

Introduction to the Historical Books a Record of God's Covenant People

This second major section of the Old Testament is both **vital and captivating**. It continues the story of God's people from where the Book of Deuteronomy ends and spans nearly a **thousand years** of redemptive history.

There are two key reasons why this portion of Scripture is considered **a unique kind of history**:

1. **According to biblical scholars, the history recorded in the Holy Bible is God's history**—not merely human events, but the divine narrative unfolding through His covenant people.
2. **It is purposeful history**—not written to entertain or to serve as mere instruction, but written to **transform us** and make us more faithful followers of God. As the Apostle Paul writes:

“For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.”
— Romans 15:4

The Twelve Historical Books

This section includes the following twelve books:

- **Joshua, Judges, Ruth**
- **1 & 2 Samuel**
- **1 & 2 Kings**
- **1 & 2 Chronicles**
- **Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther**

In the **Hebrew canon**, the books of **Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings** are referred to as the **Former Prophets**, not merely historical accounts. Their connection to the prophets shows that these books are not **mere chronicles**, but contain **theological truths** and **divine messages**. In fact, in many of these books, prophets play key roles in the narrative.

The remaining books—**Ruth, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther**—are part of the section called **"The Writings"** in the Hebrew Bible.

Five Central Historical Movements

The twelve historical books focus on **five major events** in the history of Israel:

1. **The conquest and settlement of Canaan** – when the people of Israel entered and inhabited the Promised Land.
2. **The transition from tribal rule to monarchy** – marking the rise of kingship in Israel.
3. **The division of the kingdom** – from one united nation into two: the **Northern Kingdom (Israel)** and the **Southern Kingdom (Judah)**.

4. **The loss of national sovereignty and exile** – with Israel taken captive by Assyria, and Judah by Babylon.
5. **The return to the Promised Land** – when the remnant came back to rebuild the temple and city under Persian rule.

These books are not merely ancient records—they are **sacred testimonies** of God’s covenant, justice, mercy, and faithfulness across generations.

Chronological Sequence of Historical Events the Sacred Record from 1400 B.C. to 400 B.C.

The Historical Books of the Old Testament cover a vast period of approximately **one thousand years of Jewish history**, spanning from **1400 B.C. to 400 B.C.** This extensive era naturally falls into **three major periods**:

(a) The Period of Theocracy (1405–1043 B.C.)

A **theocracy** is a form of government where **God Himself directly rules** His people, unlike a democracy where the people govern themselves. From **Joshua to Saul**, ancient Israel was governed not by kings, but **by divine leadership through appointed servants of God**.

This period is primarily recorded in three books:

- **Joshua** – the conquest and division of the Promised Land
- **Judges** – the cycle of sin, oppression, repentance, and deliverance
- **Ruth** – a glimpse of God’s providence and redemption during the time of the Judges

(b) The Period of Monarchy (1043–586 B.C.)

This era marks the rise and fall of the **monarchical system** in Israel—from the anointing of Saul to the Babylonian exile.

Though three original scrolls were written during this period, for convenience in modern translations, they have been divided into **six books**:

- **1 & 2 Samuel** – covering the lives of Samuel, Saul, and David
- **1 & 2 Kings** – from Solomon’s reign to the fall of both kingdoms
- **1 & 2 Chronicles** – retelling the kingdom’s history with a focus on Judah and temple worship

(c) The Period of Restoration (536–420 B.C.)

After **seventy years of captivity in Babylon**, the people of God returned to a land that was no longer under theocratic or royal rule, but now merely **a province under foreign empires**—first Persia, then Greece, and eventually Rome.

This period is chronicled in three books:

- **Ezra** – the return and rebuilding of the temple

- **Nehemiah** – the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls and spiritual reform
- **Esther** – God’s providential protection of His people in exile

Together, these three historical periods testify of **God’s sovereign hand** through victory, decline, judgment, exile, and restoration—showing that though kingdoms rise and fall, **the LORD remains faithful to His covenant**.

