

Center for Catholic Education and Formation Archdiocese of Hartford

*Leadership Formation for
Teachers, Catechists, and Parish Ministers*

A Guide to the Old Testament

Contents

1. Old Testament Overview – The Bible Project
2. Sprint through Salvation History – Saint Mary's Press
3. Introduction to the Pentateuch – Saint Mary's Press
4. Introduction to the Historical Books – Saint Mary's Press
5. Introduction to the Prophets – Saint Mary's Press
6. Complete Biblical Timeline
7. Ten Themes of Old Testament Theology - Lawrence Boadt
8. Guided Tour of Old Testament Events, Teachings, and People
9. Old Testament Learning Activities
10. Ways to Retell a Bible Story with Kids
11. Praying the Psalms
12. Teaching the Old Testament Online Resources

ANCIENT JEWISH TRADITION:

Torah (teaching)
Nevi'im (prophets)
Ketuvim (writings)

REFERRED TO IN:
 • DEAD SEA SCRILLS (ca. 100 BCE)
 • WISDOM & STRIFE (ca. 200 BCE)
 • JESUS & MARY MAGDALENE (ca. 30 CE)

TaNaKh - the Old Testament

A PROPHETIC INTERPRETATION OF ISRAEL'S HISTORY THAT REVEALS GOD'S PURPOSE TO RESCUE THE WORLD

SCRIBES & PROPHETS
 DAVID
 MOSES
 GUIDED BY GOD'S SPIRIT
 THROUGH HUMAN VOICES
 GOD SPEAKS TO HIS PEOPLE

POETRY
PROPHETS
HISTORY
REVEREND

COMPLETED AROUND 3rd or 2nd CENTURY B.C.

LATER CHRISTIAN TRADITION

TORAH GENESIS 1-11

ABRAHAM & SARAH GENESIS 12-50

DAVID PSALMS 1-100

MOSES EXODUS 1-18

THE PLOT:

- GOD WANTS TO FULLY REVEAL HIMSELF TO THE WORLD THROUGH HIS PEOPLE
- ISRAEL'S GOD IS THE ONLY TRUE GOD
- ISRAEL'S GOD IS THE ONLY TRUE GOD

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NEVI'IM JOSHUA, JUDGES, 1-2 SAMUEL, 1-2 KINGS

ISRAEL'S STORY TOLD FROM THE LATER PERSPECTIVE OF THE PROPHETS

ISRAEL'S STORY TOLD FROM THE LATER PERSPECTIVE OF THE PROPHETS

ISRAEL'S STORY TOLD FROM THE LATER PERSPECTIVE OF THE PROPHETS

ISRAEL'S STORY TOLD FROM THE LATER PERSPECTIVE OF THE PROPHETS

KETUVIM including:

PSALMS THE PROMISED KING

DANIEL ISRAEL'S FAILURE SUFFERING

THE WISDOM SCROLLS: CONVERSATION AMONG LIVING PEOPLE IN GOD'S KINGDOM & COMING WORLD

PROVERBS THE WISE MAN

JOB THE WISE MAN

ECCLIESIASTES THE WISE MAN

CHRONICLES THE WISE MAN

Sprint Through Salvation History

The God revealed in the Old Testament is not aloof or distant from human affairs; this God acts within human history. Salvation History is the pattern of events in human history that exemplify God's presence and saving actions. In Catholic thought *all* of history is salvation history, even though God's presence may not be recognized.

It will help to keep the big picture of that history in mind as we set out to discover the meaning of the Old Testament, because the history and the Scriptures of ancient Israel were intertwined. Do not be concerned about memorizing names and events at this point; they will come up again in this course. Instead simply try to recognize the broad pattern of history.

About 3000 BC, history as we know it began, with the development of early forms of writing. The biblical period—from the beginnings of Israel as a people through the time of Jesus and the earliest years of the Church—went from about 1850 BC until about AD 100. It lasted almost two thousand years. That is about the same amount of time as has elapsed from the time of Jesus until today.

What follows is a brief overview of the events of the biblical period.

The Founders and the Promise

The history and the religion of the Israelites began with Abraham. Abraham was a wandering herdsman, or nomad, who lived in the region now called Iraq, around 1850 (BC). According to the Book of Genesis, God made an agreement with Abraham. God promised to make Abraham's descendants a blessing to the world and to give them the land of Canaan, later known as Palestine. The Promise, as this is called, was that Abraham's descendants would reveal the one God to the world. Christians believe this Promise reached its fulfillment in the coming of Christ.

Abraham's descendants and their families inherited the Promise. Abraham, his son Isaac, and his grandson Jacob would be called the patriarchs, or founders, of the Jewish faith. Their wives—Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel—would be called the matriarchs.

The Exodus of the Israelites and the Covenant

At the close of the Book of Genesis, the descendants of Abraham are living in Egypt, having traveled there from Canaan in order to survive a famine. Yet as the Book of Exodus opens, we find them enslaved by the Egyptians. Practically nothing is known about the Israelites in Egypt from about 1700 to 1290 (BC).

Moses, the main character in the story of the Exodus, was one of the greatest religious leaders in history. About 1290 (BC), the understanding that one God was above all other gods came to Moses when God revealed God's name—Yahweh, meaning "I am the One who is always present." With God's power the Israelites, led by Moses, made a daring escape from Pharaoh's army through the sea—the Exodus—and were thus freed from slavery.

After a dramatic encounter between Moses and God on Mount Sinai, a covenant, or agreement, between Yahweh and the Israelites was confirmed. The Israelites' part of the Covenant was to keep the Ten Commandments, which God had presented to Moses. God's part was to make the Israelites "the People of God" and to be with them as long as they kept the Covenant. Once again God promised that they would be given the land of Canaan. But before they entered Canaan, they wandered for forty years in the desert as they learned to trust God's care for them.



Taking Over the Promised Land

After Moses' time the Israelites, led by Joshua, entered Canaan. Over the next centuries—from about 1250 to 1000 (BC)—they fought against the people who lived in that region. In these battles the Israelites were led by military leaders called judges. During this time the Israelites abandoned their nomadic ways for the more settled agricultural life that was native to the region.

The Nation and the Temple

Around 1000 (BC) Israel became recognized as a nation, with David as its anointed king and Jerusalem as its capital city. God made a promise to David that his royal line would endure forever. (Later Jews put their hopes in a descendant of David to save them from oppression.)

David's son Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem, and it became the principal place of worship for the nation. As both a political and a religious capital, Jerusalem became a great and holy city.

The Kings and the Prophets

After Solomon's death in 922 (BC), the nation divided, with the kingdom of Israel in the north and the kingdom of Judah in the south. Heavy taxes and forced service in both kingdoms created hardships for the people. In addition, the kings often practiced idolatry—the worship of idols (images of other gods).

Prophets spoke out against both kingdoms' injustices to the people and infidelity to God. They questioned the behavior of the kings and called them and their people back to the Covenant. Yet the kingdoms continued to oppress the poor and worship pagan gods until eventually both kingdoms were crushed by powerful conquerors. The Assyrians obliterated the northern kingdom of Israel in 721 (BC) and took its people into exile. In 587 (BC) the Babylonians destroyed Judah, including the city of Jerusalem, and took its people to Babylon as captives.

The Babylonian Exile and the Jewish Dispersion

While the people were exiled in Babylon, still other prophets encouraged them to repent of their sins and turn back to God. During this time the prophet known as Second Isaiah proclaimed that God was the one and only God. Monotheism, the belief in one God, was now the revelation of this people to the world, their blessing to the nations.

After fifty years in Babylon, the exiles were released from captivity by the conquering Persians and allowed to return home. Judah, no longer a politically independent kingdom, had become a district within the Persian Empire, and the returned exiles became known as Jews, from the word *Judah*. They rebuilt the Temple, and under Ezra and Nehemiah, they re-established the Law and restored Jerusalem. That city became the religious capital for the Jews who had resettled all over the world—that is, the Jews of the Dispersion.

During the Exile the Jewish leaders had begun collecting and reflecting on their ancestral writings, forming the core of what would later become their Bible, known to Christians as the Old Testament.



More Oppressors

The Persian Empire was conquered in 330 (BC) by the armies of Alexander the Great, leader of the Greek Empire. This made the Greeks overlords of the Jews for nearly three hundred years, with the exception of a brief period of independence after a revolt led by the Maccabees family. The Greeks were followed by the Romans, who captured Jerusalem in 63 (BC). Although tolerant of other cultures and religions, the Roman Empire severely punished its subjects for revolts.

It was a dark time for the people of the Promise, who longed for release from oppression and for the day when all their hopes for a good and peaceful life would be fulfilled. Many Jews looked toward the coming of a messiah, one sent by God to save them; some expected this messiah to be from the family line of David.

It is at this point in the history of Israel that the Old Testament accounts end. . . .

Jesus, the Savior

Into a situation of defeat and darkness for the people of Israel, Jesus was born, one of the house, or family line, of David. Christians see Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah—the fulfillment of all God's promises to Israel and the Savior of the world. With his Death and Resurrection, Jesus' followers recognized that he was the Son of God. The community of believers began to grow, first among Jews but later among Gentiles, or non-Jews. The story of Jesus and the growth of the early Church is told in the New Testament.

(This handout is adapted from *Written on Our Hearts: The Old Testament Story of God's Love*, Third Edition, by Mary Reed Newland [Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2009], pages 18–24. Copyright © 2005 by Saint Mary's Press. All rights reserved.)



Introduction to the Pentateuch

Background

The Hebrew Bible or Old Testament took shape over many centuries. Long before the final written form of the Scriptures came to be, bits and pieces of it were told orally, sometimes as stories, sometimes in worship rituals, sometimes as legal judgments about particular disputed claims. In time, these oral traditions, long passed down by word of mouth, were codified in written form as stories, liturgies, and legal texts. Finally, after many rewrites and much editing, the Old Testament emerged as the Sacred Scriptures divided into three sections. The first, and most authoritative section of the Bible for most Jews is called the Torah, a Hebrew word often translated as “law” or “the Law.” The second and third sections of the Hebrew Scriptures are called the Prophets, and the Writings, respectively. Hints of this three-part canon of the Scriptures are found in the foreword of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) around 180 BC and later in the New Testament (Matthew 5:17, Luke 14:44, John 1:45), but the roots of this division go back much earlier. As the canon of the Scriptures evolved over time, and with the inclusion of additional books, the Old Testament canon as we know it was divided differently.

Torah: The Heart of the Old Testament

The Torah is considered the heart of the Old Testament, as the Gospels are the heart of the New Testament. The term *Torah* can also be understood more broadly than simply “law” or even a set of laws. Its meaning includes general instructions or teaching, including the story or narrative into which these instructions or laws are sometimes placed. Law, instruction, teaching, and story are all found in the Torah of the Scriptures, that is, the first five books of the Bible known to non-Hebrew readers as the Books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. As the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek, the name for this first and most sacred part of the Scriptures became known by its Greek title, “The Pentateuch,” meaning, “the five books.”

The Torah or Pentateuch opens with the story of Creation and concludes with the death and mourning of one of its central characters, Moses. It opens with stories of the world’s formation and closes with the children and grandchildren of freed Hebrew slaves standing on the banks of the Jordan River waiting to enter the Promised Land. In between, stories are told of the faith and disobedience of the ancestors, the escape from Egyptian slavery, the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, forty years of wandering to and fro in the desert, and several significant law codes woven throughout.

