



THE HISTORICAL BOOKS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Lesson 1

Lesson 1 Commentary	Introduction to the Historical Books and Summarizing the Pentateuch
Lesson 2 Questions	Joshua

Introduction

When I say, “The Historical Books of the Old Testament,” I am referring to the following books:

- Joshua
- Judges
- Ruth
- 1 & 2 Samuel
- 1 & 2 Kings
- 1 & 2 Chronicles
- Ezra
- Nehemiah
- 1 & 2 Maccabees

As you can imagine, there is a great deal of material in these 14 books of the Old Testament and we will not be able to cover them in depth. However, we will be able to trace the historical journey of Israel up to very close to the period covered by the New Testament.

Before diving into the Historical Books, I need to give you some background information that will be helpful as we tackle this subject. First, there are two versions of the Old Testament, the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint. The Masoretic Text is the Hebrew Bible and is the Old Testament used by Protestants (Genesis through Malachi). The Septuagint is a Greek version of the Old Testament which included Greek translations of all the books from in the Hebrew Bible, plus the deuterocanonical books that were accepted as canonical by the Roman Catholic Church (Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch, 1 & 2 Maccabees, additions to Esther, and additions to Daniel). It also contained certain other books that were not considered canonical by the Roman Catholic Church. The first Latin edition of the entire bible was called the Vulgate, which was primarily translated by St. Jerome in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. “Saint Jerome’s

translation became the most widely used Latin text for centuries even before the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century designated it as authentic and suitable for use in public reading, controversy, preaching, and teaching. Because of its authoritative character, it became the basis for many translations into other languages.”¹ The Vulgate contained the deuterocanonical books previously mentioned.

Second, beginning in the 17th century, debate raged over the actual authorship of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible). The theory that has developed is referred to as the Documentary Hypothesis. That hypothesis argues that the Pentateuch was derived from four independent sources and later combined to create what we know as the Pentateuch. Those sources were referred to as:

- J – the Yahwist
- E – the Elohist
- P – the Priestly source
- D – the Deuteronomist (restricted to the book of Deuteronomy)

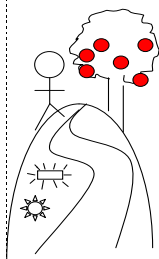
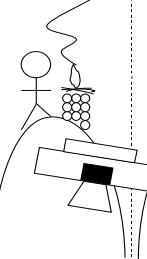

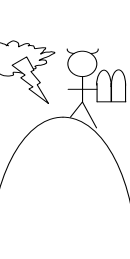
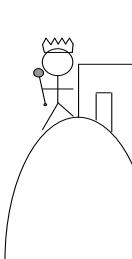
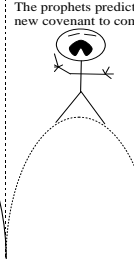
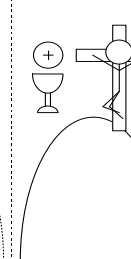
What makes this important for this course is that in the 1940s, a scholar by the name of James Noth coined the term “Deuteronomic History” when referring to the collection of books from Deuteronomy to 2 Kings. There are similarities of language and themes in this set of books, which suggests that it may have come from a single writer or at least passed through the hand of a single redactor/editor. This theory is not without its dissenters.

Summarizing the Pentateuch

Without some level of knowledge of the Pentateuch, diving into the historical books would prove confusing. For instance, without the Pentateuch, one would not understand why there were two tribes or who Moses, Abraham, Isaac or Jacob/Israel were. The Pentateuch consists of five books – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These books trace the Nation of Israel from creation to the death of Moses, when Israel was on the brink of entering the land that God had promised Abraham. John Bergsma does an excellent job of depicting the series of covenants that occur in the Pentateuch which form the foundation of salvation history.²

¹ Scott Hahn, ed., *Catholic Bible Dictionary* (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 2009), 944.

