infilling of the Holy Spirit.

Instead of the whole nation of Israel fulfilling the divine aspiration for a “kingdom of priests,” the Old Testament will come to its unfinished conclusion with mortal priests still falling short of God’s standards (Mal. 1:6—2:9). Christ alone will meet the standard; Christ alone can raise us to the standard as we continue to grow toward fulfillment of God’s unchanged and unchanging will to bless all the families of the earth through his people.

God’s Dwelling with Israel

Exodus 24:1-8 recounts a covenant-ratification ceremony for all of Israel. For their part, the people pledge, “All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do” (24:3). Moses splashes some of the blood of sacrificed animals “against the altar” (24:6). He reads aloud to the people “the Book of the Covenant,” and they re-affirm their pledge: “All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient” (24:7). Moses now sprinkles the people with the rest of the blood from the sacrifices and makes the solemn pronouncement: “Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words” (24:8).

Representing the whole people, Moses, Aaron, Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu, and 70 elders ascended the mountain for a covenant meal with God (24:1, 9-11). During this meal the select representatives “saw the God of Israel” (24:10), or at least something that revealed his presence. God’s “feet” were seen, but there is no indication that they saw God’s face, which even Moses was not allowed to see (34:20, in a later episode of intense intercession for God not to destroy Israel for their disobedience and idolatry).

Moses and Joshua went still further up the mountain, where Moses would receive detailed instructions for the tabernacle, its furnishings, and the priests (24:12-14; chapters 25-31). The presence of God, however, was visible as “a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel” (24:15-18).

All of this seems mysterious as well as awe-inspiring. One might think the events would have a lingering effect on the witnesses. But when Moses didn't come down as soon as the people expected (32:1), they pressed Aaron to provide a substitute god for their comfort and worship. Remember these are the same people who heard the very voice of God in Exodus 20 when he forbade the making of such images as the golden calf (20:4-5; 32:1-6). These are the same people who at least saw the "devouring fire" at the top of the mountain (24:17), and Aaron was among those who saw the mysterious presence of God during the covenant-sealing meal (24:9-11). What do people need to see to keep them (us) away from idolatry?

We find this tension throughout Israel's time in the wilderness, and often the tension breaks out in rebellion and wrath. God is in their midst, visibly manifesting his presence with fire and cloud (Exod. 13:21-22), yet they cannot get close to him. They can pledge their full obedience in solemn ceremony (Exod. 24), but they easily forget their pledge and turn to play in front of the forbidden idol (32:6).

Even after the tabernacle was finally completed and consecrated, "and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle" so that even "Moses was not able to enter the tent" (Exod. 40:34-35), the people whose tents were arrayed on every side of that holy tent were themselves often far from holy. It's the paradox of the OT covenant people. Even when God was most "visible" his people often acted as though he couldn't see them. There was God, right in the middle of the camp, but he was not in the campers!

As we read this OT account from a NT perspective, we should know a little better why it was necessary for Jesus to "go away" through his saving death and resurrection, and for him to send us "the Helper" (John 16:7). Like Israel, we need more than just having God in the vicinity (visible or not). We need God's dwelling to be more than "with us"; we need his dwelling to be "in us" (see John 14:17 and 23).

From **Adam** to **Abraham** to **Moses** to **David** to **expectation** of future fulfillment.

Adam? (impossible to date with certainty due to incomplete records and the difficulty of understanding the ages of people, especially before the Flood)

Abraham—approximately 2000 or 1800 B.C.

Moses—possibly about 1500-1400 B.C.

(although dated by some as around 1300-1250 B.C.)

David—around 1000 B.C.

Solomon's Temple and Jerusalem destroyed by Babylonians in 587 B.C.

Second Temple built after return from captivity about 520-516 B.C.

Malachi—about 460 B.C. or possibly a little later

Overview of the Old Testament
Lesson 4: A Kingdom Rises and Falls
Conquest Led by Joshua
Chaos Increases in Era of Judges
Israel's First King, Israel's Second King
Promise to David
Promise of Solomon, His Later Failure
Divided Kingdom
Judah Inconsistent at Best
Israel Consistent at Worst
Elijah, Amos, Hosea
Both Judah and Israel Still Claimed by God,
Even When at Odds with One Another and
Scattered in Captivity

As seen in the list of topics above, this lesson attempts to comprehend a great deal. Remember the purpose of the course is an overview, getting a clear view of the big picture, not trying to explain each development. The list above functions more as a summary than as an outline for the lesson. The teacher might choose to focus on selected aspects of this era, as Israel moved from being a nomadic group of tribes in the wilderness to settling in Canaan and eventually forming (for a relatively brief time) a single kingdom.

Conquest Led by Joshua

“Joshua leads Israel’s conquest of the promised land” would be a topic worth a lot of time, but for purposes of this series we’ll limit our attention to a few items which may or may not be comforting. The first is that there is not sufficient archaeological evidence to date an extensive destruction of Canaanite cities such as we might imagine from reading Joshua. That fact might ease our feelings about Joshua’s troops killing huge numbers of people (including women and children) in what we would call “ethnic cleansing” or “genocide.”

The cities of Canaan were not modern metropolises. Jericho, the first city challenging Israel’s progress after they crossed the Jordan River (Josh. 2, 6), might have been a walled military outpost with few “civilians.” At least one resident of that doomed city (Rahab) testified that the inhabitants of Canaan were terrified by reports of what the LORD had done to the much stronger Egyptian army and to the kings Og and Sihon (Josh. 2:9-11). Possibly many people in and around other Canaanite cities fled as refugees rather than try to resist Israel’s invasion. [Paul Copan’s book, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God*, devotes three chapters to questions raised by God’s directions for the Israelites to kill everyone in the Canaanite cities. The issues are too complex to deal with in a series like this. One helpful thing to know is that it was common practice in that era to use hyperbole in describing one’s success in warfare. Often claims by ancient kings to have completely obliterated a population have been shown to be exaggerations—even in their own records they report on later actions by a population supposedly “wiped out.” See Copan, pp. 172-73, on Ancient Near Eastern “war rhetoric.”]

What is clear from Scripture itself is that Israel did not in fact “cleanse” the land of *all* Canaanites. In contrast to the seemingly absolute claims of **Joshua 21:43-45**, compare the statements of **Judges 1:27-36**. Israel apparently established control of great swathes of territory and displaced many people in the process, but they still had plenty of pagan neighbors when the fighting subsided! This led eventually to what some have called the “Canaanization” of Israel. Despite God’s warnings, many in Israel adopted the worship practices of their pagan neighbors.

Chaos Increases in the Era of the Judges

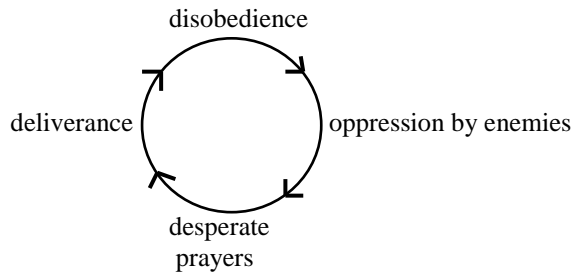
Under Joshua’s spiritual and military leadership, the tribes of Israel remained unified and faithful to their identity as God’s people. But Joshua’s death left a vacuum no one could fill—at least not in unifying the Twelve Tribes. Tribal loyalty was stronger than “national” loyalty, as seen in the Book of Judges. The following passage near the beginning of Judges summarizes the downward spiral of the separate Tribes in the generations after Joshua:

¹¹ And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals. ¹² And they abandoned the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the LORD to anger. ¹³ They abandoned the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth. ¹⁴ So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them. And he sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. ¹⁵ Whenever they marched out, the hand of the LORD was against them for harm, as the LORD had warned, and as the LORD had sworn to them. And they were in terrible distress.

¹⁶ Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them. ¹⁷ Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they whored after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the LORD, and they did not do so. ¹⁸ Whenever the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge, and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge. For the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them. ¹⁹ But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. ²⁰ So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he said, “Because this people have transgressed my covenant that I commanded their fathers and have not obeyed my voice, ²¹ I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died, ²² in order to test Israel by them, whether they will take care to walk in the way of the LORD as their fathers did, or not.” ²³ So the LORD left those nations, not driving them out quickly, and he did not give them into the hand of Joshua. [Judges 2:11–23 (ESV)]

A “judge” was usually associated with just one or two tribes and not the whole of Israel. Judges contains some inspiring examples of “judges” (better thought of as leaders or even “warlords”). Gideon, for example, was very human, but he was obedient and greatly used. Samson, on the other hand, was greatly used but also a horrible example. In general, the situation in Judges goes through repetitive cycles of disobedience, oppression, desperate prayers, and deliverance, only to

repeat the process. But it's also a descending spiral, in which moral chaos seems to be gaining ground.



Indeed, the events of the later chapters of Judges are gruesome, including some tribes of Israel making war on Benjamin (one of the Twelve) because Benjamin refused to surrender criminals among them to the rest of Israel (chapters 19-21). If there was any “law and order” in the land, it seems to have been local and tribal, but the Book of Judges describes the time as even more lawless than that, as “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25).

The First King and the Second King (1 & 2 Samuel)

Samuel can be regarded as the last of the “judges,” since he led Israel in more than just spiritual matters. But his authority to lead was clearly based on his capacity to hear and obey the voice of the LORD (from 1 Sam. 3 on). When he became old and appointed his sons as successors, however, the people rejected them as unworthy (1 Sam. 8:1-3). Furthermore, they demanded that Samuel appoint “a king to judge us like all the nations” (1 Sam. 8:5). This displeased Samuel, but God said he should do as they asked, since they had already rejected God as their king (1 Sam. 8:7). They wanted a human king, and they would get one. Following God’s instructions, Samuel assures Israel that having a king would not solve all their problems. In 1 Sam. 8:10-18, he warns that a human king will take more from them than he will give! (Compare God as King, the Source of every good gift! See James 1:17.)

Saul was chosen as the first king. In his story we can see the Twelve Tribes in transition to being a *kingdom* by the sequence of events: Saul is chosen by the LORD, anointed by Samuel, and acclaimed by the people (1 Sam. 9:16-17; 10:1ff.; 10:20-24). He was also anointed by God’s Spirit (10:9-12). Yet after this public acknowledgement, Saul returned to his home (10:26) and resumed work on the family farm (11:5) until a crisis arose. In response, Saul leads Israel to a great victory in battle (11:8-11). Then “the kingdom” is renewed with sacrifices (11:12-15). From this point, Saul will act more like kings are expected to act, with a small standing army (13:2) which could be expanded in times of war.

Saul’s story sounds very promising at the beginning. He led Israel’s battles successfully (1 Sam. 14:47-48). His son, Jonathan, was also an outstanding warrior and leader (1 Sam. 14). But Saul’s prospects quickly deteriorated as he showed impatience and foolishly made a sacrifice instead of waiting for Samuel to arrive (1 Sam. 13:8-14). Samuel informed him that his dynasty would not continue (13:14). Saul made a rash vow that could have cost Jonathan his life, had it not been for the intervention of Saul’s soldiers (14:24, 43-45). The reader starts getting the sense that Saul is “out of his depth” as king, even while he’s still winning battles. The most decisive event was Saul’s compromised obedience in fighting against the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15).

Contrary to specific instructions from God through Samuel (15:1-3), Saul spared Agag, king of the Amalekites, and the best of their livestock (15:9). When confronted by Samuel, Saul put the responsibility on the people rather than acting as a true leader (15:15, 21). Samuel himself did what Saul should have done in killing Agag (15:33). Saul's failures grieved Samuel and God (15:35). Although Saul would continue to be king for years, his course was set on a downward path, and God had already chosen an unknown shepherd boy to become the next (and greatest) king of all Israel.

David is introduced into the narrative in 1 Samuel 16. The youngest son of Jesse, David would not have been suggested as the next king even by his brothers! God had to speak directly to Samuel to avert another bad choice (16:6-10). But when David was finally brought in, God told Samuel: "Arise, anoint him, for this is he" (16:12). After his anointing, "the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon David from that day forward" (16:13). In dramatic contrast, the next verse (16:14) informs us that "the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul," who was troubled by "an evil spirit" to the point that David's music was required to bring peace to Saul's mind (16:14-23).