If one reads the stories of the Torah or the Pentateuch according to the chronology laid out in the stories themselves, it becomes apparent that the storytellers wished to emphasize certain parts of the story over others. For example, the first fifty chapters of the Pentateuch, the Book of Genesis, purports to cover about 2,300 years according to the narrative’s own internal chronology. We now know, of course, that in actual historical time, such a time frame is much too short, giving us a clue to the writer’s ancient mythic worldview. The next part of the story, which tells of the Exodus from Egypt and the giving of the Law and other events at Sinai, takes eighty-one chapters (Exodus; Leviticus; and Numbers, chapters 1 through 14) to tell about events that cover just over one year! The last twenty-two chapters of Numbers cover the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Finally, the Book of Deuteronomy spends thirty-four chapters recounting the last day or two in Moses’ life as he interprets the Law for a new generation on the banks of the Jordan River in what appears to be his last will and testament. Given such a contrived chronological storytelling structure, clearly, for the storytellers of the Pentateuch, the Exodus experience and the giving of the Law at Sinai were critically important. These two experiences provide a lens through which all other experiences before and after were to be understood. In the central themes of salvation



and covenant, grace and obligation, gospel and law, freedom and commitment found throughout the Scriptures, one sees traces of the Exodus and Sinai traditions.

When Moses is called to lead the Hebrew slaves from Egypt, the Lord promises not only to “rescue them from the hands of the Egyptians” but also to “lead them out of that land into a good and spacious land” inhabited by other peoples (Exodus 3:8). Over one hundred and fifty times in the Pentateuch, the ancestors of Israel are not only promised many descendents, a relationship with God, and that they will be a blessing to the whole world, but they are also promised a new homeland. Genesis 12:1–3 provides the most succinct expression of these promises made by the Lord to Abram. As if to underscore these promises, the earliest oral confessions of faith recorded in the Scriptures (e.g., Deuteronomy 6:20–24, 26:5–9) also recount the fulfillment of these promises in one form or another, especially, the promise of a new homeland.

If good stories have good endings, then the Torah or Pentateuch seems to end all too abruptly. Given how many times a homeland was promised throughout the rest of the Pentateuch, one might have expected that a good storyteller would have ended the Torah story with the people having arrived in their new homeland. They certainly had available to them stories of glorious conquest and entrance into the land as told in the Book of Joshua. Indeed, one might have guessed that the Book of Joshua would have been the most natural conclusion to the story as it unfolds in the Pentateuch. Why not a hexateuch (six books), then, instead of a Pentateuch (five books)? Why does the story end as it does with Moses dead and the fate of the ancestors in limbo? Why does the Pentateuch, the heart of the Old Testament, end with a landless people standing on the banks of the Jordan River looking longingly across to the Promised Land? Why, then, does the Pentateuch seem to end so badly? It’s as if, in terms of the stories of Jesus in the New Testament, the Gospel writers would have told of Jesus’ birth, life, teachings, and Death, but left out the most important part—his Resurrection! The ending of the Pentateuch, then, comes as a near total surprise.

Something must have happened in the intervening years between the first telling of these old, old stories about the promises God made to the ancestors and the final version of their telling in the Pentateuch that deliberately leaves out the fulfillment of those promises, especially the promise of land, as told in the Book of Joshua. Indeed, something huge did happen many years later, which provides the best explanation for why the Pentateuch ends the way it does and suggests a relative time frame for dating when the Pentateuch was finally compiled.

The Exile Factor

We now know that the Hebrew Bible, after a long process of gathering and editing oral and written sources, began to emerge in its final form during and soon after the People of God once again found themselves as refugees in the Babylonian Exile (587–538 BC). Their great Temple, their land, their kingdom, indeed, everything that had given them a sense of identity and destiny for some six hundred years, was all gone. If you imagine these refugees standing now on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in Babylon (modern-day Iraq), looking longingly eastward toward their homeland back over the Jordan River, the Torah story ending where it ends must have sounded like good news, wonderful news, of the possibility of an imminent homecoming. The Jordan River could well have been the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers of Babylon. The hills of Moab overlooking the Promised Land, where Moses and the people spend their last days together as described at the end of the Pentateuch, could well have been the fertile crescent of Babylon where the people find themselves now hearing the Pentateuch story in its final form.

The emotions of those who heard the Pentateuch read aloud for the first time, either in the Babylonian captivity or soon thereafter, are captured in the story of Ezra, the great scribe. In the Book of



Nehemiah (8:1, 9–12), Ezra reads “the book of the law (or Torah) of Moses” to the returning refugees in the square of the Water Gate in Jerusalem. The people all stand up in reverence throughout the reading, which took all morning. When the people hear the words of the Law (Torah) read, they weep (8:9). Soon after the reading and with a little encouragement from Ezra, their weeping turns to great rejoicing. If only reading the Torah or Pentateuch still evoked such awe and depth of emotion.

All readers, in some sense, must enter the story of the Pentateuch, first and foremost, from the perspective of those first hearers and readers. All readers now read it, as it were, backward from Exile. Now, as it was heard by the refugees in Babylon, all the stories and characters of the Torah or Pentateuch become larger than life, bigger than history, archetypal in force. In the Pentateuch the characters and events are more than historical. They have become mythic in revelatory power.

Now, the fact that the Pentateuch opens in the Garden of Eden located in Babylon between the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers matters. The first humans in the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis are invited to make choices of life-altering consequence just as the people gathered around Moses at the end of the Book of Deuteronomy face choices for blessing or cursing, for life or death. Reading such stories from the perspective of the Babylonian Exile or any existential exile, for that matter, becomes a new invitation to appreciate how one’s destiny is shaped by one’s choices. Adam and Eve were exiled from Eden having made wrong choices.

Indeed, the stories in the second part of the Hebrew Bible, the Former Prophets (Joshua through 2 Kings) recount the choices of consequence that were made by all those who first entered the Promised Land from the banks of the Jordan River. Those choices eventually led them once again out of the Promised Land into Exile, first to Assyria, then to Babylon. Ironically, the Book of Joshua, which would seemingly have fit best as the climax of the Pentateuch, has now been placed, instead, as the introduction to a negative history of choices gone wrong that lead to Exile. The beginning and ending of the Pentateuch are bookends of choice and its consequence.

The primeval stories that tell of Adam, Eve, the serpent, the Great Flood, and the Tower of Babel in Genesis, chapters 1 through 11, are more than origin stories per se. When read together, as a whole, these stories might legitimately be called a theopolitical manifesto composed by a people living as subjects beneath the coercive power of Babylon. Each biblical story seems to have near parallels to Babylonian origin stories only now retold so as to be critical of the domination system of the Babylonian city-state. Later, in the Book of Exodus, the stories of the Lord defeating the empire of an unnamed pharaoh allows for mythic comparison to any empire that tries to subjugate God’s People. Clearly, from the perspective of the Pentateuch, bondage in Babylon need not be any more permanent than bondage in Egypt had been. The extended story of Joseph living in exile in Egypt, not only serves as a paradigm for how a person of minority status might manage to become a “light to the nations” but also how the people might benefit from a Nehemiah-like leader who later becomes influential in Persian empire politics. The Pentateuch, throughout, has a strong bias against empire politics, while at the same time offering pragmatic illustrative stories for how a minority people living under the control of empire might survive until their promised liberation. The Pentateuch, as such, might be considered subversive literature on par with the underground literature of dissident playwrights.

The stories of Adam and Eve suffering only exile from Eden and not immediate death, the story of Cain’s exile to the East of Eden being a sort of protective custody from his avengers, the story of God starting Creation all over again with Noah in spite of ongoing human sinfulness, are heard in fresh ways by people who are on the brink of starting over again in their own exile. Exile may not be an ending but a beginning. Indeed, Abraham and Sarah, whose story begins in Babylon, immediately following the Tower of Babel mess, offer renewed hope for all would be refugees. Abraham became the mythic father of faith for the world’s three dominant monotheistic religions, precisely because in his refugee status he had to learn to live by faith in a stateless, boundaryless, existence relying only on God for his identity and existence. He and Sarah were called to leave Babylon in order to live a life of exile, that of travelers



toward the Promised Land of Canaan. Even after they arrive there, they leave once again almost immediately into exile in Egypt because of famine. As life was for Abraham and Sarah, so is life for those living in seemingly permanent Exile in Babylon. Their confessions proclaimed: “My father was a wandering Aramean” (Deuteronomy 26:5). Perhaps, wandering like Abraham, even in the wilderness for forty years as they would later do, was survivable with God on their side. Perhaps, they could even begin to imagine that they, like Abraham and Sarah, were once again being called out of Babylon to go to the Land of Promise (Isaiah 51:2).

Abraham’s grandson Jacob, renamed Israel on his way into Exile to Haran (Babylon), receives his new name and renewed promises of destiny even as he flees for his life from his murderous brother Esau. Jacob, now Israel, eventually returns to the Promised Land in humility, bearing gifts and bowing down before his brother in reconciliation. Recounting such a tale would remind those returning, or about to return to Judah from Babylon, of the need to consider how delicate any rapprochement with those living back in the homeland might need to be.

Living in Exile: Maintaining Communities of Faith

The law codes and legal material found throughout the Pentateuch serve to remind people living in exile of the importance that worship and ethics play in the formation and maintenance of communities of faith and life. Indeed, people living in exile might easily be tempted to assimilate to the dominant culture, choose the gods of the empire, and too easily forget the Covenant relationship promised to them by God. All the various versions of the Law in the Pentateuch seem to function less as stories telling of Israel’s past, than as stories creating an imagined future around profound jurisprudence and constitutional formation. Ultimately, the variety of laws in the Pentateuch, and especially those that have been explicitly updated from earlier versions of the Law such as Moses models in the Book of Deuteronomy, suggest that even these sacred laws may be in need of periodic revision. The laws serve as a summons to the people to live lives of obedience and true worship, to make choices for blessing, now more than ever, as they stand on the banks of the Jordan or Tigris and Euphrates Rivers living in hope of yet fulfilled promises.

When Jesus is asked by some lawyerly peers who are trying to test his faith, “Which commandment in the law is the greatest?” (Matthew 22:34–40), he responds with two verses from the Pentateuch. First, he quotes Deuteronomy 6:5: “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (verse 37). Jesus adds that “this is the greatest and the first commandment” (verse 38). Second, he quotes Leviticus 19:18: “The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (verse 39). Jesus concludes by saying, “The whole law [meaning Torah or Pentateuch in this instance] and the prophets depend on these two commandments” (verse 40). In a sense, in reciting these two verses from the Pentateuch, Jesus responds to two questions asked by the Lord at the beginning of the Pentateuch. To Adam and Eve hiding in shame because of their disobedience, the Lord seeks them out and asks, “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9). To Cain, after he kills his brother, the Lord asks, “Where is your brother?” (Genesis 4:9). The first question invites reflection on one’s relationship to God, the Creator. The second question invites reflection on one’s sister or brother or neighbor. In short, Jesus’ summary of the Law is a summary of the Pentateuch—love God and love others!

(This article is from “Introduction to the Pentateuch,” by James E. Brenneman, PhD, President of Goshen College Goshen, Indiana, in *The Saint Mary’s Press® College Study Bible, New American Bible*, ed. Virginia Halbur [Winona, MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 2007], pages 5–9.)



Introduction to the Historical Books

Some people are prevented from reading the historical books because they find history dull or pointless. They share Huckleberry Finn's attitude to historical study: "I don't put no stock in dead people." However, the same people who say they find history dull find great enjoyment in other forms of storytelling, such as novels, television, movies, and gossip. Why, then, does history stand accused of being boring? Perhaps only a certain understanding of history is at fault. Modern people tend to think of historical narratives strictly as accounts of what actually happened in the past. Even a cursory reading of the Bible's historical narratives, however, should reveal that the biblical writers did not share this view.

Biblical Narratives versus Modern History

Biblical narratives differ from modern historical (or even fiction) writing in several respects. One striking difference is that biblical writers make extensive use of composed speeches and dialogue. Modern historians rarely include speeches in their narratives unless they have reliable access to the exact spoken words of persons who lived in the past. Biblical writers, however, like other ancient historians, abided by different conventions in the narration of history. Although they also lacked reliable access to spoken words, they regularly composed speeches to add interest to their narratives and highlight the issues at stake in the events (e.g., Joshua, chapter 23; 1 Samuel 8:10–18; 1 Kings 8:22–64).

Since modern historians do not often make use of dialogue, they resort to other literary devices to add color to their histories. For example, they sometimes supply detailed descriptions of landscape and character sketches that profile the temperament, attitudes, and values of individuals important to the story. By contrast, biblical writers rarely provide descriptive details concerning the landscape, buildings, or people unless these details are important to the narrative.