² The depiction below was obtained from John Bergsma. It is drawn from the seven covenants of salvation history, as described in *Bible Basics for Catholics*, (Ave Maria Press, 2015).

Name	"Adamic" or "Creation"	"Noahic"	"Abrahamic"	"Mosaic" or "Sinai"	"Davidic"	"New"	"Eucharistic"
						 The prophets predict a new covenant to come:	
Mediator	Adam	Noah	Abraham	Moses	David	Son of David	Jesus
Mountain	Eden	Ararat	Moriah	Sinai	Zion	Zion	Calvary (Zion)
Organization	Married couple	Extended Family	Tribe	Nation	Kingdom (Empire)	Kingdom (Empire)	Church
Scripture	Genesis 1-2	Genesis 9	Gen 12:1-3; Gen 15; Gen 17; Gen 22	Exod 19-24 (fulfills Gen 15)	2 Sam 7 Pss. 89, 132 (fulfills Gen 17)	Jer 31:31-35 Ezek 37:24-28 Isa 55:1-5	Luke 22:14-32 esp. v. 20
	Roles of Adam: 1) Firstborn Son 2) King 3) Priest 4) Prophet 5) Universal Bridegroom		Promises to Abraham: 1) A Great Nation → Fulfilled		2) A Great Name (Royalty) → Fulfilled		3) Universal Blessing (to all nations) → Fulfilled
Covenants of Creation				Covenants of Redemption			

Seven Covenants of Salvation History

The Pentateuch begins with the creation of man and then the fall. God's creation itself represents a covenant with Adam, which Adam and Eve broke. Though man was created in the image of God, through sin, that image became distorted. Sin caused all sorts of problems resulting in the destruction of all mankind in the flood, except for one family, Noah's. God makes a covenant with Noah:

I will establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all creatures be destroyed by the waters of a flood; there shall not be another flood to devastate the earth. God said: This is the sign of the covenant that I am making between me and you and every living creature with you for all ages to come: I set my bow in the clouds to serve as a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth, and the bow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and every living creature—every mortal being—so that the waters will never again become a flood to destroy every mortal being. When the bow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature—every mortal being

that is on earth. God told Noah: This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and every mortal being that is on earth.³

That does not end the sinfulness of man. In fact, mankind tries to build a tower to God in Babel. God makes everyone speak different languages to keep this from happening again.

In Chapter 12 of Genesis, God calls Abram (later changing his name to Abraham) to leave his home and go to land that He will show him. In Chapters 12, 15, 17 and 22, God makes promises to and covenants with Abraham. God promises Abraham three things – (1) a great nation (land and people), (2) a great name (royalty), and (3) that all nations would be blessed through him. Abraham, though old, has a son, Isaac. Abraham loves Isaac. Yet God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac to God, which Abraham agrees to without question. God sees Abraham's obedience and spares Isaac. God tells Abraham in Genesis why the Abrahamic covenant is so special.

A second time the angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven and said: "I swear by my very self—oracle of the LORD—that because you acted as you did in not withholding from me your son, your only one, I will bless you and make your descendants as countless as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore; your descendants will take possession of the gates of their enemies, and in your descendants all the nations of the earth will find blessing, because you obeyed my command."⁴

Isaac marries and has two sons, Esau and Jacob. Jacob's name is changed to Israel and he has 12 sons.

- Reuben
- Simeon
- Levi
- Judah
- Dan
- Naphtali
- Gad
- Asher
- Issachar
- Zebulun
- Joseph (sons – Ephraim and Manasseh)
- Benjamin

³ Gen 9:11–17. All biblical citations are from the NABRE.

⁴ Gen 22:15–18.

Eventually the family ends up in Egypt where the family thrives, each of the sons (two in the case of Joseph) fathering what would become the twelve (really 13 with the Levites) tribes of Israel.