David is introduced into the narrative again in 1 Samuel 17, in the story of Goliath. This can seem confusing as King Saul does not recognize David (17:55), who (according to chapter 16) had been playing music to calm Saul's troubled spirit. The simplest answer for this odd chronology is that the author of 1 Samuel chose to tell the stories of David's anointing and his musical abilities before introducing him as a warrior. I would have put chapter 17 before 16, but we have to let the biblical writers tell the story the way they wish (and as the Spirit guided them). When you think of David's eventual impact in the history of salvation and God's revelation to humanity through the Psalms and supremely in David's descendant, Jesus, there's something appropriate about introducing David first as God's anointed and as a psalmist. David's military feats are celebrated extensively in 1 and 2 Samuel, but his anointing sets the stage for "the Anointed One" (Messiah) who will come through David's line.

David's character is illustrated repeatedly in his dealings with Saul, who was jealous of David's fame, to the point of wanting to kill him (1 Sam. 18:6—26:25). David's refusal to harm the LORD's anointed (who was trying to kill David) shows David's respect for the anointing. Samuel had anointed both Saul and David, which makes it obvious that God's anointing does not guarantee the character, motivations, or success of the anointed one! Saul more than once acted out of presumption or paranoia, but he was still God's anointed, and David twice refused to kill him when he could easily have done so (1 Sam. 24:1-7; 26:7-12). (Israel's constant enemy, the Philistines, eventually killed Saul and Jonathan. David grieved over both. See 1 Sam. 31 and 2 Sam. 1.)

After Saul's death, David becomes king, but only over Judah to begin with, headquartered in Hebron (2 Sam. 2:1-4). One of Saul's sons, Ish-bosheth, reigns over the rest of Israel (propped up by Abner, the commander of Saul's army, 2 Sam. 2:8ff.). After seven and one-half years (and a messy ending for Abner and Ish-bosheth, 2 Sam. 3-4), David finally becomes king of all Israel (2 Sam. 5:1-5). His military successes and his wisdom in following God's ways promote confidence in his leadership. David has his enemies (even within Israel), but they are outnumbered by loyal followers.

God's Promise to David

David stabilized his kingdom by victories over the surrounding enemies of Israel and established his capital in Jerusalem (2 Sam. 5:6-10). In a comment to the prophet Nathan, David implies that it seems inappropriate for him to have a nice house of cedar while God's ark is still kept in a tent (Sam. 7:1-2). Nathan has seen how God has blessed all of David's undertakings; so he encourages the king to do what's in his heart. If he wants to build God a temple, Nathan implies, David should (7:3). But Nathan has to return to the king with a fresh word from God:

⁵“Go and tell my servant David, ‘Thus says the LORD: Would you build me a house to dwell in? ⁶I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent for my dwelling. ⁷In all places where I have moved with all the people of Israel, did I speak a word with any of the judges of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, ‘Why have you not built me a house of cedar?’ ’ ⁸Now, therefore, thus you shall say to my servant David, ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel. ⁹And I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you. And I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. ¹⁰And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more. And violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, ¹¹from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel. And I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the LORD declares to you that **the LORD will make you a house.** ¹²When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, **I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom.** ¹³**He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.** ¹⁴I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, ¹⁵but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. ¹⁶And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. **Your throne shall be established forever.** ’ ” ¹⁷In accordance with all these words, and in accordance with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David.
[2 Sam. 7:5-17, emphasis added]

A question immediately presents itself to the thoughtful reader: How much of this promise was fulfilled in Solomon and later heirs to the throne? How much of this promise could be fulfilled only when Jesus comes?

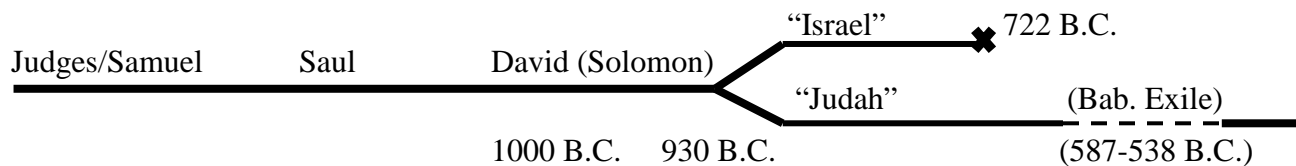
On one level, God promises David that his immediate heir (Solomon) will build the temple that David wanted to build. But that is not the most striking promise. God promises that he (God) will build David's "house," not a physical structure but a dynasty, "the house of David." God pledges to David: "Your throne shall be established forever" (7:16). This is truly extraordinary, and David expresses his humble gratitude to the LORD in eloquent prayer and praise (7:18-29).

We should note that part of God's message to David through Nathan could apply *only* to the merely mortal heirs of David: "When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men" (7:14). And for a long time, through many generations

of kings (from about 1000 B.C. to 587 B.C.), God preserved the Davidic line, whether they were good kings or bad. (The only interruption before 587 was the usurpation of Queen Athaliah, which lasted about six years, 842–836 B.C. Even then, a Davidic heir was kept safe from Athaliah’s murderous ways. See 2 Kings 11.) Specifically God pledges not to take the kingship away from David’s line as he had previously taken it away from Saul’s (2 Sam. 7:15). This promise is **unconditional**, as was the earlier promise to Abraham to bless all the families of the earth through his descendant (Gen. 12, etc.). This unconditional promise to David, however, raises questions in subsequent history (see Psa. 89, for example).

Solomon was David’s spectacular successor, taking Israel to its apex of influence and affluence. But Solomon also began the unraveling of the united Israel. Although he had a promising start, with God speaking to him personally and granting him unparalleled wisdom (1 Kings 3:5-14; 9:1-9), Solomon had a weakness many men have experienced: “Solomon loved many foreign women” (2 Kings 11:1-8). As king of a wealthy nation he could afford as many wives as he pleased and a large harem of concubines. Many of these women came from pagan backgrounds, and Solomon indulgently allowed them to worship their own gods. Wise though he might have been in many ways, Solomon was foolish in this regard. He gave the practice of idolatry royal approval, by his toleration but also by his participation (1 Kings 11:5-8).

After Solomon’s death (about 930 B.C.) the ten northern tribes broke away and took the name “Israel” as their own and made Samaria their capital; they set up their own kings and priests. Solomon’s heirs maintained the Davidic line, but only in Judah, with its capital and temple in Jerusalem. (See 1 Kings 12.) So from about 930 B.C. “Israel” existed without a Davidic king until finally being destroyed by the Assyrian Empire (in 722 B.C.). Judah was almost swallowed by that same empire, but they managed to survive (through miracles from God) until 587 B.C., when Judah was taken into exile by the Babylonian Empire (who had conquered the Assyrians).



After the division of David and Solomon’s kingdom into two parts—Judah and Israel—God still spoke to both nations through his prophets. Elijah had his ministry principally in Israel. Amos had his home in Judah, but God sent him to Israel with his prophetic word. The northern tribes (Israel) may have decided they wanted no part of David’s heir as their king, but the LORD continued to speak to Israel and Judah as if they all still belonged to him and as if David’s heir was still the rightful ruler (though unacknowledged in Israel). Of course Israel (as distinct from Judah) had also been in rebellion against the God-appointed priesthood, the descendants of Aaron, from the same time. The first rebel king of Israel, Jeroboam, constructed two golden calves at alternative worship sites for Israel to worship the LORD, in Bethel and Dan, so that they would not go to Jerusalem (1 Kings 12:26-33). These illegitimate worship sites were overseen by illegitimate priests. So Israel’s worship of the LORD was corrupted throughout the history of northern Israel (930-722 B.C.). Adding to their corrupted worship of Israel’s true God (Yahweh), the kings of Israel led their people into the worship of other gods like Baal (1 Kings

16:29-33). Every single king of “Israel” (from the division in 930 B.C. until the destruction of 722 B.C.) is described as evil, not just because they were not descendants of David but because they taught the people of God to practice idolatry. (The northern kingdom’s fall to Assyria is described and the reasons explained in 2 Kings 17:6-18.)

Meanwhile, in the southern kingdom of Judah, with the Davidic kings and the Aaronic priesthood, there was at least a superficial legitimacy and connection with God’s promise to David. And some of David’s heirs (like Asa, Hezekiah, and Josiah) could be described as “good” because they “did what was right in the eyes of the LORD” (1 Kings 15:11) and tried to lead the people in faithfulness to the LORD. They were not perfect men, of course. But many of Judah’s kings, sons of David though they were, are described as evil because they “did not do what was right in the eyes of the LORD” (2 Kings 16:2). So Judah was inconsistent at best, while Israel (until its demise in 722 B.C.) was consistent in its rebellion against the LORD and against God’s appointed, anointed king for his people.

With the events of 587 B.C.—the destruction of Solomon’s Temple and the removal of David’s heir from the throne of Judah—even more serious questions arise about God’s promise to David. The Babylonians had previously taken away significant captives from Judah in 597 (including King Jehoiachin, 2 Kings 24:12), but they left a Davidic heir, Zedekiah, on the throne in Jerusalem as a vassal or client king. Zedekiah, however, was not content to reign under the authority of Babylon. When he refused to pay tribute to Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian army returned to Jerusalem—this time to destroy the city walls and the magnificent temple built hundreds of years earlier in Solomon’s reign (2 Kings 25). Furthermore, Nebuchadnezzar had King Zedekiah’s sons killed in his sight, just before blinding Zedekiah and leading him away captive (2 Kings 25:6-7).

Not all of David’s descendants were killed in 587 B.C., but a descendant of David never sat on an independent throne of Israel or Judah from that time on. When the Persians replaced the Babylonians as the ruling empire of the region, they allowed the exiled Jews to return to Judah (538 B.C.), but the Persians kept the government in their own hands. When Alexander the Great conquered the Persians in the 300s B.C., Judah simply got a change in management (from Persian to Greek). Under the Maccabees (who revolted against Greek rule in the 160s B.C.), the Jews were independent of foreign control for a while, but the High Priest was supreme in the land, not a Davidic king. Then came the Romans in 63 B.C., and they placed their own governors over Judea (like Pilate). So, what happened to the **unconditional promise** to David that his “throne shall be established forever”?

During the Babylonian exile, the prophet Ezekiel (who was among the exiles) prophesied there would be a return to Judah for the Jews but also a reunion with Israel under the leadership of “David” (Ezek. 34:22-24; 37:15-24). But when the Persians conquered Babylon and allowed exiled people to return to their native territory, including an encouragement for the Jews to rebuild their temple (2 Chronicles 36:22-23; Ezra 1), many Jews chose not to return to their ancestral homes. Although Zerubbabel, a descendant of David, was among those who returned to Judah, and although he played a key role in rebuilding the temple of the LORD, Zerubbabel did not reign as king. Under the Persians, Zerubbabel was appointed “governor” but not “king” (see Ezra 3:2; 5:2; Hag. 1:1; 2:2; Matt. 1:12).

As can be seen from the genealogy of Jesus as recorded by Matthew 1:1-16, Jesus was born into the line of David. But after “the deportation” (Matt. 1:11-12), none of the ancestors of Jesus ever reigned as “king.” The prophets had spoken so hopefully of a renewed Davidic kingship--during the exile (as noted above in Ezekiel 34 and 37) and also after the exile. In fact Haggai 2:21-23 seems to fasten these hopes to Zerubbabel. But Judah’s hopes for a son of David to reign once again remained unfulfilled. God brought them back to the land, but he did not restore the Davidic kingship. Would God allow his unconditional promise to David (2 Sam. 7:16) to remain unfulfilled?

In light of these developments (or “non-developments”) in the centuries between the Babylonian Exile and Jesus’ birth, you can see how Jewish “messianic” hopes (hopes for the “anointed” deliverer) came to be expressed as longings for the “Son of David” to come. So, when people called out to Jesus as “Son of David,” they were calling on him to be their messianic savior and deliverer (see Matt. 20:30 and 21:9, for two of many examples).