In fact, the biblical writers rarely give the reader access to the internal life of characters. We are left to infer character thoughts and motives from their words and actions. This reticence frequently creates ambiguity. For example, in Second Samuel, the motive for Ahithophel's suicide is not provided (17:23). Does he kill himself because he is overly concerned about his failing reputation or because he knows that, once his advice is ignored, David will regain the throne and punish those who sided with Absalom?

Modern historians often make explicit judgments about the actions of the people they describe. Even though many people think of the Bible as moralistic, biblical writers rarely state explicitly whether an action was good or bad. For instance, the several suicides in biblical narrative occur without narrative comment, so that interpreters may disagree about whether the Old Testament prohibits suicide (Judges 9:52–54, 16:25–30; 1 Samuel 31:4–5; 2 Samuel 17:23; 1 Kings 16:15–20). Most often, moral evaluations are placed in the mouths of other characters (2 Samuel 13:12–13). The major exception to this rule is the regular evaluation of kings as good or bad according to their obedience to the Law (1 Kings 15:34).

Illuminating the past to understand the present. The biblical narrative employs engaging storytelling about the past in order to understand the present. The past is illuminating because events have a way of recurring. We can gain insight into our present situation not only by understanding how it developed from past events but by searching for past situations analogous to our own. Biblical narrative employs extensive use of analogy to indicate the commonalities among diverse events. These similarities invite the reader to consider historical patterns and to discern what is unique in each episode.

For instance, the crime at Gibeah (Judges, chapter 19) connects with several other narratives. In the story, the men of Gibeah want to rape the male guest who is staying with one of their neighbors. To avoid this crime, the male guest thrusts his concubine outside for the men to gang rape through the night. In the morning, he finds her body on the doorstep, takes her corpse home, cuts it into twelve pieces, and sends the parts to the Twelve Tribes of Israel in an attempt to mobilize the tribes to exact revenge for the crime.



Most obvious, the outrage at Gibeah is strikingly reminiscent of the attempted rape at Sodom (Genesis, chapter 19) in which the men of the city want to rape the male guests of Lot. Although Lot offers his daughters as substitute victims for his guests in Genesis, chapter 19, the guests are angels who save themselves and Lot's family from the crowd. Through the many connections between the stories, Gibeah is presented as an Israelite city that is as bad as the proverbial wicked city of Sodom (Isaiah 1:9–10, 3:9; Jeremiah 23:14). The magnitude of the crime is adequate cause for the civil war that follows. Gibeah, which is the hometown of Saul (1 Samuel 10:26, 11:4), stands in contrast to Bethlehem (Judges 19:1–2), the hometown of David (1 Samuel, chapter 16), and to Jebus, a Canaanite city that will later be known as Jerusalem (Judges 19:10). The outrage at Gibeah leads the Israelite tribes nearly to extinguish the Tribe of Benjamin after the Levite sends the twelve parts of his concubine's body among the Tribes of Israel to raise an army (Judges 19:29–30). Later, Saul will send parts of oxen among the tribes to raise an Israelite army (1 Samuel 11:4–8). The connections among these stories invite the reader to consider the stories together. Among the implications is a comparison between David and Saul. David is the better man (1 Samuel 15:28) who comes from the better city. Saul, meanwhile, has a dubious heritage for a king (1 Samuel 9:21).

Perhaps the most obvious reason to read the historical books is to learn about Israel's past. However, one can fairly ask whether this history can best be learned from the biblical accounts or from books written by modern scholars with such titles as *A History of Ancient Israel*? Modern historians have access to information that is not mentioned in the biblical texts, such as ancient inscriptions found in and around the land of Israel. Also, we think of modern historical works as somehow objective in a way that ancient narratives are not. Consequently, a modern book might be a more accurate guide to Israel's history than the biblical books.

Fact or fiction. The first section in this introduction began the discussion of how ancient and modern historical narratives differ and how these differences reflect various ideas about what history is. Because modern historians often seek to present their work as objective and scientific, they avoid rhetorical techniques associated with imaginative or persuasive writing. Biblical narrative uses techniques common to imaginative and persuasive discourse (such as composed dialogues) because history is understood as an imaginative enterprise (representing the past) with a persuasive dimension.

Because the biblical narrative does use rhetoric in an imaginative effort to persuade, scholars disagree about how reliable the information derived from biblical narrative is. Consequently, they strive to separate the interpretations from the facts. The facts are difficult to establish with certainty because the Bible remains the only significant written source for the history of Israel. In order to gauge the historical accuracy of the biblical narrative, scholars seek to correlate biblical texts with archeological evidence to determine whether or not the archeology confirms the biblical account. These efforts have met with mixed and inconclusive results. For example, archeologists have found that the gates of Hazor, Meggido, and Gezer, dating from Solomon's time, share nearly identical fortification patterns, suggesting centralized control. Since 1 Kings 9:15 credits Solomon with construction at these sites, scholars associated the archeological finds with Solomon's activity. Recently, however, some archeologists have questioned that the gates date to Solomon's time and think they were erected at a later time. If this is so, then the Bible attributes to Solomon the work of a later king, which leads one to wonder how much of the biblical account of Solomon is exaggerated. Overall, the archeological evidence concerning ancient Israel does not offer the definitive proof of the Bible's historicity that some had hoped for. At the same time, several correlations between the Bible and archeology and the biblical claims to historicity are not easily dismissed.

Biblical narrative (like other historical narrative) is not merely a passive presentation of historical facts but an imaginative presentation of Israel's history that seeks to persuade the reader of a given interpretation of that history. Historical information, however, can be interpreted in more than one way.



Modern books with titles like *A History of Ancient Israel* narrate an interpretation of Israelite history that may or may not be similar to the interpretation of the biblical narrative. For example, the biblical narrative frequently involves the action of God in history, since it aims to reflect on Israel's relationship with God. God's activity, however, is beyond the scope of modern historical study. Therefore, modern histories of Israel (like modern histories of any other nation) make no reference to God as an agent in history. This significant difference between biblical and modern history necessarily leads modern historians to interpretations of Israel's history that may be at variance with the biblical version. Although modern histories are valuable for learning about the history of Israel and the history of the biblical text, all of these historians, in varying degrees, use the Bible as a primary source. Consequently, anyone who wishes to learn about the history of ancient Israel should begin where the modern historians begin—with the biblical narrative.

What Are the Historical Books?

The historical books consist of the following biblical books: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, First and Second Samuel, First and Second Kings, First and Second Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Tobit, Judith, Esther, and First and Second Maccabees. Some of these books are more closely related to each other than others. Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings together comprise a continuous narrative of Israel's history from the death of Moses until the end of the monarchy and the Exile to Babylon. The Books of Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah narrate a separate history of Israel that concludes with the reconstruction of Jerusalem after the return from the Babylonian Exile. The Books of Maccabees narrate partially parallel stories about the attempt of the Israelites to throw off the oppressive rule of the Greeks. Finally, Ruth, Tobit, Judith, and Esther are each short narratives that stand independently of each other and the other historical books (although Ruth is placed between Judges and First Samuel).

The first set of the historical books (Joshua to Kings) constitute the bulk of the historical material and are thought to be the most ancient of the various narratives. Although this narrative consists of several books, modern scholars believe that these books were edited together as one larger work known as the Deuteronomistic history. The Deuteronomistic history includes Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. This historical work is called "Deuteronomistic" because the whole history seems to be influenced by the language and thought of Deuteronomy. For instance, the historical books share Deuteronomy's view that worship should be centralized in Jerusalem (Deuteronomy 12:4–14; 1 Kings 11:13, 32, 36; 2 Kings 21:4, 7; 23:27). The work seems to have incorporated earlier sources and edited them into a larger work narrating the history of Israel from Moses' final speech in the wilderness to the destruction of the Judean state and the Exile of its leaders. Consequently, many scholars now approach these works as an interconnected whole rather than a disparate collection. The final editor gave shape and meaning to the whole narrative by composing several passages at significant moments. Some of these passages are narrative statements (Judges, chapter 2; 2 Kings, chapter 17) while others are speeches placed in the mouths of major characters (Joshua in Joshua, chapter 23; Solomon in 1 Kings, chapter 8).

The Deuteronomistic history provides the most detailed history of Israel before the Exile. It begins with Moses' summary of the Law in Deuteronomy. The Book of Joshua narrates the conquest of the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua. After Joshua's death, the period of the Judges begins. Although the Book of Judges ends before the birth of Samuel, the period of the monarchy does not begin until Samuel anoints the first king of Israel. During the reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon, the Twelve Tribes of Israel are unified under the rule of one king. After the death of Solomon, the period of the united monarchy ends and the divided monarchy begins when the northern tribes establish their own kingship



apart from the dynasty of David. Ultimately, this northern kingdom is destroyed by the Assyrian Empire. Shortly afterward, the Babylonian Empire destroys the southern kingdom and forcibly removes its leading citizens to Babylon.

Among the historical books is another set of books related to one another. The work of the chronicler's history includes First and Second Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. Scholars disagree about whether a single editor is responsible for all of these books. However, the fact that the beginning of Ezra is the same as the end of Second Chronicles indicates a connection between the works: Ezra and Nehemiah is the continuation of the history narrated in First and Second Chronicles. The Books of Chronicles draw on earlier sources (including the Deuteronomistic history) to narrate the history of Israel until the decree of Cyrus permitted the Jews to return from Exile. Ezra and Nehemiah tell the history of Israel after this decree. In Chronicles, the description of events is sometimes significantly different from that of the Deuteronomistic history. For example, Chronicles shows little interest in the history of the northern kingdom of Israel that separated from the dynasty of David after the death of Solomon, whereas Kings narrates the history of this kingdom in some detail. Comparison of these two histories will reveal many differences large and small.

Unlike the dual Books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, First and Second Maccabees do not form a continuous narrative. Rather, each book relates some of the same history in different ways. These works tell the story of Israel from the conquest of Alexander the Great into the Maccabean period. The Maccabees were Jews who lead a successful revolt against their Greek rulers and established Israel's independence until the Roman conquest.

The remaining historical books are sometimes characterized as short stories. They are Ruth, Tobit, Judith, and Esther. Each book is named after its main character. In three of the four cases, the main character is a woman who somehow saves Israel. Judith and Esther rescue Israel from the threat of destruction at enemy hands. Ruth, although a foreigner, saves an Israelite family from childlessness and becomes an ancestress of King David and therefore of Jesus. Finally, the Book of Tobit narrates the suffering and redemption of two Israelite families living in Exile.

(This article is from "Introduction to the Historical Books," by David A. Bosworth, PhD, in *The Saint Mary's Press® College Study Bible, New American Bible* [Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2007], pages 269–273.)



The Prophets

What Is a Prophet?

You might think the answer to this question is simple: a prophet is someone who predicts the future. But this is not the biblical understanding of what a prophet is. The Bible defines a prophet as a spokesperson for God. The prophet reports to the community what God speaks to him or her.

Usually the prophets' messages warn the people when they are sinning and tell them how God will punish them if they continue to sin. Sometimes the reports from the prophets describe how God will save the people from present oppression and outline how they should respond to God. It can appear that prophets are predicting the future, because what they warn often comes to pass. But we must always remember that the words of the prophet are God's speech.

We call prophets' speeches oracles. An oracle is a message from God delivered to the people by a prophet. Prophets can deliver these oracles in many different ways. They can speak them, sing them, or even act them out. We will look at these various ways in more detail later.

Prophets were not necessarily passive mouthpieces. Some prophets argued with God; the Bible says that a few even changed God's mind. Prophets also delivered God's message in ways their community would best understand. We see prophets adding to their oracles to make God's message clear.

Facing Our Own Problems with the Prophets

It is hard for us today to imagine prophets of old, because we live in a world where prophets are viewed with suspicion. Some might picture them as people who were always ranting and raving, as if they were a little "nuts." Part of the problem is that we live in a society where people tend to put down those who claim to be prophets.