Chronological Overview of the Historical Books from the Death of Moses to the Restoration in Jerusalem

Book	Dates Covered (B.C.)	World Kingdom	Events Covered
Joshua	1405–1390	Canaanites	From the death of Moses to the death of Joshua
Judges	1390–1045	Canaanites	From the death of Joshua to the death of Samson and civil war with Benjamin
Ruth	1100–1089	Canaanites	A brief account of Ruth, a Moabite woman, finding refuge under the wings of Boaz
1 Samuel	1105–1011	Assyria	From the birth of Samuel to the death of King Saul
2 Samuel	1011–971	Assyria	From David's ascent to the throne to the end of his reign
1 Kings	971–851	Assyria	From the beginning of Solomon’s reign to the death of King Ahaziah
2 Kings	853–722	Assyria	From King Ahaziah to the fall of Samaria to Assyria
1 Chronicles	1011–971	Babylon	From the reign of David to the anointing of Solomon
2 Chronicles	971–576	Babylon	From Solomon's reign to the fall of Judah and the decree of Cyrus to rebuild
Ezra	538–457	Medo-Persia	From the first return to Jerusalem through the second return
Nehemiah	425	Medo-Persia	From Nehemiah's commission to rebuild the wall to its dedication
Esther	483–471	Medo-Persia	A brief yet providential account of how God saved His people through Esther

The Concept of History in Israel and the Ancient near East

History may be perceived in **three principal ways**:

(a) The Linear View of History

Time moves in a straight, purposeful line—from a fixed past, through the present, and into the unfolding future.

(b) The Apocalyptic View of History

Events are seen as marching toward a climactic and transformative end—a divine consummation and renewal of all things.

(c) The Cyclical View of History

History is understood as a repetition of patterns, a continuous cycle of rise and fall, of glory and decline.

Purpose of History Writing: Israel vs. Ancient near East

In the **Ancient Near East**, history was not written for the sake of truth or moral instruction, but to **glorify the monarchs**. Kings commissioned the writing of historical records to ensure that their mighty deeds would be praised and remembered. These records were often selective, incomplete, and shaped to please the king. In such records, the **central figure** was either the **king** himself or a **deity** in service of the monarchy.

In contrast, **Israelite history** is **theological in nature**. The purpose of historical writing in the Bible is to **bear witness to the acts of God**, to **reveal His faithfulness**, and to **record how He fulfils His promises** throughout time. The historical books do not merely recount victories or glorify human leaders; they portray both the **faithfulness and failure of Israel**, recording **God's judgment and mercy alike**. Through these accounts, the Bible seeks not merely to preserve memory, but to **reveal who God is**, and how He governs the course of history according to His divine will and redemptive plan.

Tips for Reading the Historical Books of the Old Testament

1. **Read Theologically, Not Merely Historically**
Regard these books as divine revelation first, and as history second.
2. **Remember the Central Focus**
The true aim of the Historical Books is to proclaim **God and His covenant**, rather than to detail the deeds of men or the mere sequence of events.
3. **Discern Cause and Effect by God's Hand**
Though human actions appear upon the page, the ultimate cause and effect are to be seen in **God's sovereign purpose** and working.

Understanding the Historical Literature of the Old Testament

It is essential to bear in mind that in these sacred histories we behold **the self-revelation of God**. Their purpose is to impart instruction and knowledge concerning the LORD, not merely to entertain or to chronicle human affairs. This message is not delivered by isolated narratives alone but is made manifest by the **repeated recounting of events down through the generations**.

Many readers seek only lessons for their own day. Yet, as we glean from these accounts, we must also endeavour to discern the **thematic patterns, divine purposes, and theological truths** the text unfolds concerning the nature and character of God.

Therefore, let us read all events **in their proper context**, with our hearts fixed upon **the LORD Himself** as the chief subject of these sacred pages.