N.T. Wright, one of the most distinguished New Testament scholars of our time, has suggested one way to explain why the messianic prophecies of Ezekiel and Isaiah were not fulfilled in the decades and centuries after the Jews returned to Jerusalem in 538 B.C., still under foreign domination: the exile was not over yet! In his challenging (and scholarly) book, *The Climax of the Covenant* (Fortress Press, 1992), Wright observes that “at least some Jews in this period [Jesus’ time] understood the exile to be still continuing, since the return from Babylon had not brought that independence and prosperity which the prophets foretold” (p. 141). It should be obvious that “As long as Herod and Pilate were in control of Palestine, Israel was still under the curse of Deuteronomy [28]” (p. 141).

Wright goes on to say: “For Paul, the death of Jesus, precisely on a Roman cross which symbolized so clearly the continuing subjugation of the people of God, brought the exile to a climax. The King of the Jews took the brunt of the exile on himself” (p. 146). Later he writes these words:

Because the Messiah represents Israel, he is able to take on himself Israel’s curse and exhaust it. Jesus dies as King of the Jews, at the hands of the Romans whose oppression is the present, and climactic, form of the curse of exile itself. The crucifixion of the Messiah is, one might say, the *quintessence* of the curse of the exile, and its climactic act. [p. 151, emphasis in original]

So fulfillment of the unconditional promise of David’s eternal kingdom awaited the coming of one who could also bring the fulfillment of God’s unconditional promise to Abraham—to bless all the families of the earth.

From **Adam** to **Abraham** to **Moses** to **David** to **expectation** of future fulfillment.

Adam? (impossible to date with certainty due to incomplete records and the difficulty of understanding the ages of people, especially before the Flood)

Abraham—approximately 2000 or 1800 B.C.

Moses—possibly about 1500-1400 B.C.

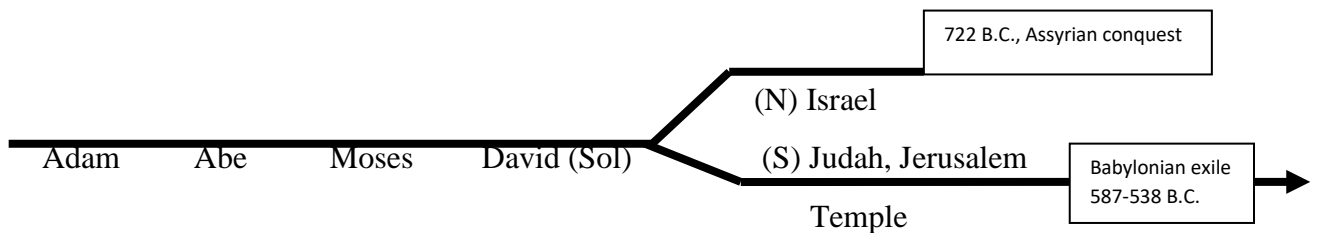
(although dated by some as around 1300-1250 B.C.)

David—around 1000 B.C.

Solomon's Temple and Jerusalem destroyed by Babylonians in 587 B.C.

Second Temple built after return from captivity about 520-516 B.C.

Malachi—about 460 B.C. or possibly a little later



Overview of the Old Testament

Lesson 5: Called Back to Covenant Faithfulness

A Prophet Like Moses
The Role of the Prophets
Elijah, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah,
Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, etc.

For this series we have moved essentially in chronological order—Adam, Abraham, Moses, David, to the exile and return—to gain an overview of the events and words of the Old Testament. For this lesson, we leave the historical overview in the background to focus on the role of prophets and prophecy in Scripture. Truly there would be no OT without prophets.

What is a prophet? In biblical usage a “prophet” is not defined simply (or even primarily) by the ability to predict the future. Prediction is among the things prophets sometimes do, and it’s certainly important. But prediction is not at the core of what makes an OT prophet.

Perhaps the best study of the prophets—their character and mission—was written by Rabbi Abraham Heschel (*The Prophets*, 2 vols., Harper & Row, 1962; Hendrickson, 2007). Heschel says a prophet (by God’s grace) sees with **God’s perspective**, even feels what God feels. God’s perspective can be applied to **past** events, **present** circumstances, or **discernment** of hidden motives. And, yes, seeing with God’s perspective could include predictions for the **future**.

Just as we saw concerning *promises* in earlier lessons, *predictions* can be “conditional” or “unconditional.” “Conditional” predictions present different possible consequences: **If** you obey, this will happen; **if** you don’t obey this other will happen. Moses, for example, predicted that Israel would dwell securely in the Promised Land **if** they faithfully kept their covenant commitments to God. **If** they did not remain faithful, they could be expelled from the land. See Deuteronomy 28, which focuses on the *blessings* (28:1-14) or *curses* (28:15-68) brought by the nation’s faithfulness or lack of faithfulness. Deut. 28:63 specifically predicts the exiles of 722 B.C. (Israel) and 587 B.C. (Judah). Many predictions by the “writing prophets” (the books we call “The Prophets”) are conditional, as Hosea, Jeremiah, and others called on the people to return to God.

Some predictions by the prophets are “unconditional.” The most obvious examples of unconditional predictions are in Daniel, when he speaks about a succession of kingdoms to follow the Babylonians; there are no “ifs” in those predictions. There are unconditional predictions in the writings of other prophets, too. Isaiah’s prophecies about “the Servant of the LORD” who would suffer and die to save us (Isa. 53) are unconditional. The obedience of God’s people cannot cause or prevent the fulfillment of that prediction/promise.

Who was the first prophet?

Noah certainly heard from God and declared God’s message (Gen. 6:13ff.; 2 Peter 2:5). It would not be inaccurate to describe Noah as a prophet. But Abraham is the first person in the Bible actually described as a “prophet” (Gen. 20:7). Ironically, that revelation came to Abimelech in a dream, after Abraham misled him by saying Sarah was his sister.

What made Abraham a prophet? God spoke to him, giving him promises and direction for his life but also to pass on to his heirs. The covenant and words God gave to Abraham became the heritage of Isaac, Jacob, and the Twelve Tribes fathered by Jacob.

Through the leadership of another prophet, Moses, the LORD delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt. God led them to Mt. Sinai, where the whole nation entered into solemn covenant with God. That covenant was mediated by the prophet Moses, after the people begged not to hear God's voice again, lest they die (Exod. 20:18-19).

Moses became the quintessential prophet for forming Israel's national life—through the Law but also through receiving God's directions and passing on God's exhortations and warnings to the people during forty years in the wilderness. In his fifth book, Deuteronomy, Moses knows the people will soon cross the Jordan into the Promised Land. He also knows he will not be with them (Num. 20:7-12 gives the reason). Among many exhortations and warnings found in Moses' "farewell" speech in Deuteronomy we should pay special attention to the following from Deuteronomy 18, which points to coming prophets and ultimately to Jesus:

¹⁵ The LORD your God will raise up for you **a prophet like me** from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen— ¹⁶ just as you desired of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, "Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die." ¹⁷ And the LORD said to me, "They are right in what they have spoken. ¹⁸ I will raise up for them **a prophet like you** from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. ¹⁹ And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. ²⁰ But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die." ²¹ And if you say in your heart, "How may we know the word that the LORD has not spoken?"— ²² when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him. [Deut. 18:15-22, ESV, emphasis added]

In this passage Moses predicts that God will continue to speak to his people through "a prophet like me" (18:15). Since the expression is singular, it could be understood as just one more would be sent, but subsequent history shows God sending a succession of prophets (and sometimes more than one in a given era: Isaiah lived in the same century as Hosea, Micah, and Amos).

Over time, however, expectation grew that a singular, unique "prophet like Moses" would come. This expectation was in the minds of those who questioned John the Baptist in John 1:21, after he denied being the Messiah: "What then? Are you Elijah?" John knew the prophecy in Mal. 4:5, and he replied, "I am not." Then they asked him, "Are you the Prophet?" "The Prophet" was a reference to Deut. 18:15, 18. Again John answered, "No." Since John denied being the Messiah or Elijah, "the Prophet like Moses" seems to be a separate expectation in the minds of those questioning John the Baptist. (Just like today, there were various ideas floating around about the 'harbingers' of the age-to-come. They didn't have to be coherent ideas held by everyone, just plausible-enough possibilities to gain some adherents!)

If John the Baptist was not "the Prophet like Moses," was Jesus? At one level, yes. But Jesus over-fulfilled that expectation. Jesus spoke what he heard from the Father, as Moses did, but Moses never claimed that the Father dwelled in him! (See John 14:10-11.) Moses interceded for Israel (Exod. 32:11-14), but Jesus made intercession once for all time, acting simultaneously as priest and sacrifice on the cross, and now living forever "to intercede" (Heb. 7:25; Rom. 8:34).

“The Prophet like Moses” in Deut. 18 is a pointer—to the succession of prophets God sent in the generations after Moses, and also to Jesus, the Incarnate Word of God (John 1:14). Even though Jesus is the ultimate “prophet” who *embodies* and *speaks* God’s Word, the New Testament also reports the ministry of “prophets” after Pentecost (Acts 21:9-11; Eph. 4:11). In fact, Peter says Joel’s prophecy about many people prophesying is fulfilled by the phenomena of Pentecost (see Acts 2:16-21 and Joel 2:28-32). When Moses said God would send “a prophet like me” (Deut. 18:15), it was apparently not “just like me” or “equal to me.” Jesus was greater than Moses (Heb. 3:5-6); the NT prophet Agabus was not as great as Moses (in impact and lasting significance, Acts 21:10-11). Yet Jesus and Agabus were both like Moses in speaking revelatory words from God. The same can be said for Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, and many unnamed, unknown prophets throughout church history. The really significant point made in Deut. 18:15 and 18 is not exhausted by a single prophet. **The point is that God will continue to speak to his people, and Moses says God’s people should be ready to listen.**

Before leaving Deuteronomy 18, notice how God warns against presumption in claiming to speak with prophetic authority (18:20). God also gives some guidelines for discerning whether a would-be prophet is true or false: someone “who speaks in the name of other gods” (18:20) calls for the severest punishment. And if someone presumes to use the name of the LORD for his authority to prophesy, “if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him” (18:22). In other words, “prophecies” as predictions can be tested for accuracy, and so-called “prophets” can thus be identified as false or deluded. (We don’t have to stone them, but we also don’t have to pay attention to them.) According to Deut. 13:1-3, even the ability to do a miracle or foretell the future accurately does not guarantee the “prophet” is from God. The prophet who leads people away from the LORD is a false prophet.

Who can prophesy?

Of course anyone can claim to have “a word from God.” In the OT context such claims could be evaluated with the criteria of Deut. 13 and 18. (In the NT the criteria are spelled out more fully and with reference to Christ. See 1 John 4:1-6, for example.) And even when Moses was *the* prophetic voice for Israel, he did not feel he was the only one who could hear from God or speak for God.

In Numbers 11:16-30, God gives Moses some help in managing the Twelve Tribes as they travel through the wilderness. Moses was instructed to gather seventy elders at the tabernacle for God to put on them “some of the Spirit” that was on Moses. The Spirit would empower these seventy to help “bear the burden of the people” (11:17). At the gathering, “the Spirit rested on them” and “they prophesied” (11:25). Nothing is recorded of what they said, but there was some obvious manifestation of the Spirit’s coming. What is recorded is that “they did not continue doing it,” apparently because the initial manifestation was to attest the Spirit’s enablement to do what they were appointed to do—guide and make decisions for people in Moses’ place.

Two of the seventy men chosen stayed in the camp and missed the ceremony at the tabernacle, but the Spirit came upon them also and “they prophesied in the camp” (11:26). Joshua urged Moses to stop them, but Moses said: “Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!” (11:29) Consider that wish of Moses in the light of Pentecost, when Peter quoted from Joel 2. At Pentecost God answered that wistful prayer. Or we

could put it this way: Moses prophetically prayed that God's Spirit be given to all of God's people, so that all could (potentially at least) "prophesy" (see 1 Cor. 14:5, 31).