Even if you personally believe there are prophets among us today, we live in a culture where those who feel that way are in the minority. When we read stories about the prophets, we bring our current attitudes with us. We read biblical texts as twenty-first-century Americans, not as sixth century BC Israelites, which makes it hard to take the prophets seriously.

Israel's View of Prophets

In contrast to our culture, the Israelites were very accepting of prophets. They believed that God communicated to the people through the words of a prophet. This attitude toward the prophets was especially strong during the monarchy, when Israelite and Judean kings had prophets as part of their royal administration. What do we know about the Israelite prophets?

Prophetic activity was a social phenomenon. Today when we think about the prophets, we tend to imagine solitary, holy individuals, similar to saints and hermits. We might conclude that what is important for making someone a prophet is their piety. But prophets are not prophets unless they deliver God's message to the people. Having an individual experience of God does not make someone a prophet.

Conversely, prophets are not prophets unless some group recognizes them as prophets. The Israelites knew that people could think that they were hearing God's voice but could be mistaken or delusional. They had a couple of ways to explain this phenomenon. First, they might say a god other than



Yahweh could be talking to the prophet (remember they did not yet believe that Yahweh was the only God). Second, they might say someone was possessed by a demon or a “lying spirit.” So it was not enough for persons to claim that they had talked to God. The community played a role in determining whether such a claim was true.

Israel had hundreds of prophets. People often think the only prophets who were around in ancient Israel were the ones named in the Bible. We might imagine a famous prophet, such as Elijah, as a solitary prophet in his day. That is far from the truth. The Bible tells us there were hundreds of other prophets when Elijah lived, just in the small area around the city of Samaria. So why didn’t the people listen to the prophet? They probably did. It just may have been the wrong prophet.

There were many different kinds of prophets. We tend to think all prophets were alike: they heard God’s voice, and they spoke it back to the people. Again, the Bible tells us something quite different. There were different types of prophets. Some worked for the king. Some worked in groups. Some worked at temples. Others were solitary, roaming the country and living off donations. Some were prophets their whole lives, while others were prophets for only a while. Some heard a voice. Others had visions, while still others were “possessed” by a spirit sent from God.

Prophets did more than speak. Because the most common place to hear these oracles today is in church or synagogue services, we tend to think prophets gave speeches. The Bible, however, describes prophets going into a “frenzy.” The texts do not describe this frenzy because they assume everyone knows what it is. Prophets also acted out oracles in strange and sometimes shocking ways. For example, Ezekiel lies on his side for 430 days to act out the siege of Jerusalem (Ezekiel 4:5–6), while Isaiah walks around the city naked to demonstrate the coming defeat of Egypt and Ethiopia (Isaiah 20:1–6). At least some of the oracles were sung.

Other cultures also had prophets. To think that only Israel had prophets is far from the truth. All ancient near-eastern countries had prophets. Often these prophets acted in much the same way as Israelite prophets. Prophets are a common part of many cultures even today. For instance, Southeast Asian communities often have a prophetic figure called a shaman. We see the same figure among tribal groups in Africa and among some Native American groups. When we consider the prophetic figures in these cultures, we find that Israel’s prophets shared many things in common (their role in society, group approval, problems determining who is a true prophet) with other cultures even today.

There were both male and female prophets. Although the collections of prophetic oracles were all from men, other biblical texts talk about female prophets, such as Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah.

Some prophets performed miracles. This is especially true for Elijah and Elisha. We see this same thing in the prophets of other countries as well. In fact, one biblical scholar renames these miracles, “prophetic acts of power.” These miracles pop up especially in times of crisis, when a prophet is being ignored. The miracle demonstrates to the community that the person is a true prophet, with a reliable connection to the divine realm.

Prophets Spoke to a Nation

The prophets spoke to their own community about issues facing them in their own day. To be sure, sometimes these oracles had elements that looked to the future, often to a happier future, but, even then, the first audience for these oracles was ancient Israel.

Prophecy flourished during the monarchy. These men and women were the ones most able to critique kings and other powerful members of Israelite society. They sometimes were the voice of the poor and oppressed. They could tell a king when he sinned, or they could advise him that his public policies were not in accord with God’s will.



Doubtless there were prophets who delivered oracles to common people about common things, such as their crops, their children, their business, and so on. But the oracles that have been preserved are those dealing with issues facing the nation as a whole. Why? Because these were the oracles delivered to people who knew how to write and who had the means to pass on written collections of oracles. These oracles also had a wider significance.

Overwhelmingly, then, the audience of the biblical prophets were the kings, priests, and other elites within Israel and Judah. Their topics dealt with such things as national security, economic policies, government stability, military decisions, and so on. Reading the prophets can be more like reading the editorial page of a major newspaper than reading the meditations of the saints.

Because these prophets were some of the most important, learned, and respected people of their day, their words were valued. Some of their oracles were understood as having a lasting meaning: that is, while they addressed events in their own day, they also hinted at events in days far beyond their own. We see this in a book such as Isaiah: the first part has oracles from Isaiah, but the second part has oracles from a much later time, written as if Isaiah were still alive.

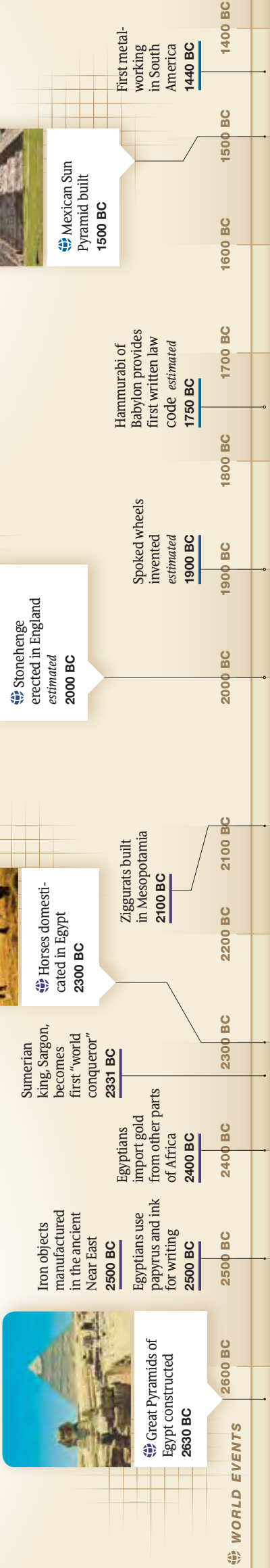
The oracles that most often were understood as having a lasting meaning were the oracles of hope. We will see that the prophets described a glorious future for Israel. We also know this future never came to pass. Instead, they were preserved as visions of a blessed future God held out for the people.

(This article is adapted from "Defining the Prophets," in *Encountering Ancient Voices: A Guide to Reading the Old Testament*, by Corrine L. Carvalho, PhD, [Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2006], pages 243–248.)



COMPLETE BIBLICAL TIMELINE

Catch a glimpse of the whole sweep of biblical history. The ten historical eras outlined in the *Chronological Life Application Study Bible*, along with the books of the Bible you will find in each, are in the center bar. Significant world events are above the bar, and biblical events are below it.



Beginnings

undated–2100 BC

GENESIS, undated–1805 BC

God's Chosen Family

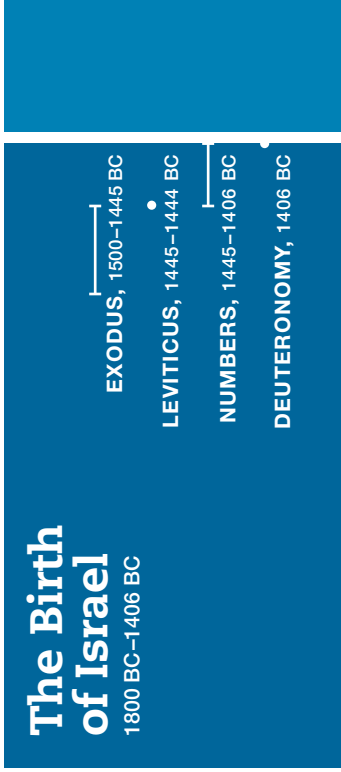
2100 BC–1800 BC

• JOB, around 1900 BC

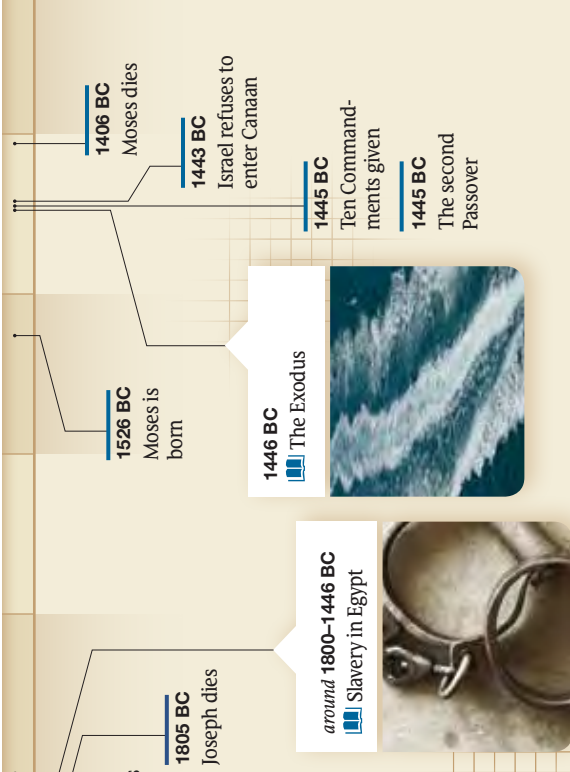
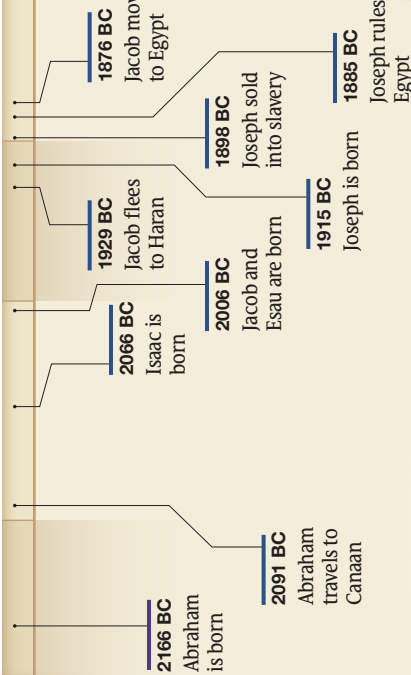
The Birth of Israel