The Role of the Prophets

Especially in light of Deut. 13, we see that **faithfulness** to the revelation God has already given and to the covenant he has already made is the touchstone for discerning genuine prophecy. That points to the principal role served by OT prophets. While accurate predictions are one possible indicator of authenticity, **accuracy of prediction is not enough**: there must be faithfulness to the established covenant. Faithfulness takes precedence over predictions and miracles! The main job of the OT prophets is to call the people back to covenant faithfulness.

J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays (*Living God's Word*, Zondervan, 2012) have a simple but accurate description of the main message of the prophets after Moses (especially the "writing prophets" like Amos and Isaiah). Their summary of the message is as follows:

1. You (Israel and/or Judah) have broken the covenant (i.e., Deuteronomy). You must repent!
2. No repentance? Then judgment is coming!
3. Yet there is a glorious future time of restoration coming after the judgment through a righteous King, the Messiah. [Duvall and Hays, p. 103]

That description fits the message of some prophets more than others. Nevertheless, the role of the prophets taken as a whole is well summarized with those three points.

Duvall and Hays go on to describe the main sins of Israel and Judah against the covenant: **idolatry, social injustice, and ritualism**. **Idolatry** deserves first mention as Israel's and Judah's most flagrant violation of the Ten Commandments. Their idolatry was often manifested as *syncretism*: the covenant people still honored Yahweh, the LORD, who brought them out of slavery and brought them into the Promised Land. Yet soon after their arrival in the land promised to Abraham, his descendants *added* the Canaanites' gods to their worship. They would, for instance, sacrifice and pray to Baal, supposedly the deity who brought rain and fertility to the fields, flocks, and herds. Even worse, they resorted to worshipping Molech, Chemosh, and other gods whose worship included child sacrifices. This horrifying syncretism was introduced at the highest level by none other than Solomon, who indulged his many pagan wives with their own temples for their gods. Even Solomon, late in his life, seems to have joined in this syncretistic worship of other gods alongside of Yahweh. (See 1 Kings 11:4-8.)

Idolatry is the most frequently mentioned covenant violation leading to Israel's destruction in 722 B.C. (2 Kings 17:6-41) and then Judah's exile and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 587 B.C. (2 Kings 21:10-16; 2 Chron. 36:1-20). But **social injustice** was also a persistent sin in Israel and Judah. Mistreatment of the poor and corrupt social practices were violations of God's covenant, since the LORD commanded his people to love their neighbors as themselves and be generous to the needy (Lev. 19:9-18). Among the prophets but not alone, Amos is the most notable for his denunciations of social injustice (see Amos 2:6-8; 4:1). Amos also ties Israel's injustice to a third complaint God had against his people: **ritualism**.

We should qualify “ritualism” with some adjectives like “empty,” “hypocritical,” and perhaps “syncretistic.” God had given Israel certain rituals and observances to perform and pass on to succeeding generations. But making sacrifices to “the LORD”—while also ignoring his guidance for life, his commandments for holiness and generosity, and his claim to be the one and only God, worthy of our love and exclusive worship (Deut. 6:4-5)—such worship was worse than not worshipping at all. God spoke these strong words to Israel in Amos 5:21-24:

- ²¹ “I hate, I despise your feasts,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
²² Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the peace offerings of your fattened animals,
I will not look upon them.
²³ Take away from me the noise of your songs;
to the melody of your harps I will not listen.
²⁴ But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

What made Israel’s worship rituals repulsive in God’s sight? Their daily lives of disobedience! Their mistreatment of one another, especially the weak and poor! God spoke these words through Amos around 760 B.C., but the same basic principle is declared in Samuel’s rebuke of King Saul (before 1000 B.C.): “to obey is better than sacrifice” (1 Sam. 15:22). (Shortly after Amos’s ministry in Israel, Micah preached the same point to Judah in Micah 6:6-8.)

Also noteworthy is that Amos was native to Judah and considered an “outsider” in Israel, especially after he prophesied against social injustice and declared God’s certain wrath (see Amos 7:12-13). By this time Israel and Judah had been separate political states for more than a century. Yet God sent prophets to both nations, urging repentance for covenant violations.

Sometimes the prophets are referred to as “covenant enforcers,” yet they had no coercive power at their disposal (although Elijah could show some of God’s wrath in his own actions; see below). The power of the prophets was that they spoke the word of the LORD; some people responded to their faithful witness but others (perhaps the majority?) did not. In the northern kingdom, Israel, *every* king is described as evil because they made little effort to please the covenant God of Israel. *Some* kings in Judah, like Hezekiah, were faithful to the LORD and listened to prophets like Isaiah. Other kings in Judah overtly rejected the prophets’ words. Jeremiah suffered persecution and death threats from the ruling class (Jere. 20:1-2; 26:7-11), and King Jehoiakim defiantly and methodically burned the writings of Jeremiah as he heard them read (Jere. 36:23-26). If the prophets had any human power, it was the power of influence, which can be accepted or rejected at the discretion of the audience.

Calling Israel Back to the Covenant: Elijah on Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18)

Next to Moses, the single greatest example of dramatically demonstrating miraculous power is Elijah (800s B.C.). Ironically his spectacular success in calling down fire from heaven—in the “show-down” with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel—also demonstrates the limits of a prophet’s power to change the hearts of the rulers and the people.

Elijah challenges the crowd on Mt. Carmel to abandon their syncretism and idolatry and come back to full covenant commitment: “And Elijah came near to all the people and said, ‘How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.’ And the people did not answer him a word” (1 Kings 18:21).

Here was a public contest: the god who answers by fire will show he is the true and living God (1 Kings 18:24). Even the crowd who had earlier said nothing in response to Elijah (vs. 21) said this would be a good test of reality (vs. 24). After the prophets of Baal failed miserably (18:26-29), and Elijah’s simple prayer brought astonishing results (18:36-38), the people seemed sufficiently convinced: “They fell on their faces and said, ‘The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God’” (18:39). They assisted Elijah in executing 450 prophets of Baal, who had proved to be no god after all (18:40).

This triumph was followed by another, as Elijah’s prayers for rain broke the drought of three years and six months—a drought produced by Elijah’s prayers, as God had directed him (1 Kings 17:1; 18:1, 41-46; James 5:17-18). Yet the follow-up of this powerful demonstration of God’s power must not have been what Elijah expected. Perhaps Elijah thought everyone in Israel, on hearing what had happened, would repent and turn to the LORD. Perhaps some did, but not the nation as a whole, and certainly not King Ahab and Queen Jezebel.

Jezebel sent word to Elijah that she would see him dead “by this time tomorrow” (1 Kings 19:2). Perhaps with surprise we read that Elijah “was afraid” and “ran for his life”—out of Israel, into southern Judah, until he was exhausted (19:3-4). Elijah was spiritually exhausted, as the following account of his trek to “Horeb” (i.e., Mt. Sinai) makes clear. He’s ready to die (19:4), but God is not through with him. After a mysterious encounter with the LORD, on the same mountain where Moses communed with God centuries before, Elijah is renewed and given more assignments (19:9-18). Elijah does not get to leave the earth until 2 Kings 2, in an astonishing manner, too!

The whole lesson on the prophets could focus just on Elijah. **What was his call?** To call Israel back to the LORD and to the covenant God made at Mt. Sinai, also known as Horeb. How successful was he? That day on Mt. Carmel, he might have thought the tide had turned or would turn soon. But it did not. An unprecedented miracle might have convinced some that “the LORD, he is God,” but Israel as a whole and particularly its leadership kept going down the path of idolatry, syncretism, and social injustice.

So was Elijah a failure? He seems to feel that way at the beginning of 1 Kings 19. But Elijah was **not called to coerce** Israel to change. He was **called to call them** to change—to turn, to repent and come back to the God of their ancestors, the God who had made them his people. Elijah has his time of feeling defeated, but that’s not the same as being defeated. Elijah, despite his human weaknesses, was faithful to God’s call. In God’s eyes, being faithful is success, no matter how the world thinks of you or compares you with anyone else (see Matt. 25:21, 23; 1 Cor. 4:1-2, noting that “trustworthy” (ESV) is another way of saying “faithful,” as the NIV has it).

Are the Prophets All “Doom and Gloom”?

Because their main function in their own times was to call Israel and Judah back to faithfulness to God’s covenant, much of their message comes across as negative, predicting God’s wrath and national disaster. But the writing prophets also contain word pictures of a glorious future, often

connected with a promised deliverer, who is sometimes called the Messiah (“the Anointed One”) and sometimes “the Servant of the LORD.” Recall the summary of the prophets’ message cited earlier in this lesson:

1. You (Israel and/or Judah) have broken the covenant (i.e., Deuteronomy). You must repent!
2. No repentance? Then judgment is coming!
3. Yet there is a glorious future time of restoration coming after the judgment through a righteous King, the Messiah. [Duvall and Hays, p. 103]

Although the following positive predictions could be a series of lessons, here we simply list *some* of the more notable texts (with minimal comment) in approximate chronological order:

Genesis 3:15—offspring of the woman will bruise the serpent’s head

Genesis 12:1-3—Abraham’s offspring will bless all the families of the earth

2 Samuel 7:12-16—David’s offspring will reign over an eternal kingdom

Joel 2:28-32—God will pour out his Spirit on all kinds of people, to prophesy, dream, and see visions; everyone who calls on the name of the name of the LORD shall be saved (cited by Peter in Acts 2:17-21)

Amos 9:11—God will “raise up the booth of David that is fallen” (spoken to Israel, who had rejected David’s heirs who reigned in Judah)

Micah 5:2-5a—from Bethlehem (David’s hometown) will come a ruler over Israel (who had rejected David’s line); that ruler’s “coming forth is from of old, from ancient days,” and he will “be great to the ends of the earth.”

Isaiah 7:14—virgin mother of the Messiah (see Matt. 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38)

Isaiah 9:6-7—a child will be named “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace,” whose government and peace will never end; from “the throne of David and his kingdom” he will establish “justice and righteousness . . . forevermore.”

Isaiah 42:1-9—“the Servant of the LORD,” empowered by God’s Spirit to bring justice, healing, and light for the nations/Gentiles, to set prisoners free

Isaiah 49:1-7—“the Servant of the LORD,” vindicated by God’s power, to save “the tribes of Jacob” and be “a light for the nations [Gentiles],” to take salvation “to the end of the earth”

Isaiah 52:13—53:12—“the Servant of the LORD” bears the punishment for all our sins; God’s “righteous one” will “make many to be accounted righteous”; he “makes intercession for the transgressors”

Isaiah 61:1-2a—“the Servant of the LORD” anointed by the Spirit of God to bring good news, healing, and deliverance (used by Jesus in Luke 4:18-19, 21)

Isaiah 65:17-25—God will create new heavens and a new earth; nothing will “hurt or destroy”

Jeremiah 31:31-34—a new covenant will give everyone a heart for God’s will, personal connection to God, and assurance of forgiveness

Ezekiel 36:26-27—God will give a new heart and spirit—*his* Spirit—to his people so that they can obey from the heart [Ezekiel was in Babylonian exile when he gave this prophecy.]

Daniel 2—prediction of a succession of mortal empires, but “in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed,” which “shall stand forever” (2:44). [Daniel was in Babylonian exile at the time.]

Daniel 7:13-14—“one like a son of man” is given an everlasting kingdom; all nations will serve him [“Son of Man,” Jesus’ frequent way of referring to himself, means more than his humanity.]

A Final Word on the Prophetic Perspective?

There is no “final word” within the Old Testament. There are many “loose ends” which won’t be connected until the New Testament (and some not until Christ’s second coming). The “loose ends” that should be emphasized most are the **unconditional promises** made to Abraham (Gen. 12 and elsewhere) and to David (2 Sam. 7 and elsewhere).

By the end of OT history, has the offspring of Abraham blessed all the families of the earth? Has David’s heir established an everlasting kingdom? The answer, to that point, is clearly ‘no.’ Abraham’s descendants who survived Babylonian exile are but a shadow of the once-powerful nation(s) of Israel/Judah. After their return from exile (538 B.C. and following), Judah lived under the control of foreigners (i.e., pagans) like the Persians, the Greeks, and then the Romans. Heirs of David might be appointed governor (like Zerubbabel in the time of Haggai and Zechariah), but they weren’t kings. Even when the Jews won national freedom (in between Greek domination and Roman rule), their ruler was a priest from the Maccabees/Hasmonean family, not a king descended from David. Not a single Davidic king reigned in Jerusalem between 587 B.C. and the birth of Jesus (see the genealogy of Jesus in Matt. 1:1-17).

The promises of God seem to be hanging by a thread of stubborn hope after the return from exile did not bring an era of blessing. Indeed, the last word from the last prophet of the OT speaks of the possibility of an abiding curse (“utter destruction” in the ESV):

⁴“Remember to obey the Law of Moses, my servant—all the decrees and regulations that I gave him on Mount Sinai for all Israel.

⁵“Look, I am sending you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the LORD arrives. ⁶His preaching will turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers. Otherwise I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

[Malachi 4:4-6, New Living Translation]

Still, from the promises listed above (from Genesis to Daniel, a list that could be extended to post-exilic prophets like Zechariah and Malachi), there was reason to hope that God would yet

fulfill his promises. Prophecies like those listed above fueled the hopes of prayerful Jews at the time of Jesus. Such prophecies are in the background of statements like Andrew's in John 1:41: "We have found the Messiah." Expectations like those are in the background of the Samaritan woman's witness and question in John 4:29: "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?"

The Old Testament leaves us with "loose ends" which Jesus alone can tie together. And even Jesus' closest disciples needed explanations which made sense only after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, followed by his gift of the Holy Spirit (see Luke 24:44-49; Acts 1:8). Even now the **story is not finished**, but we can see **how** the story **can be finished**: Jesus already reigns over a kingdom that will never end, and the blessing promised to Abraham keeps spreading to more and more families over the face of the earth. And when the good news of the kingdom of God has been preached to every people group, then the end will come (Matt. 24:14).

Overview of the Old Testament
Lesson 6: Called to Worship and Wisdom
Psalms and Wisdom Literature,
God's Gifts to Israel and Us

Called to worship

In an overview series, with so much history to consider, it might be easy to miss the central role of worship in the story. Once we reflect on the most significant events, however, it becomes apparent that **worship is at the heart of the story**. What went wrong in the Garden of Eden? Adam and Eve obeyed a voice other than God's. If they had asked for God's direction before acting, how different the story would be!

Recall the Ten Commandments. Which commandments directly address worship? Certainly the first three—forbidding other gods, graven images, and disrespect for God's name—deal directly with our worship and disposition toward the LORD. And the fourth commandment—concerning the Sabbath—isn't just about rest; it's about remembering God as our Creator (Exod. 20:8-11) and Redeemer (Deut. 5:12-15).

In Exodus and Leviticus, detailed attention is given to how acts of worship should be performed. And why were the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah conquered and carried away from the Promised Land? They broke covenant with God in multiple ways, but the biggest offense was idolatry! (Recall 2 Kings 17.) It is not an exaggeration to say that worship *is* the story of both the Old and New Testaments. (What is *the* issue in Revelation? Worship! The Lamb or the Beast!).

Further to see why worship is the story of the Bible, we might need to offer a simple definition of "worship." In our time and culture, "worship" is often thought of as music. Some of us make decisions about which church (or church service) to attend based on the kind of music there. Obviously music matters a lot to us, and having preferences is natural, but music is not the essence of worship.

The essence of worship is **acknowledging God**—for who God *is*, and for what God *has done*. Or we could say worship is honoring God as God. So, prayer is worship. Listening to Bible teaching and preaching is worship. And, yes, singing to God is worship. But none of these activities is genuine worship if the intention to acknowledge God is absent. And the chief way we need to acknowledge God is by obeying him (see 1 Sam. 15:22). What we offer God in words, or in words and music, does not matter to God as much as obedience. Without obedience we cannot truly honor God (see Amos 5:23-24).

Worship is central to the theology of the Bible and to the life of God's people. Indeed, failure to honor God and give him thanks as Creator is identified in Romans 1:21-23, 28 as the root sin of all humanity. If we don't worship the true God who made us, we will worship false gods of our own making, or we will worship ourselves as self-made and self-sufficient. God wants to save us from the destruction that comes from false worship.

False worship is a form of identity confusion. Idolatry identifies the wrong thing as god—a power to give life or make life better. That's why idolatry is so destructive. What God created to live cannot live if the wrong source is identified as The Source. To save us God has to save us from idolatry. As noted above with reference to the Ten Commandments, idolatry is the beginning and source of all other sins. Also, as noted above, idolatry was the most deeply-rooted

sin that needed to be purged from God’s covenant people. (After the Babylonian Exile, the Jews still had plenty of sin issues to deal with, but overt idolatry was not one of them!)

While worship is central to the whole Bible, the part of the OT which most focuses on speaking and/or singing directly to God is the Book of Psalms. Here we find many lessons and models for worship (acknowledging God). One important lesson is that you can tell God anything; you can be honest about your feelings and know that God acknowledges your feelings. This is the reverence of transparency—honesty with God.

Psalms

The variety of feelings expressed to God in the Psalms is amazing: gratitude, praise, and joy, but also complaint, impatience, and doubt. I once heard the minister and poet Richard Exley say that the only attitude toward God that cannot be found in the Psalms is indifference. Obviously there are psalms of praise and thanksgiving (8; 34; 100; 148; and many others). Some psalms celebrate “salvation history,” focusing on the great acts by which God saved and delivered the nation or the individual (78; 136; and others).

But there are also psalms of “lament” (again, for individual or national sorrows). According to Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart (*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, Zondervan, fourth ed., p. 220), this is “the largest group of psalms,” with more than sixty psalms expressing some complaint or disappointment (3; 22; 88; and many others). Knowing that 40% of the Psalms fit into this category certainly gives us permission to speak boldly to God! It should also teach us that our worship can include expressions of sorrow or need, not just praise and joy.

In some “lament” psalms, the writer wishes or prays for bad things to happen to his enemies (35) or the nation’s enemies (137). These are called “imprecatory” psalms. People who aspire to live by Jesus’ admonitions to “turn the other cheek” (Matt. 5:39) and to pray (blessings!) for those who persecute us (Matt. 5:44) may view these OT imprecatory prayers as “sub-Christian.” But that response misses the point: Yes, you should love others as God loves them (Matt. 5:44, 48), but you should also be honest with God about your feelings toward others. God can heal what you’re willing to reveal!

If I feel hatred toward Kim Jung Un for his murderous ways, I should pray for his conversion—for him to become my brother in Christ! But in that moment when anger rises in my heart, I should tell God about it (although he already knows). Being honest with God about feelings I know are not as pure as Christ’s, I admit my need for further work in my heart by the Holy Spirit. So **telling God** that I hate Kim Jung Un and wish to see him dead opens the door for healing. **Telling others** (and not God) about that same feeling will probably add fuel to the fires of contempt and hatred in my heart and theirs. **Acknowledging my true feelings to God** is part of **acknowledging God as God**; it’s also acknowledging my need for God to keep changing me.

The variety and number of Psalms make it impossible to focus on just one for a lesson in this series. But if the teacher desires to spend some time on a particular Psalm (or even just a part of one), you might try having one or two people read the portion while everyone else listens to hear the emotional and/or theological perspective. For example, how does the writer of Psalm 100 feel about God? What are some attributes/qualities of God that Psalm 100 celebrates? What does this Psalm reveal about God’s desires? About the desires of those who seek God? You could ask such questions about any psalm (as well as other books of the Bible).

One further point about the Psalms: Although these are the words of people **to God**—words we can speak to God—the Psalms are also God’s word **to us**. We can learn God’s will for us from the Psalms: What does God want for you according to Psalm 23? And in many cases the Psalms are as prophetic as the books of the prophets. An example is Psalm 16:8-11, which Peter applied to Jesus’ resurrection (Acts 2:25-32). In Acts 2:34-36, Peter applies Psalm 110:1 to Jesus’ exaltation to God’s right hand. [Jesus himself explained his death and resurrection from “the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44).]

Called to Wisdom

The whole Bible could be called “a book of wisdom” in the sense that all of Scripture can make us “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15). But certain books of the OT are called “wisdom literature” because of their dominant focus. Those books are Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes.

Before we briefly discuss those books, notice the connection between wisdom and worship. Where does true wisdom begin? “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight” (Prov. 9:10). Thus no one can be truly wise if he/she does not acknowledge and reverence God. If the Psalms teach us the reverence of transparency (telling God honestly how we feel), then the “wisdom books” teach us that reverent worship is essential to a life of wisdom.

These three books reflect on wisdom in different ways. Proverbs comments on life-choices and encourages wise choices as opposed to foolish choices. Many of these comments are only one verse long (see examples in Prov. 10), while other comments are couched in an extended context (Prov. 9:13-18, for one example).

Another important thing to note about Proverbs: This book was not written to provide guaranteed outcomes for our choices. Rather it was written to provide **guidance** for those who want the best kind of life. See Proverbs 1:2-7 for the stated purpose of the book. Proverbs is not a book of promises (or “recipe knowledge”). The person who pays attention to the wisdom in Proverbs will likely have a better life than the person who ignores or defies the wisdom here. But the Book of Job shows us that reading Proverbs as guarantees or promises is a serious misreading.

Job is described as a man who fears God and does what is right (Job 1:1). When he suffers one horrendous loss after another, Job does not understand why. His friends think they know: Job must have committed some unconfessed sin to bring all this trouble on his family and himself. One of his friends offers Job this path back to health and happiness:

- 14 “If iniquity is in your hand, put it far away,
and let not injustice dwell in your tents.
- 15 Surely then you will lift up your face without blemish;
you will be secure and will not fear.
- 16 You will forget your misery;
you will remember it as waters that have passed away.
- 17 And your life will be brighter than the noonday;
its darkness will be like the morning.” [Job 11:13–17]

A correct reading of this passage absolutely depends on recognizing the speaker of these words: Zophar (11:1) spoke this formula to Job. God did not tell Job his troubles were caused by his sins! But perhaps Zophar had heard words like these from Prov. 12:21—“No ill befalls the righteous, but the wicked are filled with trouble.” If you took Prov. 12:21 as a promise of guaranteed results, you would have to conclude that Job was “wicked” because he was certainly “filled with trouble”! This passage from Job 11 illustrates two important principles of interpretation: (1) pay attention to the context; and (2) remember the context includes (ultimately) the whole Bible. Especially in Job, carefully notice who the speaker is for any speech. If God is not the speaker, the speaker might be ill-informed!

So, what is the explanation for Job’s suffering? In the book, God never offers an explanation to Job (even though the reader understands that Job is unwittingly caught in something of a contest between God and Satan! [Job 1:8-12; 2:3-6]). When God finally speaks to Job (chapters 38-41), God speaks of his transcendent power and asks Job more difficult questions than Job can ask. In awe of God, Job is satisfied to leave his personal questions unanswered (Job 40:4-5; 42:2-6). [The final resolution of Job’s suffering will not come until his Creator takes Job’s suffering (and ours) on himself, in the person of Jesus, dying for us and defeating our last enemy, death.]

A brief (though simplistic) comparison of Proverbs and Job will lead us on to the third wisdom book:

Proverbs tells us that life *can* be good
if we do the wise thing.
Job tells us that life *can* be painful
even if we do the right thing.
Ecclesiastes tells us that (earthly) life *will* end
no matter what we do.

Job and Ecclesiastes are both full of questions. Job asks why he is suffering. Satan asks whether Job serves God for nothing (Job 1:9). Job’s friends ask (by implication) what Job has done to bring all this trouble on himself. God asks Job questions that silence Job’s questions.

In contrast, Ecclesiastes is an extended “why?” in a monologue by Solomon (or someone writing from Solomon’s perspective; the author calls himself “the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem” in Eccl. 1:1). With boundless wealth, power, and opportunity to explore every path that humans think might lead to happiness and fulfillment, Solomon declares what he has discovered: “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (Eccl. 1:2, ESV; the NIV says “meaningless”). Pleasure doesn’t satisfy; success doesn’t satisfy; even wisdom doesn’t satisfy (1:12-18). (Ultimately this might lead the reader to consider the possibility that satisfaction is not the meaning of life!)