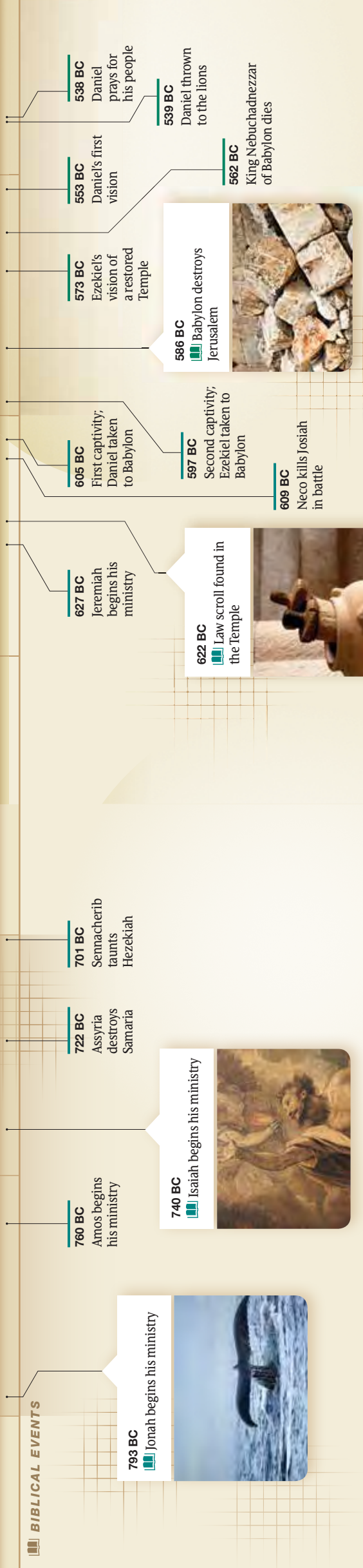
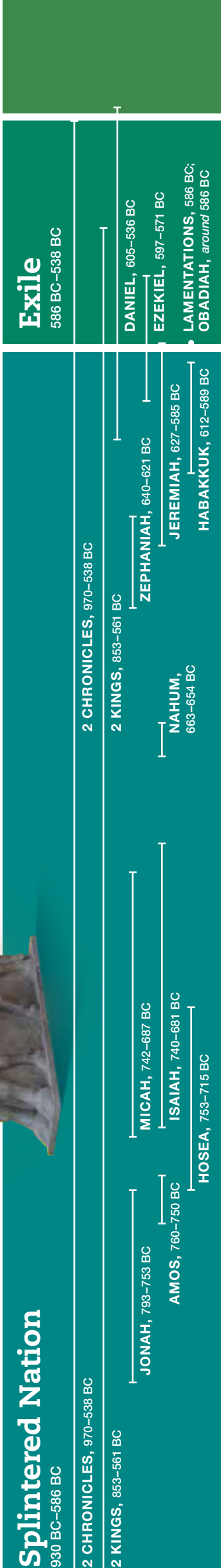
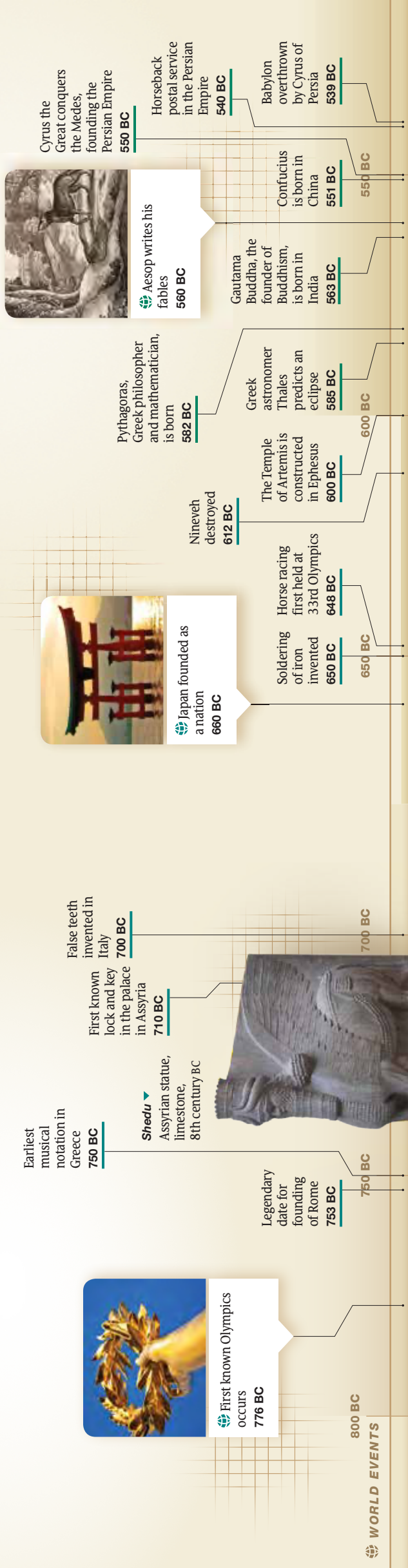
1800 BC–1406 BC

EXODUS, 1500–1445 BC
LEVITICUS, 1445–1444 BC
NUMBERS, 1445–1406 BC
DEUTERONOMY, 1406 BC



▲ **Early Accounts of Creation and the Flood**
Several ancient civilizations wrote down their own stories about origins. These tablets from Babylon record a creation myth and a story about an ancient flood.







Earliest copies of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*
500 BC

Hippocrates, the father of modern medicine, is born
460 BC



The Parthenon is built in Athens, Greece
448 BC

Public libraries open in Athens, Greece
520 BC

Polo played as a sport in Persia
525 BC

Socrates, famous philosopher, is born
469 BC

Plato, famous philosopher, is born
429 BC

Aristotle is born
384 BC

Plato writes The Republic
370 BC

Alexander the Great defeats the Persian Empire
330 BC

Romans build first paved road, the "Appian Way"
312 BC

Romans conquer Sicily
241 BC

Antiochus IV plunders Jerusalem Temple
169 BC

Judas Maccabeus begins a revolt against Antiochus IV
165 BC

First Chinese ships reach east coast of India
102 BC

Julius Caesar, first emperor of Rome, is born
100 BC

Romans conquer England
55 BC

Julius Caesar becomes dictator for life, assassinated 2 years later
46 BC

Sumo wrestling in Japan
23 BC

Herod the Great begins remodeling Temple in Jerusalem
20 BC

Cleopatra and Marc Antony commit suicide
30 BC

Romans make Herod the Great king of Judea
37 BC

Cleopatra becomes last independent Egyptian ruler
51 BC

Jews and astrologers banished from Rome
139 BC

Great Wall of China built
215 BC

WORLD EVENTS

Return & Diaspora

538 BC–6 BC

EZRA, 538–450 BC

• HAGGAI, 520 BC

• ZECHARIAH, 520–518 BC

ESTHER, 483–473 BC

MALACHI, 430s BC

NEHEMIAH, 446–432 BC

538 BC
Cyrus allows exiles to return to Jerusalem

520 BC
Haggai and Zechariah serve as prophets

473 BC
Festival of Purim originates to Jerusalem

445 BC
Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem

BIBLICAL EVENTS

538 BC
Zerubbabel leads 50,000 people back to Jerusalem

515 BC
Second Temple completed in Jerusalem

479 BC
Esther becomes queen of Persia



▲ *The Septuagint*
Jesus and the apostles apparently referred to the Old Testament in translation quite often. This 4th century AD manuscript is particularly well preserved.

around 255 BC
Hebrew Old Testament begins to be translated into Greek (Septuagint)

INTERTESTAMENTAL PERIOD



Saddles first used in Europe
AD 1

Judea becomes a Roman province
AD 6

Zealots in Judea rebel against Rome
AD 7

Tiberius succeeds Caesar Augustus as Roman emperor
AD 14

Caligula becomes the Roman emperor
AD 37

Herod Agrippa appointed king of Judea
AD 40

Claudius becomes the Roman emperor
AD 41

London is founded
AD 43

Emperor Claudius poisoned by order of his wife
AD 54

Romans begin using soap
AD 50

Nero becomes the Roman emperor
AD 54

Fire burns Rome, Nero blames Christians
AD 64

Romans destroy a religious commune at Qumran
AD 68

China opens silk trade with the West
AD 74

Mount Vesuvius erupts
AD 79

Domitian becomes the Roman emperor
AD 81



Rome begins construction on the Colosseum
AD 75

AD 1

AD 10

AD 20

AD 30

AD 40

AD 50

AD 60

AD 70

AD 80

AD 90

AD 100

Jesus Christ

6 BC–AD 30

MATTHEW, 6 BC–AD 30

LUKE, 6 BC–AD 30

MARK, AD 26–30

JOHN, AD 26–30

The Church

AD 30–present

ACTS, AD 30–60

1 JOHN, between AD 80–90 •

2 & 3 JOHN, around AD 90 •

REVELATION, AD 95 •

• 1 COR, AD 53

• 2 COR & ROMANS, AD 54

• PHIL, AD 61

• 1 TIM & TITUS, AD 62

• 2 TIM & 1 PETER, AD 64

• 2 PETER, AD 65

• HEBREWS & JUDE, around AD 66

• JAMES, AD 48

• GAL, AD 49

• 1 & 2 THES, AD 50

• COL, PHLM, & EPH, AD 60

BIBLICAL EVENTS

4 BC
 Herod the Great dies

AD 5?
Paul is born

6 BC
 Jesus is born

AD 6
Jesus visits Temple as a boy



AD 26
John the Baptist begins his ministry

AD 27
Jesus begins his ministry

AD 29
John the Baptist is beheaded

AD 30
 Jesus is crucified



AD 30
The Holy Spirit descends on Pentecost

AD 35
Saul's conversion on the Damascus road

AD 40
The conversion of Cornelius

AD 46
Paul begins his first missionary journey

AD 51
Paul begins his third missionary journey

AD 57
Paul in prison in Caesarea

AD 62
Paul is released from prison in Rome

AD 64
Paul martyred

AD 70
Rome destroys Jerusalem

AD 59
 Paul's voyage to Rome



AD 73
Jews commit mass suicide at Masada while under Roman attack

Masada

After Rome destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD, a small group of Jewish nationalists dug in at the rugged fortress of Masada, where they remained for three years until the Romans' siege finally broke through the stronghold.

Ten Themes of Old Testament Theology

Lawrence Boadt

The Old Testament is such a rich book, written over many centuries by many different authors, and containing such a wide variety of Israel's religious traditions, that readers often have difficulty finding any threats to *unify* it. The same reaction may have struck us as we read about the early books of the Pentateuch and then turned to the prophets or wisdom sections. In order to appreciate the whole Bible it is very important for us to be able to discover some unifying themes which make this a single Testament of faith *and* which enable us at the same time to treasure its many different voices expressing the breadth and beauty of the human experience of God over the ages.

The first question biblical theologians ask of the Old Testament is whether there is one *viewpoint* that characterizes all the books. Some have said that its central theme is *historical*—that is, the Bible tells the factual story of God's interventions into human history on behalf of the Israelites. This would not be ordinary history, but a special "salvation history" which concentrated attention on moments when God revealed himself in certain *events* or in the giving of divine words for human guidance through Moses or the prophets. Other scholars suggest that the major thrust is that of a "proclamation" or "confession" of God. It is Israel celebrating its relationship with God. This view especially takes account of how much of the Old Testament is not *historical* in nature, but rather *praise* and *questioning*—for example, the Book of Psalms or Job or Ecclesiastes. If it is "confession," then we must ask a further question, "Does the Old Testament have a *single* central theme that is proclaimed?" Some possible ones might be God's *choice* of Israel above other peoples, or the lasting *covenant* that God made with Israel, or God's *holiness* manifest in the world, or the *promise* which runs through both Old and New Testaments.

But those who emphasize the historical nature of Israel's traditions, and those who emphasize its proclamation of God's relationship, emphasize important truths, and to select one exclusively over the other would be to lose much of the power of the Scriptures. Israel was an intensely *historical* people; and more so than any of its neighbors, it was conscious of where it had come from and what had happened to it in different moments of its past. But it made that awareness of history alive by announcing the continual praises of God, and in living an established way of life that challenged every new generation.

The only fair candidate for a single dominant theme in the Old Testament would be the *person of God*. The implied questions—"Who is God?" "What does God do?" "Why does God do it?"—fill every page and every level of tradition of the Bible. Naturally, the Old Testament is also the story of the people of Israel, for this one God interacted with them, and they began to understand God through their experience as a people. But it is not primarily the story of God and Israel *alone*. Although the people remembered what God had done for them, they also

spoke about what God does for the *whole* world and all its nations. The Bible testifies to the universal greatness and love of God. Israel made no claim that God acted only on its behalf, nor did it insist that its knowledge of God was *entirely* special and revealed only to itself. In several passages of the Bible, Israel acknowledges the insights *other peoples* have had by borrowing their language and thoughts. One example is the flood story of Genesis 6-9, another is the description of God as Lord of the storm like Baal, found in Psalm 29.

Because Israel had a strong sense of God's special intervention into its history, it saw its duty both to *remember* the wonderful things God had done for it alone and to *proclaim* and affirm the truth about this God to the whole world.