Besides their focus on wisdom, these three very different books have another point in common: the fear of God.

In Proverbs, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 9:10).

In Job, the fear of God is all Job has left after a series of disasters. Satan has bet that Job will curse God if he loses all his blessings, including his health (Job 1:9-11; 2:4-5). Yet Job clings to his fear of God despite the temptation to “curse God and die” (2:9, suggested by his wife, who was also in great pain). Job’s fear of God is vindicated when the LORD declares Job has spoken more truthfully about God than his friends have (42:7-8).

In Ecclesiastes, all the questions from “the Preacher” have not led him to an explanation of the meaning of life. In the end, he falls back on the one thing he knows. He has not found satisfying answers to his questions, but he knows he will have to give an answer for how he lives. So he advises the reader to take that into account:

¹³The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. ¹⁴For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil. [Eccl. 12:13–14]

The questions raised by Job and Ecclesiastes seem to cry out for more answers than the books give us. Reverence for God (the fear of God) is certainly taught by both books, and that’s a lesson to take seriously. But we’re left wondering about the meaning of life, if all we know is that earthly life will end. And we’re left wondering about the problem of suffering by the story of Job. Job didn’t get an explanation, and even though we read what Job didn’t know—that he was something of a “test case”—that does not comfort us! Do we have to conclude, along with Job, that God is so far beyond our understanding that our questions about suffering must go unanswered?

As Christians, we can say more than Job could say; we can say more than “the Preacher” of Ecclesiastes could say. But we can say more only because God has done more since the time of Job and Solomon. Christ has come, with a definitive revelation of God—not only God’s power but also God’s compassion (feeling what we feel). Christ has died and Christ has risen, breaking us out of the prison of possibilities confined to earthly lifetimes.

The questions raised by Job and Ecclesiastes find their answer in Christ. The deepest discussions of wisdom in the Old Testament leave us wanting more, and we find that “more” in Jesus, “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,” including the knowledge that “Christ in you” is “the hope of glory” everlasting (see Col. 2:3 and 1:27).

Overview of the Old Testament

Lesson 7: Exile and Return

2 Kings

Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel

Judah follows Israel in idolatry but with a different ending

Lesson 4 discussed briefly the destruction of Israel (the northern kingdom of the “divided kingdom” era). Reference was made to 2 Kings 17:6-18, where the reasons for Israel’s demise are summarized. The Assyrian Empire’s destruction of Samaria (capital of Israel) and of the whole nation of Israel was as thorough as can be imagined. Large numbers of Israelites were deported to other parts of Assyria’s vast empire, and large numbers of non-Israelites were forced from their native lands and made to live in the area which had been Israel (2 Kings 17:24). This was Assyria’s cruel but effective policy to keep subjugated peoples dispirited and divided.

From this time we get the term “the ten lost tribes” of Israel, since they were scattered and assimilated into various nations. It’s also the beginning of the people we know in the New Testament as the “Samaritans.” As explained in 2 Kings 17:24-41, pagans brought to the land formerly known as Israel worshiped their own gods. Before long, however, they also adopted some of the worship practices of Israel, calling on Israel’s God, *Yahweh*, the LORD, along with the gods they brought with them. From this mixing of races and worship practices a distinctive form of “*Yahwism*” arose. [By Jesus’ time the Samaritans had their own version of the Torah (the Books of Moses) and their own “messianic” expectations for the future (thus the Samaritan woman’s questions to Jesus and her tentative identification of him to her town—John 4:9-29).]

Israel was effectively swallowed up by the Assyrian Empire in 722 B.C., but Judah managed (by God’s miraculous hand and Hezekiah’s godly leadership) to escape Israel’s fate. Especially in 701 B.C., it was a very close call (2 Kings 18:13—19:37). One might think seeing what happened to Israel would have a sobering effect on Judah. One might think escaping Assyrian conquest only by a miracle of God would produce gratitude and faithfulness to Judah’s covenant with God. Perhaps there were good effects on some people of Judah, at least for a time. What we know from history, however, is that a good king, Hezekiah, was followed by the worst king Judah had to endure: Manasseh. There is irony and tragedy in that story.

In 2 Kings 20, Hezekiah is gravely ill (possibly earlier than the events of ch. 19). His friend, the prophet Isaiah, tells him to set his house in order and get ready to die. But Hezekiah prays earnestly to the LORD, and Isaiah gets another message from God for the king: you will not die soon; you’ll get fifteen more years (20:1-11). After this extension of his life, however, two ominous things occur: Hezekiah is visited by envoys from Babylon, and he has another son.

The friendly (?) visit of the Babylonian envoys gave Hezekiah an opportunity to show off the blessings of his kingdom. Isaiah, however, predicted that everything Hezekiah had shown them would eventually be taken by the Babylonians (2 Kings 20:12-19). This would not happen during Hezekiah’s lifetime, and Hezekiah takes strange comfort in that (20:19). What Isaiah predicted took place more than a century later, when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, the Temple, and the city walls (in 587 B.C.).

The other ominous event during Hezekiah's fifteen bonus years was the birth of his son, Manasseh. Manasseh was twelve years old when his father died and Manasseh became king (2 Kings 21:1). Twelve years is long enough to learn many things from one's father, but Manasseh apparently had other influences on his life. He became the worst king of Judah ever, and he reigned longer (55 years) than any other Judean king.

What made Manasseh so wicked? As other bad kings of Judah had done, Manasseh led the people into idolatrous practices (reversing his father's policies). 2 Kings 21:2-9 catalogues some specific evils committed by Manasseh: worshiping Baal, Asherah, and "all the host of heaven"; making his son a burnt offering; resorting to fortune-tellers, mediums, and necromancers; and setting up an image of Asherah in the Temple of the LORD! According to 2 Kings 21:9, "Manasseh led them astray to do more evil than the nations had done whom the LORD destroyed before the people of Israel" (i.e., before the conquest led by Joshua!).

God sent prophets to denounce the idolatry of King Manasseh and Judah (2 Kings 21:10-15). Although not said explicitly in 2 Kings, some of these prophets may be included in the "much innocent blood" the king spilled in Jerusalem (21:16). According to tradition (outside of Scripture), one of the prophets killed by Manasseh was Isaiah, Hezekiah's trusted friend and adviser (some believe Hebrews 11:37 refers to the mode of Isaiah's execution—"sawn in two"—but this cannot be proved).

Whether or not Manasseh caused the death of Isaiah, he is held responsible more than any other king for the exile of Judah (587 B.C.) in the century after his death (about 642 B.C.). See **2 Kings 21:10-15; 23:26; 24:3**; and **Jere. 15:4**. In fairness, we might note that 2 Chronicles 33:10-19 reports some positive changes made by Manasseh after he was humbled by the Assyrians. Still, the damage had been done, and Isaiah's earlier prediction (2 Kings 20:12-19, spoken to Hezekiah, Manasseh's father) would be fulfilled by the Babylonian Exile.

Josiah's reforms, too late to save Judah

After Manasseh's death, his son Amon became king but for only two years (2 Kings 21:19). He was assassinated, but his assassins did not cut off the line of David. Amon's young son, Josiah—at the age of eight!—became king in his father's place (2 Kings 22:1-2). Eventually he became one of the best kings of Judah, perhaps the best since David reigned over an undivided kingdom.

After Josiah was king for 18 years, he began major repairs and renovation of Solomon's Temple (2 Kings 22:3-7). During that work, Hilkiah the high priest reported that "the Book of the Law" had been found in the Temple (22:8). Had the entire Torah been misplaced? When had that happened? Perhaps during the long reign of Manasseh! It's impossible to say. We have to imagine a time very different from ours, a time when books were scarce and people relied much more on oral traditions and collective memories preserved by practice (one reason why God had directed Israel to observe so many special days (feasts and fasts) during the course of a year).

Whatever caused the Book's disappearance, and whatever the exact circumstances of its re-discovery in the Temple, King Josiah was shocked by the contents when he heard it read (22:11). Tearing his clothes showed the level of his dismay. His immediate reaction and his later reforms of religious practice in Judah (2 Kings 23) have led many scholars to conclude that "the Book of

the Law” discovered and read to the king was Deuteronomy (one book of five called “the Law”). The covenant “blessings” and “curses” are emphasized more and in greater length in Deuteronomy than anywhere else (especially Deut. 28). So plausibly this “Book of the Law” was Deuteronomy, although it’s entirely possible the entire Torah (all five Mosaic books) had been collecting dust for decades in the neglected Temple.

The genuineness of the newly discovered “Book of the Law” is confirmed by “Huldah the prophetess.” She confirms also that the curses named in the Book were sure to come upon Judah, but not in Josiah’s lifetime (2 Kings 22:14-20). One of the curses of Deuteronomy was exile in a foreign land—for people and for king—if they were not faithful to the covenant (Deut. 28:36). Huldah’s prophecy was in line with the explanation given in 2 Kings 17 for the destruction of Israel and Samaria (722 B.C.). A century after Israel’s destruction, Huldah says Judah is facing similar disaster, for Judah has been unfaithful, too.

If one man’s effort to avert disaster could have sufficed, surely it would have been Josiah’s zeal for reforming Judah. The details are numerous in 2 Kings 23: renewing commitment to the covenant publicly (23:3); cleansing all vestiges of idolatry and syncretism from Solomon’s Temple (23:4, 6-7, 11-12); reforming the priesthood (23:5, 8); destroying pagan worship sites in Judah (23:10, 13-14); and ridding Judah of all “mediums,” “necromancers,” and “household gods” (23:24). Josiah even took his reforms north of the previous border between Judah and Israel: he tore down “the altar at Bethel, the high place erected by Jeroboam the son of Nebat” (23:15). That shrine had been in place since Israel split from Judah in 930 or 922 B.C. (1 Kings 12:28). Josiah destroyed other shrines in the area formerly occupied by Israel, even killing the non-Levite “priests” who served there (2 Kings 23:19-20).

Josiah destroyed many things in his zeal to bring Judah back to covenant faithfulness. One surprising, positive reform was that he commanded the people to “keep the Passover” (23:21). According to 2 Kings 23:22, “no such Passover had been kept since the days of the judges”! Possibly we should understand by this that the nation as a whole had neglected Passover; there were probably families who kept the tradition alive in the midst of an apostate nation. Another possibility is that Josiah, zealous to avoid temptations to syncretism, ordered all Passover lambs to be sacrificed by the priests, rather than by heads of separate households.

Josiah died in battle (609 B.C.), while foolishly interfering in a war between Egypt and Assyria (2 Kings 23:28-30; cf. 2 Chron. 35:20-25). Still, the overall verdict on this good king is found in 2 Kings 23:25—“Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the LORD with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the Law of Moses, nor did any like him arise after him.”

After Josiah, exile quickly follows.

After Josiah’s death, his son Jehoahaz became king (2 Kings 23:30), but Egypt did not approve. So Pharaoh Neco replaced him with another son of Josiah, Eliakim, renamed Jehoiakim (23:31-35). So who was really in charge? At this point, Egypt could dictate to Judah, even though a descendant of David still occupied the throne.

But another regional bully was on the rise—Babylon—and Judah was caught between the two powers. The history of Judah between Josiah’s death in 609 B.C. and the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. shows Judah being pushed from two sides, and the people of Judah were divided over whether to be an ally/vassal of Egypt or an ally/vassal of Babylon. “Going it alone” did not seem to be a viable option for tiny Judah.

When Zedekiah “rebelled against the king of Babylon” (2 Kings 24:20), he effectively made himself the last Davidic king. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, put Jerusalem under siege from Zedekiah’s ninth year until his eleventh year, when the famine became so severe that Zedekiah and his troops attempted to escape. The attempt failed.

Zedekiah and his sons were captured. Nebuchadnezzar had all of Zedekiah’s sons executed as the last thing the king of Judah saw before having his eyes put out and being led away in chains to Babylon (25:1-7). Afterward, Nebuchadnezzar’s troops burned “the house of the LORD” and all the houses of Jerusalem. They broke down the walls of Jerusalem, making further rebellion impossible (25:8-10). The once-glorious city was weakened to irrelevance for more than a century, when Nehemiah (under Persian authority) rebuilt the walls (Neh. 3-6; 445 B.C.).

What future is there for Jerusalem and the people of Judah?

The prophet **Jeremiah** lived through this dramatic time. He witnessed Josiah’s reforms; he also witnessed the Babylonian siege. He preached to Jerusalem and the king that submission to Babylon was the right course. Judah’s time of judgment had come and there would be no escape for those who resisted the exile (see Jere. 21:9; 38:2-3, 17-18). Naturally such words sounded treasonous, or at least disheartening to the defenders of Jerusalem; so Jeremiah suffered the wrath of his fellow Jews (38:4-6).

Significantly, Jeremiah also predicted the exile would be of limited duration. Speaking first about Judah and then Babylon, Jeremiah prophesied:

¹¹ This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. ¹² Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, declares the LORD, making the land an everlasting waste. [Jeremiah 25:11–12]

The “seventy years” is usually considered a rounded number, starting from the time King Jehoiakim of Judah became a vassal to Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 24:1) until the Medes and Persians conquered Babylon and allowed the Jewish exiles to return home (approximately 605 B.C. to 538 B.C.; see also 2 Chron. 36:20-23).

Although Jeremiah’s contemporaries thought he was too pessimistic about Judah’s chances of resisting Babylon, he actually prophesied some of the most constructive words about Judah’s future. For example, in a letter written to those already in exile in Babylon, Jeremiah wrote these encouraging words (which many Christians cite without necessarily knowing the dire circumstances of the Jews at the time):

¹⁰ For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹ **For I know**

the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. ¹² Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you, declares the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile. [Jere. 29:10–14, emphasis added]

And Jeremiah's prophecy of "a new covenant" was also given during this troubled time. When earthly hope for God's covenant people seemed to have vanished, God declares through Jeremiah that he is far from finished with his work.

³¹ Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. ³³ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. [Jere. 31:31–34, quoted in full by Heb. 8:8–12]

How could a people in exile expect God to keep his promise to bless all the families of the earth through Abraham's descendant (Gen. 12:3) and to establish the throne of David forever (2 Sam. 7:13, 16)? It seems God chose the dark hour of Judah's exile to shine a bright light of hope on the future! But Jeremiah is not the only prophet with such positive words during this terrible time. Two prophets who were actually exiled in Babylon brought powerful messages from God about what the future held for God's people.

Ezekiel

From the beginning of the Book of Ezekiel, we see he is one of the early exiles taken to Babylon. Like Jeremiah's prophecy of "a new covenant" inscribed on the hearts of the people, Ezekiel brought this promise from God:

²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put **my Spirit within you**, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. [Ezekiel 36:26–27, emphasis added]

And the long description of a new temple with a miraculous stream flowing from it (Ezek. 40:1—47:12) came after Ezekiel had received word that Jerusalem had fallen to the Babylonians (33:21).

Daniel

Daniel was another early captive taken to Babylon, before Jerusalem was destroyed. But God prospered and promoted Daniel in the service of the pagan empires which ruled during his lifetime—first the Babylonians, then the Persians. The Book of Daniel contains some prophecies that are difficult to understand, but his emphasis throughout the book is on the sovereignty of

God over whatever kingdom was ascendant at the time or would be in the future. That is the clear point of Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the great statue:

⁴⁴ And in the days of those kings **the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed**, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and **it shall stand forever**, ⁴⁵ just as you saw that a stone was cut from a mountain by no human hand, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold. A great God has made known to the king what shall be after this. The dream is certain, and its interpretation sure. [Daniel 2:44–45, emphasis added]

Another vision was given directly to Daniel:

¹³ I saw in the night visions,
 and behold, with the clouds of heaven
 there came one like a son of man,
 and he came to the Ancient of Days
 and was presented before him.
¹⁴ And to him was given dominion
 and glory and a kingdom,
 that all peoples, nations, and languages
 should serve him;
 his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
 which shall not pass away,
 and his kingdom one
 that shall not be destroyed.

How is Judah's future while in exile important to us?

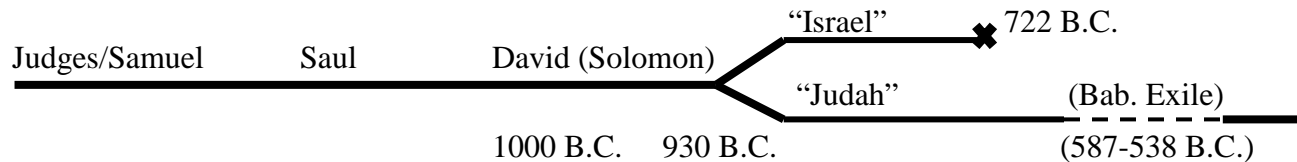
The answer to that question may already be apparent. The blessing God wants to make available to the whole world depends on **unconditional promises** God made to **Abraham** (Gen. 12:3) and to **David** (2 Sam. 7:13, 16). Because the promise of living in "the Promised Land" was a **conditional promise**, Israel and then Judah could be uprooted from the land due to their covenant-breaking ways over the centuries. As we see in the prophecies cited above, however, their being uprooted from the land did not mean God had abandoned them forever. And, most importantly for non-Jews, God had not abandoned his plan to bless the planet. That plan was "planted" (if you will) in the unconditional promises to Abraham and David.

The blessing comes in "the seed" or "descendant" of Abraham and "the Son of David." It **depends on a particular parcel of land only in the sense that the Son of David would have to be revealed as "the King of the Jews" in the place the Jews called home.** That seems to be the reason Judah's exile had to end, but the dispersion of "the ten lost tribes of Israel" did not have to be resolved. The scene had to be set for the Messiah, Son of David, to come—to his own people, in his and their place. Only there could the Son of David be rejected as "king of the Jews" (see John 19:1-22 with its emphasis on "king of the Jews").

Simply put, the **unconditional promise to David** required that Judah be brought back from exile, to live **without a Davidic king until Jesus came**, to be rejected by men but vindicated by

God—as God’s Son, as David’s heir, and as the “seed” of Abraham who would bless all the families of the earth.

[Discussion of the unconditional promise of an eternal kingdom ruled by David’s heir could also include Psalm 110:1-4, as used by Jesus (Matt. 22:41-46) and the Book of Hebrews (1:13; 7:21).]



Not necessarily for the class, but for the teacher the following timeline might be helpful, as it shows the period following exile, the post-exilic period, when some Jews moved back to Judah, but many Jews (such as Mordecai and Esther) did not.

587 BC—Fall of Jerusalem

539—Fall of Babylon (to Medes and Persians; Cyrus)

538—First Jewish return to Jerusalem; altar restored but no temple or walls for the city

536—foundation for a new temple laid

530—work on the temple stopped by opposition

520—work on the temple resumed (encouraged by Haggai and Zechariah)

516/515—The “Second Temple” is completed.

(Jesus ministered during the era of the “Second Temple,” which Herod had enhanced.)

483-471—events of Esther, in Persia

458—Ezra’s mission; more Jews return from Persia to Jerusalem

445—Nehemiah rebuilds the walls of Jerusalem

432—Nehemiah’s reforms renewed

Overview of the Old Testament

Lesson 8: Unfulfilled Promises

An Unfinished Story

Ezra and Nehemiah

Malachi

Blessing for All the Families of the Earth?

A Kingdom that will Last?

When does the Old Testament end?

The order of OT books does not make it easy to know when the story ends. The narrative of historical events is found in the first seventeen books—Genesis through Esther. But within this group there is chronological overlap, repetition (Kings and Chronicles), and some chronological dislocation. For example, the events in Esther happened before the events of Ezra and Nehemiah.

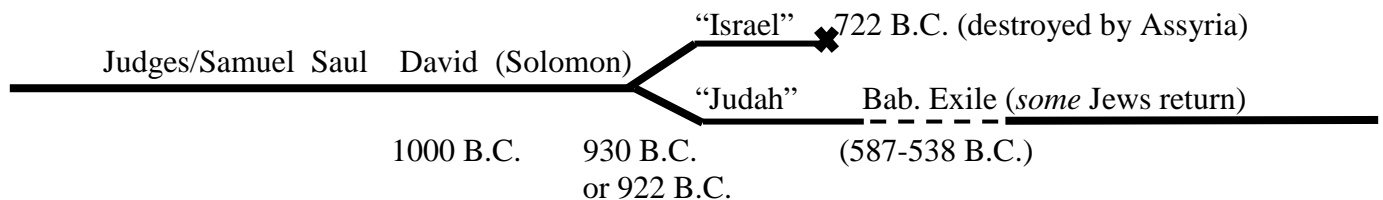
Ezra picks up the historical narrative from Chronicles. It seems plausible that Nehemiah follows Ezra, but they actually overlap one another's times in their respective ministries. Effectively, **the historical narrative of the OT ends with the events recorded in Nehemiah.** (Some prophetic books might have been written slightly later, such as Malachi. Some evangelical scholars think Daniel was written in the second century B.C., although most conservatives believe Daniel comes from the era he describes as his own time—Babylonian Exile, followed by Persian rule).

Anyone used to reading books in chronological order might think the events of Job took place after Esther, but that would be a mistake (without harm to the soul). The Book of Job shows (internal, vocabulary) signs of possibly being one of the older books in the OT (possibly older than the Books of Moses). Since Job itself makes no claims for any particular time, we cannot use it for working out the timeline of events in the OT. Rather, we have to read Job for its intended purpose: recounting the experiences of one man and the religious/theological issues raised by his experiences.

Job belongs to a collection of books called “the wisdom literature” (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes) or “the poetic books” (Job through Song of Solomon). The category of “poetic books” has the advantage of making sense of where we find the Psalms. The category of “poetic books,” however, has the disadvantage of ignoring the fact that the “prophetic books” (Isaiah through Malachi) contain a lot of poetry! And, as already noted, the “minor prophets” are not in chronological order relative to the “major prophets,” since Hosea, Amos, and Micah lived in the same century as Isaiah (not after Jeremiah and Ezekiel, as an uninformed reader might guess).

In trying to sort out this chronological jumble, we can take some comfort in the fact that Malachi (the last book in the Old Testament) is from about the same era as Ezra and Nehemiah (the 400s B.C.). Otherwise we simply have to deal with the reality that the **writings of the prophets** (major and minor) are **segregated from the history** in which the prophets lived and spoke God's Word. For help in situating each prophet in his time, look to Bible dictionaries or handbooks, or a book like *How to Read the Bible Book by Book* (by Gordon Fee and Douglas). Study Bibles often provide dates and other information for each book.

For reading the prophets, it is important to know whether a particular person ministered during the **pre-exilic** time of the “divided kingdoms” (“Israel” in the north; “Judah” in the south). Also, did the prophet speak to “Israel” or “Judah” or both? Or was the prophet ministering **during the Exile** in Babylon, such as the “exilic” prophet Ezekiel? Or was the prophet among the **post-exilic** voices speaking God’s Word (like Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi)? To grasp fully the message of each prophet we really need to know where they fit in the frame of historical reference we have given repeatedly in these lessons:



Ezra and Nehemiah—rebuilding a covenant people

Ezra and Nehemiah show us the challenges faced by Jews who returned from Babylonian Exile. Many Jews chose to remain in Babylon or in other cities of the new Persian Empire, where they had made homes for themselves. They knew Judah would be a difficult place to live. Thus we have the story of Daniel—still living and working for the Persians. Thus we have the story of Esther, one of the Emperor’s wives, a Jewish woman instrumental in saving the lives of thousands of Jews throughout the Persian Empire.

Ezra begins his book with a virtual repetition of 2 Chronicles 36:22-23. The king of Persia, Cyrus, decreed that the Jews could return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple to the LORD (Ezra 1:1-4). This decree was issued in 538 B.C., and Ezra 2 gives names and numbers of the first to return: 42,360 men, along with servants and work animals (Ezra 2:64-66). That’s not an overwhelming number, especially considering that Jerusalem is in ruins, and no walls will be built for the city until Nehemiah leads that project in 445/444 B.C.