The Only God

Thus the *first and most important* theological theme found in the Old Testament is that God *is one*. This may seem like a small statement, but it governs everything. Israel lived in a world with many competing gods and many debased ideas about divine power. The polytheism of its neighbors was based on an attempt to understand the forces of nature and the mysteries of life that faced humans every day. Why is there drought, sickness and death? How do we find blessing of good crops, children, security and peace? The common answer was to recognize different divine powers everywhere, often with the competing aims and attitudes toward human beings. The means of relating to these gods was, in effect, to *manipulate* them into doing what we needed or wanted. Elaborate rituals and rites that *imitated* the force of storms or the generating acts of sex gradually led to an attitude toward divine beings as glorified humans complete with all our envies, pettiness, moods and self-interest. The world and its gods were nearly identical. In contrast, Israel insisted on a single divine being who ordered and controlled everything out of love for the goodness of creation. The creation story in Genesis 1 makes this clear. And God never acted from whims nor tolerated immoral behavior as part of worship – Genesis 2 and 3 make this clear. Nor were there to be any rivals nor struggles of other forces threatening to overwhelm God—the flood in Genesis 6 and the tower of Babel story in Genesis 11 make this clear. Above all, this God ruled human history and actively guided, protected, cared for and was involved in human affairs—the whole Bible tells this story. It affirms everywhere that God was never to be confused with the created things of the world. The Old Testament returns again and again to the themes that God is *holy*, God is *King*. God is *Shepherd* or *Father*, God is *Creator*—always to emphasize the transcendence of God. God is near the world but never of it. As Jeremiah 23:23 puts it, “Am I a God nearby, says the Lord, and not a God far away?” “Do I not fill heaven and earth?” Perhaps the highest point in Old Testament theology is reached in the famous prayer of Deuteronomy 6 on this very point: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your spirit and with all your power.”

God Active in History

This brings us right to the heart of the *second important theological theme in the Old Testament. God is an actor in history.* Israel is literally created by the action of God. God reveals that history is not neutral, but is a stage for the discovery of the self-revealing God. Israel thus proclaims that pagan ideas of circular time, those unending repeating cycles of events in which nothing is ever really new, must be discarded for good. History is *ever new*, it moves ahead, and we can grow better or worse in it, and we can certainly learn from it. This insight flows from the worship and adoration of a transcendent God. If God is not merely part of nature, tied to its ups and downs and its wet seasons and dry, God can act *upon* it. Some years ago, the term “salvation history” for the Old Testament was very popular. It expressed the sense that Israel remembered and learned from those moments when God acted in the events which were most crucial to its past existence. But theologians are now less willing to use that term, because it fails to call attention to the vital element of worship and philosophizing that makes up a large part of what the Bible says of itself. At the same time, we should not totally lose sight of this salvation history” approach because it underscores Israel’s breakthrough insight that God not only *cares about* humans but operates in a carefully *ordered* and loving way for the *good* of humans—and always has.

Above all, this insight into divine activity declares that God was a *Liberator and Savior*. God delivers the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; God saves Moses and the slaves at the Red Sea; God hears the cry of the poor and listens to them in the psalms; God frees the servant who gives witness through suffering in the Book of Isaiah; God pleads with Israel to return and change its heart and be liberated in Hosea and Jeremiah. There is perhaps no stronger theme anywhere in the biblical tradition than this one. It forms the background for understanding the New Testament proclamation of Jesus; it is the *central motif* of the later themes of *messiah* and *hope*. And it certainly has vital ramifications for our world today.

Personal Response and Prayer

The *third important theological theme, which follows from the second about God as actor in time, asserts the necessity of human response to what God does.* The Old Testament never accepts that a worship of God can be adequate which is grateful only for the preservation and daily working of nature. Ours is a personal God who demands from us a *personal* response of friendship, loyalty, obedience, and communication. In Scripture this truth takes many forms. It can be seen in the passages that recognize God’s “glory” in the world, or in the temple in Jerusalem, and that lead Israel to awe and wonder. It takes shape in the spirit of trust and even complaints freely offered form the fabric of the psalms. It makes possible the existence of the great prophets who not only speak in God’s name but watch over and *insist upon* concrete replies by Israel in both deeds and words. The very creation of the Bible as a sacred book stems from the awareness that Israel must express itself fully before God—both in the telling of its story and in the constant praise of the living and present God in its midst, and even in the

rather daring questioning by wisdom writers who seek to understand their relationship with God more deeply.

Our fourth theme is really a concrete application of this human response—prayer—or the praise of God. The Bible is history and catechetics, speculative thought and poetry and entertaining tales and much more, but all of it is praise of God. Israel was a community that learned to place its purpose and hopes and self-understanding only in God. So when we read the Scriptures, we should not consider just the psalms as our prayer. *All of the biblical texts* tells the glory of God. It is not always easy to see praise of a good God in the violence of Joshua or Judges, or in the doubts of a Job and an Ecclesiastes; but Israel saw God present in blessing even there, and could still pray in the midst of a very real sense of curse all around them. Today many people would like to blot out the harshness of human sin and divorce God from it, and demand of God an end to injustice before they give praise. Instead, the Bible teaches us something about our continual need to struggle for what is right while proclaiming that only God can accomplish it.

Covenant and Tradition

The fifth theological theme might be called community and covenant. The Old Testament came into existence as the remembering by an on-going community who received what had been the testimony of others and took responsibility for it. Above all, they clung stubbornly to a conviction that God had indeed entered into a special relationship of *covenant* with them—a covenant that established bonds of loyalty and responsibility between God and humanity in the person of Israel. We recognize how this formed and preserved the true *inner bond* of Israel as a *community* which maintained a profound respect for the worth and love of the neighbor—as Leviticus 19:18 points out so strongly when it demands *love of neighbor* as much as of oneself.

A sixth important theme follows from the last one. Israel is above all a people of tradition and institutions. It is Torah, “teaching” or, even better, “way of life.” Israel does not shrink from including sacrifice laws and regulations about bodily ailments and sanitary practices right next to moral and ethical demands for justice and humility and caring. The Old Testament is a rather awkward collection of materials because it reflects *all* the different sides of life in community. We should keep in mind that the traditions come from a very long period of time, at least a thousand years, and probably much more. Anyone who has seen the musical “Fiddler on the Roof” knows the importance of tradition to keeping alive a sense of community in a difficult and often hostile world.

The greatness of biblical revelation is that it uses the structure of society to help a community function religiously, but at the same time moves beyond these structures. Thus Israel could demand *fidelity* and *obedience* to God’s law that no other Near Eastern monarch had to face. Or it could demand from individual tribes a cooperation and submission of their own purposes for the good of all Israel. When the Assyrians destroyed the northern kingdom of ten tribes, the rest could move on to a new understanding that God worked even when you did not have the

promised land to live in; and when the temple and king were destroyed by the Babylonians, they moved on to perceive that these too could be dispensed with, and that God would now act in new ways. The Scriptures themselves are written so that Israel can be freed from any single human social structure or government or land and continue to meditate and proclaim the *enduring covenant* through time.

The Prophets and Justice

A significant seventh theme that follows from an honest wrestling with Israel's sense of concrete existence in the world is found in the *tension between God's will and our often sinful and selfish response*. Israel was no Pollyanna that thought of human nature as always good and God as always forgiving of any and every fault. The Israelites never failed to proclaim God to be a God of mercy, as Exodus 34 expresses it, "slow to anger and rich in kindness," but they tempered it with a true awareness of *justice*. God does indeed make demands on the community, demands that they be *like* God. If the claim of Genesis 1:26 means anything when it says that humans are made in the image and likeness of God, it means that we too have moral choice and moral responsibility. Leviticus 19 insists over and over that Israel obey God's laws because God is *holy*. If God indeed faithfully treats the world in an ethical and right fashion, acting solely out of love and goodness, then the *proper* human response must be in kind.

This explains the central vitality of *prophecy* to the Old Testament tradition. The prophets are the *ethnic watchdogs* par excellence. They should not be seen only as radical innovators or rebels against the laws and traditions. They recalled tradition to the people, showing them how God had acted in the past, and what the covenant had taught, and insisting that Israel not forget the freedom of God to act in new ways or the faithfulness of God that would not overlook repeated violations of the covenant. The prophetic word indeed stands in judgment on Israel's behavior only because Israel *forgets*. Ethics is therefore not divorced from the great sense of tradition but stands within it. There is no picture of God in the Hebrew Scriptures, unlike in many of the pagan myths and prayers, that ever *forgets* that he is a God of *action* who demands *actions* in return. God always acted rightly, and all Israel must act rightly because they remember as their sacred duty what God is. "Forgetting" negates the meaning of history and establishes evil practices because they seem helpful or useful for our present desires. Prophecy challenges these. As a result, prophecy has often been seen as a highlight of Old Testament revelation, and perhaps it is, but, if so, only because it roots itself forcefully in the covenant and narratives of the Pentateuchal revelation.

Hope and the Future

The office of the prophet as watchdog and critic and challenger of Israel's evil ways is balanced by the fact that the prophetic office also brings comfort and hope in times of trouble and loss. **The is the *eighth theological theme: hope and optimism about the future*. Biblical theologians often speak about "eschatology" in the Bible and mean by it the dynamic expectation that God will act in the future.** This is not just the natural assumption that God will

work tomorrow as God did today, but the much greater confidence that God has all of time and human history under a plan and that there will be moments of profound change when God intervenes. This conviction took shape in any number of crisis moments facing Israel in the Old Testament—the rise of the kings in the tenth century, the loss of northern Israel and ten of twelve tribes in the eighth century, and the loss of land, temple, king and independence in the sixth century. Never in any of these crises did Israel come to the conclusion that God would *not act* again. They interpreted disasters as punishment for their own evil for the most part, and the prophets frequently warned the people that God had future punishment in mind if they would not *convert* their ways. But there always remained a conviction, even when the prophets used the most absolute and damning language condemning Israel, that God would *renew* or *restore* because above all God was faithful.

This led to the hope of a *messiah*, a figure sent by God, greater than any king of the past, who would bring about the full flowering of Israel. Such hopes were really quite late in the Old Testament period and are only mildly reflected in the actual books of the Bible—an example is Daniel—but were very common among other writings and in Jewish groups just before the time of Christ. As Christians think of the Old Testament's relation to the New, they must be careful not simply to say that Jesus *fulfilled* all the unfulfilled messianic words of the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus acted differently than even the Old Testament expected and revealed what the Israelites always knew through the prophets—God *does not do* what you hope for; he acts in new and surprising ways. We cannot expect it, but we must know God well enough to *accept it*.

The sense of hope should be coupled with *another theme—the goodness of the world and of the creation that God has made*. Hope is rooted ultimately in the knowledge of a good God. Israel has many beautiful passages in its Scriptures that express this deep conviction of God's majestic power and blessing on all of creation. It can be found in the creation story of Genesis 1 and 2 in the blessing that God brings on the earth, and the fact that for each day of the creation story, God “saw that it was good.” It can be seen in the blessing and promise themes to Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, in the wisdom poems of Job 28 or Proverbs 8 or Sirach 24, and in the overwhelming imagery of praise in the Book of Psalms.

Many scholars wondered why the Bible had so little to say of an *afterlife*. Only in one of the latest books of the Bible, Daniel, does such a belief emerge clearly. Perhaps Israel focused itself so strongly on the covenant with the *now-community* that it had little room for wondering how that bond could be continued after death. But eventually the radical belief that *God was good* without fail—from beginning to ultimate end—led to an equal assertion that God could raise the dead who had suffered unjustly. God could preserve the faithful Israelite into the life to come. It remains a minor theme in the Hebrew Scriptures but takes a much more central place in light of the resurrection of Jesus.

The Mystery of God's Ways

Finally, we should conclude with a *last theme of importance: the Bible is wisdom.* Wisdom books are not just appendages but form a very important layer of tradition that affirms that God made humans *rational and free*, with divine powers of *searching* and *choosing* and behaving ethically. Wisdom writings boost the goodness of being human and seek to explore dimensions of God and the problem of relating to God that troubled everyone. Israel never developed philosophers like the Greeks who exalted human reason as a power that answers to nothing but itself. Israel maintained that the *search* for wisdom *must be done* in awe and fear of the Lord. Greeks were skeptical of how the gods could actually interact with the created world. Israel *never doubted* how active and directly present God was to the world. Israel's wisdom thinkers instead turned the believers' questions and difficult problems of suffering and inequalities among people toward the *mystery of existence*. God's ways were not our ways, and while we can see God at work we cannot understand with our insights the what or why. But covenant love for the one God demanded both proper reverence for divine transcendence and bountiful hope for divine nearness.

The legacy of the biblical traditions of Israel that have been brought together in the Scriptures is a *combination* of divine *nearness* and *distant* greatness, of intimate, individual love side by side with reasonable, orderly governance. These ten theological themes help bring this out about the God of Israel. Continued reading and study of the Old Testament will serve to nourish these truths more deeply and to open up innumerable *other aspects* of our relationship to God.

(From *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction*. Second Edition. Lawrence Boadt with Richard Clifford and Daniel Harrington. Paulist Press, 2012.)

Guided Tour of Old Testament Events, Teachings, and People

Begin the Guided Tour by reading the Bible selections for “Creation.” Then, take a few minutes to reflect on the significance of these readings for understanding the Old Testament using the Reflection Questions. Write your reflections on paper or digitally.

Use this same process for each event, teaching, or people as you move through the Guided Tour .

Reflection Questions

- What is the significance of these readings for my understanding of the Old Testament?
- How do these readings help me understand who God is and what God is doing in the lives of the people of the Old Testament?
- Which of the ten themes of Old Testament theology are illustrated in these readings?
- How will these readings help me understand the story of the Old Testament better?

Bibles

You can use a print version of the *New American Bible* (Revised Edition) or *New Revised Standard Version* (Catholic Edition). Both Bibles are available from a variety of publishers. There are several excellent Catholic study bibles which provide articles, maps, and commentaries to assist you in reading the Bible. Consider the following: *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible* and *The Catholic Bible, Third Edition* (from Oxford University Press)

You can also go online to **Bible Gateway**: <https://www.biblegateway.com>. Type in the Bible passage you want to read and then select which edition of the Bible from the dropdown list. Select New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE) or New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition (NRSVCE).

Guided Tour

Creation

- Read the Genesis chapters 1 and 2 for the two accounts of creation.

Abraham

- Read Genesis chapter 12:1-9 and chapter 17:1-8.

Moses

- Read Exodus chapter 3.

Exodus

- Read Exodus chapter 12:40-50 and chapter 13 and 14.

Commandments

- Read Deuteronomy chapter 6:1-12 and then chapter 5.

Samuel, a Judge of Israel

- Read 1 Samuel chapter 3 and chapter 7:3-17

Deborah, a Judge of Israel

- Read the Judges chapters 4 and 5.

Ruth and Naomi

- Read the Book of Ruth chapters 1 through 4.

Exile

- Read Jeremiah 52:1-30; 2 Chronicles chapter 36; Psalm 137; and Ezra chapters 1 and 3:1-7.

David and Solomon

- Read 1 Chronicles chapter 11:1-9, chapter 16:1-36, and chapters 28 and 29.

Isaiah, the Prophet

- Read Isaiah chapter 2:2-4; chapter 9:2-7; chapter 11:1-9; chapter 35:1-10; chapter 40:1-10; chapter 43:1-7; chapter 56:1-8; chapter 58:6-10; chapter 61:1-6

Psalms

- Read Psalms 1, 15, 23, 27, 46, 71, 103, and 139

Old Testament Reading Activities

1. A Bible Reading Method
2. Studying a Bible Text
3. Reflective Bible Reading
4. Praying with the Psalms
5. Lectio Divina
6. Visio Divina

A Bible Reading Method

Pray

Pray before reading, asking God to help you understand and receive his Word. Through Christ you are in the Father's holy presence. Approach him boldly, humbly and expectantly.

Read

Next, read slowly and carefully through the Bible passage. Sometimes, you'll want to read the passage more than once. You may also find it helpful to read the preceding or following passages to get the context. Take the time to read it as thoroughly as you can, expecting God to answer your prayer for understanding of his Word.

Reflect

Reflect on what you have read, waiting in openness, ready to obey God's Word to you. Think through the passage, asking yourself such questions as:

- ◆ What does this passage say? What is its main point?
- ◆ What does it reveal about God, or about me?
- ◆ What insight am I given into myself and into my life situation?
- ◆ What does God require of me now, in thought, word or action?

These questions will help you "dig deeper" into the meaning of the passage as you study and reflect. Many people find it helpful to write their answers in a journal or notebook. You may find it helpful to use a Study Bible to help you probe the deeper meaning.

Apply

The Bible's purpose is not only to give us information about God, but also to help us live in the proper relationship to God and others. Apply what God has taught you from today's reading to the circumstances of life – situations at work, home school, or church. Use what you have learned in order to become more like Jesus.

- ◆ How can God's Word apply to my life today: my situations at home, at work, school or church?

Pray

End your time as you began, in prayer. This time turn the things you have learned into prayers. Make your discoveries from the Bible the basis of your prayer time. Ask God to help you live out and apply what you learned that day.

Studying a Biblical Text

Bible Reading: Matthew 18:1-5

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, asking, "Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven?" So Jesus called a child to come and stand in front of them, and said, "I assure you that unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven. The greatest in the Kingdom of heaven is the one who humbles himself and becomes like this child. And whoever welcomes in my name one such child as this, welcomes me"

1. What is happening in the reading? Try this:

- ◆ Identify the characters by name.
- ◆ Identify the words and phrases that seem significant to you.
- ◆ Identify the emotions or feelings that are expressed by the characters.
- ◆ Identify the plot and theme of the reading.
- ◆ Consult a commentary that will help you discover if there are any important details that a 21st century reader would likely miss. For example, the word that Jesus would have used for child is synonymous with the word slave. Jesus is not instructing his followers to become childish; he is telling them to become humble, powerless and dependent. This childlike or slave-like disposition, not arrogance or selfish ambition, is the path to Christian greatness.

2. How is the happening in the reading present in today's world? Think about:

- ◆ Newspaper stories about murders that are committed for personal or financial gain
- ◆ Corrupt politicians who are more concerned about selfish desires than service
- ◆ Television programs that glorify selfish ambition at the expense of harmonious relationships
- ◆ An unbalanced competitive spirit that compels some people to cheat to get to the top

3. How is the happening in the reading present in my life? Examine this:

- ◆ What characters do I like/dislike in the reading?
- ◆ Why do I like particular characters?
- ◆ Why do I dislike particular characters?
- ◆ How do I see what I like and dislike in my own personality?
- ◆ How do I compete with others in my life?
- ◆ What is my definition of greatness?
- ◆ Am I willing to be dependent upon others? Why or why not?
- ◆ Am I willing to hand my life over to God in the way that a young child must be dependent upon a parent? Why or why not?

The critical task here is to discern how the Word of God that you discover in the Bible is also calling you and guiding you outside of the Bible in your daily life. When we develop an understanding of the Word of God in the Bible, we are then in a privileged position to seek out and follow Jesus, the living Word, with more confidence in our daily experiences. The Bible helps us to clarify in our minds the identity of Jesus so that we will recognize him when he presents himself to us in every moment of every day.

Reflective Bible Reading

1. Choose a passage from Scripture, about five to ten verses in length. (See the list of “Scripture Passages by Topics” list if you need help.)
2. Choose a comfortable place where you will not be interrupted.
3. Light a candle, if possible. Take a few moments to get your body in harmony with your spirit.
4. Sometimes it helps to take a few deep breaths or stretch your body, then relax.
5. Acknowledge God’s presence with you. Ask God to send the Spirit to be with you and guide you in this time of reflection.
6. Read the passage you have chosen slowly, out loud, listening carefully to it. You might want to pause after a sentence or phrase.
7. Say the words or phrases that struck you.
8. Read the passage a second time, slowly and prayerfully.
9. Consider the message the passage might have for you: a challenge, an affirmation, or an insight. If you are doing this with others, you could invite them to share what comes to mind.
10. Read the passage a third time, slowly and prayerfully.
11. Pause for about ten minutes of silence and allow the Spirit to speak to you. If no words or thoughts come, just sit in the silence. Sometimes God touches us in ways we cannot know.
12. Following your quiet time, consider how the passage calls you to action. Is there something you need to do to make the Scripture alive for you here and now?
13. Close with a brief prayer of thanksgiving or praise to God for the gift of the Spirit.

Scripture Passages by Topic

(You can use your own Bible or access these passages online from Bible Gateway by typing the verse into the search. Go to <https://www.biblegateway.com>. Select NRSV version.)

Affliction: Romans 8:18–25, 35–39; Sirach 2:1–18; John 14:1–3; Matthew 11:28–30; Philippians 4:12–13; 2 Corinthians 1:3–7.

Anger: James 1:19–21; Ephesians 4:26; Proverbs 12:16; Sirach 30:24; Colossians 3:12–13; Psalm 37:7–8

Charity/Love: John 13:1–15, 15:9–13; Romans 12:9–21, 13:8–10; 1 Corinthians 13:1–13; 1 Peter 4:8–10; 1 John 3:11–20; 1 John 4:7–12, 18–21.

Confusion about God: Isaiah 55:8–9; James 1:13–14; 1 Peter 4:12–13; James 1:2–3; Luke 6:22–23; 2 Corinthians 12:7–10

Death: 1 Corinthians 15:19–22; John 11:1–44; Romans 5:12–15; Colossians 3:1–4.

Discouragement: Philippians 4:6–8; Psalm 138:7–8; John 14:1; John 14:27; Philippians 1:6; Psalm 94:18–19

Fear: John 4:18; 2 Timothy 1:6–7; Romans 8:15; Psalm 91:1–5; Proverbs 3:25–26; Isaiah 43:2; Sirach 34:14; Matthew 10:28

Forgiveness: Ezekiel 36:25–36; Matthew 18:15–18, 21–35; Luke 15:11–32.

Friendship: Sirach 6:5–17, 9:10–16, 13:1–13; Luke 10:25–37, 11:5–13; John 15:14–17, 20:11–18.

Happiness or Joyfulness: Psalm 4:8–9; Psalm 16:11; Psalm 34:6; Psalm 71:23; Isaiah 29:19; Acts 2:28; 3 John 1:4

Impatience: Romans 8:24–25; Psalm 37:7–8; Proverbs 25:15; Ephesians 4:1–3; James 5:8–10

Life: Isaiah 65:17–25; Genesis 1:1–2:4; John 15:4–7; Romans 6:3–11, Romans 20–23; Matthew 7:13–14; 1 John 5:9–13.

Loneliness: Psalm 25:16–17; Isaiah 41:10; Isaiah 41:13; John 14:18; Psalm 46:1; Psalm 73:23–24; Revelation 3:20

Marriage: Genesis 2:18–24; Deuteronomy 24:5; Isaiah 62:3–5; Matthew 19:3–11; 1 Corinthians 7:3–5; Ephesians 5:22–33.

Peace: Ezekiel 34:25–31; Isaiah 2:2–5; John 20:19–26; Luke 24:36–43; Philippians 4:4–7; 2 Timothy 2:20–26.

Physical Illness: Psalm 103:2–3; Jeremiah 30:17; James 5:14–15; Exodus 23:25; Sirach 31:22; Matthew 10:1

Sadness: Sirach 30:21–23; Matthew 5:4; 2 Corinthians 4:8–10; Ecclesiastes 7:3; Matthew 19:21–22; Isaiah 41:10; Proverbs 15:30

Temptation: Corinthians 10:13; Hebrews 4:15–16; 1 Timothy 6:9; Psalm 119:9–11; James 1:13–14; Ephesians 6:10–11

Thankfulness: Tobit 12:6; Psalm 107; 2 Thessalonians 1:3; 1 Chronicles 16:34; Psalm 30:13; Psalm 105:1; Psalm 118; Daniel 3:89; 1 Corinthians 15:57; 1 Thessalonians 5:18; Exodus 18:8–12; Psalm 111; John 11:41–42; Ephesians 1:3–6; Philippians 1:3–6.