The first six chapters of the Book of Ezra are history which predates Ezra himself. Ezra did not return to Judah until 458 B.C. (Ezra 7). In the first six chapters we’re told how the first returnees built an altar to the LORD and resumed observation of “the appointed feasts of the LORD,” even though “the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid” (Ezra 3:1-6). In 537 or 536 B.C., Zerubbabel (a descendant of David, but not reigning as king) “made a beginning” (3:8) by laying a foundation for a new temple (3:10). Some Jews shouted for joy over this milestone, while others wept because this temple would be much smaller than Solomon’s (3:11-12).

Even this smaller temple was opposed, and political forces worked in the Persian Empire to hinder the project “all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia” (Ezra 4:4-5). This comment shows the Jews’ vulnerability to powers beyond their control. [Ezra 4:6-23 is a confusing insertion about an incident during Ezra’s lifetime, when opponents appealed to the Persian king to stop the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls (see 4:12-13, 21). Perhaps Ezra put it here to illustrate that political opposition to any rebuilding by the Jews—temple or walls—came from the same sources. Ezra gets back on topic (for chronological reading) in 4:24.]

The excitement of laying the foundation for a new temple did not last. Because of opposition, work on the temple stopped (probably in 536 B.C.) and was not resumed until “the second year of Darius king of Persia” (4:24), i.e., 520 B.C. The post-exilic prophets Haggai and Zechariah encouraged Zerubbabel and Jeshua to resume work on the temple (Ezra 5:1). The opposition leader, Tattenai, requested a search of the official archives to get evidence against the Jews (5:6), but this backfired. King Darius (6:1) ordered the search and found that **Cyrus had decreed** in 538 B.C. that **the temple should be built** (6:3-5). Furthermore, Darius ordered Tattenai to leave the Jews alone and to pay for the building costs “from the royal revenue” (6:6-8, i.e., use Persian tax money to build the temple).

So, after two decades of delays and disruptions, the “Second Temple” was finished in 516 (or 515) B.C., “in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king” (6:15). It’s notable that the Jews offered “as a sin offering for all Israel 12 male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel” (6:17). [This “Second Temple” was later enlarged and beautified by Herod the Great before and during the time of Jesus, only to be destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D.]

With the Second Temple in place and operational, it’s hard to imagine the desolation surrounding it. The strong and well-organized Persian Empire kept the peace, but how many people would want to live in the rubble of a city still without walls? That’s the situation when Ezra arrived to make his own contribution to rebuild the people of Judah.

Ezra describes himself as “a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses” (7:6; assuming Ezra wrote the Book of Ezra). With the support of King Artaxerxes, Ezra and others useful for temple worship made the trek from Babylonia to Jerusalem (7:7-9; more details of the trip in chapter 8). This was in 458 B.C., and Jerusalem still lacked walls. But Ezra’s building project was more important: “Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel” (Ezra 7:10). Ezra returned to Jerusalem to teach God’s people God’s Word. That was their greatest need to rebuild their lives personally and as the people of Judah. Their need is illustrated by what Ezra found on his arrival.

Mixed marriages (Ezra’s and Nehemiah’s response)

After Ezra’s arrival in Jerusalem, he heard that “The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations” (9:1). The most serious and complex problem was intermarriage between Jews and pagans (Ezra 9:2; see Deut. 7:3). Ezra tore his clothes and pulled hair from his head as expressions of distress and grief over this (Ezra 9:3). Then he prayed a very public prayer of repentance (9:6-15), which the people joined in Ezra 10. Ezra named those who had committed this breach of the covenant (10:18-44).

This issue is a major concern in Nehemiah also (Neh. 10:28-30). It was a difficult and persistent problem, leading Nehemiah to act in ways we would consider harsh:

²³ In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. ²⁴ And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but only the language of each people. ²⁵ And **I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair**. And I made them take an oath in the name of God, saying, “You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves. ²⁶ Did not Solomon king of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like

him, and he was beloved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin. ²⁷ Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women?" [Neh. 13:23–27, emphasis added]

Yes, that was harsh (by our standards), but hear Nehemiah's concern, shared by Ezra: Marriages contrary to their covenant with the LORD (against God's explicit commandment, Deut. 7:3 and elsewhere) had led to the downfall of Solomon through idolatry, the eventual destruction of (northern) Israel, and the Babylonian Exile from which Judah was still struggling to emerge. As Ezra and Nehemiah saw it, the very survival of the Jewish people was at stake.

Nehemiah's greatest contribution: rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem

Nehemiah's sense of call to return to Jerusalem came when he heard how bad things were there (Neh. 1:3-4ff.). With a secure and prestigious position in the Empire, Nehemiah had a lot to lose by asking for extended leave to supervise repairs in Jerusalem (1:11—2:8), but the king granted his request because "the good hand of my God was upon me" (2:8). Nehemiah gives God credit for his success, but he also (in the following chapters) names those who opposed his efforts.

Just as there had been opposition to rebuilding the temple, there was opposition to this new project. Nehemiah gives many details about the opposition's attempts to distract or disrupt, along with details about who rebuilt which gates and which parts of the walls all around the city (Neh. 2:9—7:4). Don't miss the note in 7:4: there were "few" people living in the city, "and no houses had been rebuilt." In other words, people were living in the ruins of houses destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 B.C. That illustrates how hard living conditions were and why it was so important to rebuild the walls. We can well understand why the success of this project was celebrated with great fanfare and praise to God (12:27-43). [In 11:1, lots were cast to bring more people to live in the city.]

Nehemiah also led in other reforms. He stopped wealthier Jews from charging interest from impoverished Jews, and he made them return properties previously confiscated for payment (5:1-13). He required the people to swear an oath to live by God's covenant (10:28-31) and to support the ministry of the temple (10:32-39). He put a stop to trade and unnecessary work on the Sabbath (13:15-18).

Ezra's mission to teach God's Word to the Jews of Judah

Ezra would have preferred not to have to deal with the problem of mixed marriages. His heart was set on studying the Torah, obeying it, and teaching it to the remnant of Israel and Judah (Ezra 7:10). What he really wanted to do is described in Nehemiah 8 (originally Ezra-Nehemiah was one book).

On a platform made for the occasion (Neh. 8:4), Ezra read from the Law of Moses "from early morning until midday" (8:3). It's interesting that assistance was required from several men (8:7) to help the people understand what Ezra read aloud (8:8). Perhaps they were translating from Hebrew (as read by Ezra) into Aramaic (a similar but different language more widely understood). Another possibility is that these assistants explained the application of what was read.

Some scholars trace the beginning of the “scribes” we meet in the Gospels to this event in Nehemiah 8. That is possible, but this kind of public reading and explaining probably happened more than once, and with various sizes of audience. However the development took place, it’s clear by Jesus’ time that a “scribe” was considered a scholar and a teacher of Scripture, especially of the Law of Moses. And certainly the scribes saw themselves as heirs of the responsibility (and authority) of Ezra and his peers. What had happened in the days of Josiah—when the Book of the Law was misplaced and re-discovered (2 Kings 22:8-20, about 621 B.C.)—would not be allowed to happen again. The scribes (led by Ezra’s example) would not let the people forget the Torah.

The development of a guild of Torah scholars seems to come out of the fires of Babylonian Exile and the difficulties of rebuilding Judah. In one way this was vital for the survival of the Jewish faith, for after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 A.D., the Jews had to become “the people of the book.” The Scriptures had to become the unifying center, a place once held by the temple. On the other hand, as Jesus pointed out, having the Scriptures and truly believing them are two different things (see John 5:46-47). [And, of course, we have to make that application to ourselves as Christians who revere these books as God’s Word.]

How can an unfinished story be finished?

With Ezra-Nehemiah we come to the end of the historical narrative of the Old Testament. We cannot evade the feeling of “unfinished business.” Ezra’s and Nehemiah’s work provided a basis for going forward, even though Judah was subjugated to the Persian Empire (until the conquests of Alexander the Great in the following century). But what about the promises made to Abraham and David? Is Judah a blessing to all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:1-3)? Even more glaring: Where is the Davidic king who will reign forever (2 Sam. 7:13, 16)?

The Old Testament (as Christians call what Jewish people call “the Bible” or “Scripture”) ends open-ended. This is true for the Ezra-Nehemiah narrative, which depicts a fragile, subservient Judah. It is also true for the prophetic book which comes from about the same time: Malachi.

Malachi rebukes the priests and the people of post-exilic Judah for half-hearted devotion to the LORD. They use less-than-the-best for their offerings (Mal. 1:6-8); they regard their religious obligations as “weariness” (1:13). God says the people are “robbing” him, not only by withholding their tithes (3:8-12) but also by their lack of respect and gratitude toward him (1:14; 2:17; 3:5, 14).

This final book of the Old Testament prophets contains both promises and warnings. God says he will send his “messenger” to “prepare the way” before him (3:1; “Malachi” literally means “my messenger”). God says “the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight” (3:1). That’s good news, isn’t it? Well, yes and no. It will not be a picnic: “Who can endure his coming, and who can stand when he appears?” (3:2). But there will be purification for God’s people, which is good news for those who welcome it (3:2-3).

The last chapter of the last book of the Old Testament predicts two opposite futures, depending on human receptivity. “All the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble” for the day of burning

which is coming (4:1). But for those “who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings” (4:2).

The last paragraph of the Old Testament likewise contains good news/bad news: “Elijah the prophet” will come before “the great and awesome day of the LORD”; “he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers” (4:5-6). That’s the good news! The bad news? If the turning doesn’t occur, God will “come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction” (4:6, ESV; KJV and NLT have the word “curse”).

The word *cherem*, translated as “utter destruction” or “curse,” is literally the last word in the Old Testament. [That’s the same word used when God told Joshua and Israel to destroy everything because it was under the “ban” or “curse” (*cherem*).] What a word with which to end! But what an invitation to welcome the one who will bring the **blessing** promised to Abraham by bearing and breaking the **curse** (see Gal. 3:13-14)!

The Scriptures began with God’s blessing on his creation, continued with God’s plan to bless all the families of the earth through Abraham’s seed, but the OT ends with the threat of a curse! That threat, however, only makes sense in contrast to God’s unwavering will to bless, even if it takes a new heaven and new earth to make the right environment (Isa. 65:17-25; 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1). What’s clear from beginning to end is that God’s desire is to bless. What is also clear is that those he wants to bless can choose to refuse. Refusing God’s blessing invites the curse.

Drawing our overview to a close, we repeat the observations that God made **two unconditional promises** in the Old Testament which are fulfilled (and still being fulfilled) in Jesus: (1) to bless all the families of the earth through Abraham’s descendant, and (2) to establish an everlasting kingdom ruled by a descendant of David. The promise to Abraham is still in the process of being fulfilled as more and more people groups are evangelized around the world. The promise to David has already been fulfilled because Jesus was raised from the dead with an immortal body, and he ascended to his everlasting throne at the right hand of the Father. Already he reigns, and his kingdom is forever.

So the Old Testament ends with the story unfinished, with God’s people waiting for fulfillment. The New Testament also ends with the story unfinished. But the perspective on the end of the story is different in the New Testament, which bears witness to Christ’s resurrection, which is the beginning of the new creation. What God has started in Jesus will be completed also in us and in the new heavens and new earth. As God’s people we wait for fulfillment, but we wait as those who already know by experience something of the power of the age to come (1 John 3:1-3; Rom. 8:28-39). Our waiting has more reason to hope (expect) fulfillment, because already Christ reigns and already the eternal, life-giving Spirit of God indwells us: “And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love” (Rom. 5:5, New Living Translation).

Postscript: Some materials useful in teaching Lesson 8 were discussed earlier near the end of Lesson 4. Especially helpful (I believe) is the idea that Judah’s exile was still going on until Jesus died and rose again as “King of the Jews.” [Note again N.T. Wright’s words quoted there.]