Worry: Matthew 6:25; Matthew 6:34; 1 Peter 5:6–7; Philippians 4:18–19; Mark 13:11; Philippians 4:6

Praying with the Psalms

The Psalms are the Bible's book of prayer. The Psalms have been used in worship for thousands of years. We often go to the Psalms today for prayer, personal devotion, and for communal worship. Select one of the Psalm passages below that you feel most comfortable with as the focus of this prayer experience. (You can use your own Bible or access these passages online from Bible Gateway by typing the verse into the search. Go to <https://www.biblegateway.com>. Select the NRSV translation.)

- Psalm 8:1-7 "What is man, that you think of him?"
- Psalm 11:1-7 "I trust in the Lord for safety."
- Psalm 16:1-11 "I am always aware of the Lord's presence."
- Psalm 23:1-6 "The Lord is my shepherd."
- Psalm 25:1-14 "Keep your promise, Lord, and forgive my sins."
- Psalm 30:1-12 "Lord...I will give you thanks forever."
- Psalm 32:1-11 "Happy are those whose sins are forgiven."
- Psalm 62:1-12 "God alone protects and saves me."
- Psalm 63:1-8 "O God....My whole being desires you."
- Psalm 86:1-13a "Teach me, Lord what you want me to do."
- Psalm 103:1-14 "Praise the Lord, my soul!"
- Psalm 121:1-8 "Teach me, Lord, what you want me to do."
- Psalm 139:1-12 "Lord, you have examined me and you know me."

1. Read the Psalm passage you selected in quiet. Read every word, pausing when necessary, in order to let every word present itself to you. Read the words as if you had never read or heard them before. Be open to new insights that may come. Read the words as if they were the words of your own prayer. Whenever you read "I," "my," "me," etc., read it as if that meant you.
2. From the passage you have read, select a phrase, a verse or two verses to be the words you will use to begin your own prayer.
3. Write those words down and then continue writing an additional sentence or two of your own continuing the thoughts and feelings begun by the words of the Psalmist.
4. Here are a few ways you can incorporate praying with the Psalms in their daily life:
 - Read a psalm as you rise each day.
 - Read a psalm as part of your evening prayer.
 - Read a psalm or part of a psalm as part of your meal blessing.
 - When you are experiencing strong emotion, like joy or grief or frustration, flip through the psalms and see which one reflects your own feelings then pray it.

Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina is a contemplative way of reading the Bible. It dates back to the early centuries of the Christian Church and was established as a monastic practice by Benedict in the 6th century. It is a way of praying the Scriptures that leads us deeper into God's word. We slow down. We read a short passage more than once. We chew it over slowly and carefully. We savor it. Scripture begins to speak to us in a new way. It speaks to us personally, and aids that union we have with God through Christ.

Use the Lectio Divina experience to guide you into a prayer reflection on a Bible passage and imagining how you will live the passage in your daily life.

Select a Scripture passage that you would like to reflect upon and pray with. This may be a story from the Old Testament, a Psalm, a passage from the Prophets, a Gospel story or parable, or a passage from one of Paul's letters. You can also select the Gospel reading from Sunday worship.

1. **Read:** Read the Scripture passage slowly and purposefully. Reflect on it silently for a few minutes to pray with it and to ponder what it might be saying.
2. **Meditate:** Read it a second time followed by a few minutes of silence. Discover a word or two from the passage that is echoing in your heart or stands out for you in any way.
3. **Pray:** What do you want to communicate to God? What emotions do you want to express to God?
4. **Act:** Reflect on how God is challenging you through this Scripture passage. What is God calling me to do? What is the next step you need to take?

Visio Divina

The practice of praying with visual images is called *visio divina* or divine seeing. It is adapted from the sixth-century Benedictine practice of Bible reading called *lectio divina*, using both the text and art to help the reader encounter the living Word of God. The rhythm of *visio divina* ignites the senses to “hear and see” the Word of God as one listens, meditates, and prays with the sacred text. Studying a text of Scripture and the illustration involves uncovering layers of meaning. When we have discovered the “voice” of the text, we can bring its images and lessons into the present and discern its significance for our life situations.

1. **Read:** Read the following Scripture passage from the Gospel of Mark. Listen with the “ear of you heart” for a word or short phrase that God has for you this day.

The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come. (Mark 4:26-29)

2. **Meditate:** What does the word or phrase you have chosen mean to you today?
3. **See:** Look at the image and let your eyes stay with the very first thing that you see. Keep your attention on that one part of the image that first catches your eye.



Photo by [Melissa Askew](#) on [Unsplash](#)

4. **Contemplate:** Breathe deeply and let yourself gaze at that part of the image for a minute or so. Now, let your eyes gaze at the whole image. Take your time and look at every part of it. See it all. Reflect on the image for a minute or so.
5. **Reflect:** What emotions does this image evoke in you? What does the image stir up in you, bring forth in you?
6. **Pray:** What do you want to pray for today?

5 WAYS TO

RETELL A BIBLE STORY WITH KIDS

A great way for kids (and adults!) to remember God's story and to experience it more deeply is to retell it in ways that engage their head, heart, and hands.

Get inspired with these easy ideas for retelling a Bible story.

1 BUILD

Use building blocks or play dough to recreate scenes from the story. Work together or build scenes individually and then show and tell each other about what you've made.

2 DRAW

There are lots of ways to use art to tell stories: Have each person draw a picture of a different part of the story; then put the pictures together and tell the story again. Pick a word from the story and illustrate it. Make a cartoon strip. Sketch pictures of what you're imagining as the story or text is being read; then compare your thoughts.

3 SING

Make up a tune (or use one that's familiar), and turn the story into a song. Or look for a version of the story that's already been recorded, and learn it together. (We love the Bible story songs written and recorded by *Rain for Roots*.)

4 ACT

Use puppets (socks, dolls, or utensils will do!) or yourselves to act out the story. Consider taking photos of each scene and printing them as a book or comic strip. Another fun idea is to assign readers to read the dialog and/or assign sound effects to particular words, and to reread the story together.

5 WONDER

Ask open-ended questions that have no "right or wrong" answers. For example,

- **I wonder what . . .** (I wonder what Jonah thought about inside the fish . . . ?
I wonder what you would have thought about . . . ?)
- **I wonder how . . .** (I wonder how it felt to cross the Red Sea . . . ?
I wonder how this story makes you feel . . . ?)
- **I wonder who . . .** (I wonder who the shepherds told first about meeting baby Jesus . . . ?
I wonder who you would have run to tell . . . ?)
- **I wonder why . . .** (I wonder why Jesus told stories to people . . . ?
I wonder why we don't always do what God asks us to do . . . ?)

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- | | |
|------------------|---|
| • Psalm 8:1-7 | "What is man, that you think of him?" |
| • Psalm 11:1-7 | "I trust in the Lord for safety." |
| • Psalm 16:1-11 | "I am always aware of the Lord's presence." |
| • Psalm 23:1-6 | "The Lord is my shepherd." |
| • Psalm 25:1-14 | "Keep your promise, Lord, and forgive my sins." |
| • Psalm 30:1-12 | "Lord...I will give you thanks forever." |
| • Psalm 32:1-11 | "Happy are those whose sins are forgiven." |
| • Psalm 62:1-12 | "God alone protects and saves me." |
| • Psalm 63:1-8 | "O God....My whole being desires you." |
| • Psalm 86:1-13a | "Teach me, Lord what you want me to do." |
| • Psalm 103:1-14 | "Praise the Lord, my soul!" |
| • Psalm 121:1-8 | "Teach me, Lord, what you want me to do." |
| • Psalm 139:1-12 | "Lord, you have examined me and you know me." |

1. Read the Psalm passage you selected in quiet. Read every word, pausing when necessary, in order to let every word present itself to you. Read the words as if you had never read or heard them before. Be open to new insights that may come. Read the words as if they were the words of your own prayer. Whenever you read "I," "my," "me," etc., read it as if that meant you.
2. From the passage you have read, select a phrase, a verse or two verses to be the words you will use to begin your own prayer.
3. Write those words down and then continue writing an additional sentence or two of your own continuing the thoughts and feelings begun by the words of the Psalmist.
4. Here are a few ways you can incorporate praying with the Psalms in their daily life:
 - Read a psalm as you rise each day.
 - Read a psalm as part of your evening prayer.
 - Read a psalm or part of a psalm as part of your meal blessing.
 - When you are experiencing strong emotion, like joy or grief or frustration, flip through the psalms and see which one reflects your own feelings then pray it.

Teaching the Old Testament Online Resources

Teaching the Bible Articles

“Five Ways to Retell a Bible Story with Kids” in the Guide.

“Using Imaginative Retellings in Teaching the Bible.” Saint Mary’s Press.

<https://www.smp.org/resourcecenter/resource/2577/>

Resource Centers

Activities for Teens – Ave Maria Press

<https://resources.avemariapress.com/resources/36/The-Old-Testament-Third-Edition/>

<https://resources.avemariapress.com/resources/23/The-Old-Testament-Revised/>

Devotionals, Bible Stories, Bible Study – Kid’s Corner

<https://kidscorner.net>

Old Testament Learning Stations (4 learning stations):

<https://catechistsjourney.loyolapress.com/2012/09/old-testament-learning-stations-ready>

Scripture Activities – Saint Mary’s Press Resource Center

(Hundreds of individual activities, articles, videos, and presentations – available for free)

<https://www.smp.org/resourcecenter/subject/Scripture/9/>

The Bible Project

(The Bible Project creates videos, podcasts, articles, and classes to make the biblical story accessible to everyone, everywhere.)

<https://bibleproject.com>

Collections of Bible Activities

Bible Activities for Kids (A Collection of Activities) – The Religion Teacher

<https://www.thereligionteacher.com/bible-activities>

Bible Activities and Articles – The Catechist

<https://www.catechist.com/category/lessons-and-activities/bible>

Children’s Bible Activities and Bible Stories – DLTk

<https://www.dltk-kids.com/bible/cv/index.htm>

Scripture Articles and Activities – Sadlier Religion

<https://www.sadlier.com/religion/blog/topic/rel-topic-scripture>

Prayer and Devotionals

Bible Devotionals – Kid’s Corner

<https://kidscorner.net/devotions>

Living Faith Daily Catholic Devotions – Creative Communications for the Parish

<https://www.livingfaith.com>

Praying with Scripture from Ignatian Spirituality

<https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-what-how-why-of-prayer/praying-with-scripture/>

Video Sources

The Beginners Bible

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCiM9mWNxTWpKY-V9Eb9TfkA>

What’s in the Bible

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCiFluW5SWY2HwVi878DVdug>

Kid’s Corner

<https://kidscorner.net/bible-stories>

Saddleback Kids

<https://www.youtube.com/c/SaddlebackKids/playlists>

Recommended Bibles and Books

Children’s Story Bible

Jesus Storybook Bible. Sally Lloyd Jones. Zonderkidz, 2006.

<https://www.sallylloyd-jones.com/books/jesus-storybook-bible>

Growing in God’s Love: A Story Bible. Elizabeth F. Caldwell and Carol A. Wehrheim, editors. Westminster/John Knox Press, 2018. (Ages 4-8 years old)

Catholic Bibles from Saint Mary's Press

<https://www.smp.org/category/bibles>

Children: *The Catholic Children's Bible*

Middle School: *Breakthrough! The Bible for Young Catholics*

High School: *The Catholic Youth Bible*

Activity Books

The Catholic Children's Bible Coloring Book. Saint Mary's Press.

The Catholic Children's Bible: Leader Guide. Saint Mary's Press.

The Catholic Children's Bible: Activity Booklet Saint Mary's Press.

The Catholic Children's Bible: Strategic Reading Resource. Saint Mary's Press.

Breakthrough! The Bible for Young Catholics: Activity Booklet. Saint Mary's Press.

Breakthrough! The Bible for Young Catholics: Leader Guide. Saint Mary's Press.

The Catholic Youth Teacher Guide: Old Testament. Saint Mary's Press.

The Catholic Youth Teacher Guide: New Testament. Saint Mary's Press.