Because the Israelites become so numerous, the Pharaoh began to see them as threat and they are enslaved by the Egyptians. Moses arrives on the scene in the book of Exodus and becomes the leader of the Israelites through the end of the Pentateuch. God hears the cries of the Israelites and calls Moses to free them from Egypt. God brings down the ten plagues on Egypt to convince Pharaoh to let the Israelites go, the last being the killing of the first born for all those that did not follow God's instructions related to the Passover. Pharaoh had enough and let the Israelites go. Moses and the Israelites headed for the holy mountain, Sinai, where Moses received his call from God in the burning bush. There God makes a covenant with Moses and the Israelites, fulfilling the first of the promises made to Abraham, a great nation.

When Moses came to the people and related all the words and ordinances of the LORD, they all answered with one voice, "We will do everything that the LORD has told us." Moses then wrote down all the words of the LORD and, rising early in the morning, he built at the foot of the mountain an altar and twelve sacred stones for the twelve tribes of Israel. Then, having sent young men of the Israelites to offer burnt offerings and sacrifice young bulls as communion offerings to the LORD, Moses took half of the blood and put it in large bowls; the other half he splashed on the altar. Taking the book of the covenant, he read it aloud to the people, who answered, "All that the LORD has said, we will hear and do." Then he took the blood and splashed it on the people, saying, "This is the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you according to all these words."⁵

In a short time, the Israelites break their covenant with God by worshipping a golden calf. Moses talks God out of destroying the Israelites. God gives several stages of laws to Israelites (some would say as a result of their disobedience). They build the ark of the covenant and the tabernacle for worship. After a couple of years, they leave Sinai to head toward the promised land. As they approach the promised land, Moses sends out 12 spies to scout out the promised land. The twelve return and ten of them say that the occupants are too strong for the Israelites. Two, Caleb and Joshua, say that they should trust in the Lord and attack. The crowd rallies behind the ten spies who were afraid to enter Canaan, which displeases God. He sentences them to wander in the wilderness for 40 years until this rebellious generation dies out. The only ones that will be allowed to enter are Caleb and Joshua.

Throughout their wanderings, more rebellions and transgressions by the Israelites occur. Even Moses disobeys God and is forbidden from entering the promised land. Joshua is selected

⁵ Exod 24:3–8.

to succeed Moses. Before entering Canaan, the land is apportioned to each of the tribes. As they approach Canaan, Moses gives them his final instructions and then goes to Mount Nebo, where God shows him the promised land. Moses dies, ending the Pentateuch.

It is now Joshua's task to lead the Israelites into Canaan, the land promised to Abraham. This is where the historical books start and where we will pick up in the next session.

QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 2

Joshua

Day 1 – Scan the lecture notes. Write down one or two points that you consider most interesting.

Day 2 – Read “The Book of Joshua,” attached. Write down one or two points that you consider most interesting.

Day 3 – Read Deuteronomy 31:1-13 and Joshua 23:1-16. Write down the similarities between the farewell speech of Moses and the farewell speech of Joshua. What do you think the author is trying to illustrate?

Day 4 – Read Genesis 17:9-14 and Joshua 5:2-9. If circumcision is the sign of the covenant between Abraham and God, how do you reconcile that with Joshua 5?

Day 5 – Read Joshua 6:16-21 and Deuteronomy 20:16-18. Write down your thoughts on why God would command or allow the total destruction of cities, including what appears to be women, children and animals.

Day 6 – After sleeping on yesterday’s readings, is there any explanations you can come up with that reconciles our all-merciful, all-good God to the actions of the Israelites when they enter the promised land?

THE BOOK OF JOSHUA⁶

The Book of Joshua presents a narrative of the way Israel took possession of the land of Canaan, making it the land of Israel. This process is swift and inexorable and is followed by an orderly division and disposition of the land among the twelve tribes, with a concluding ceremony of covenant renewal.

The theological message of the book is unmistakable. God has been faithful to the promise of the land. If Israel relies totally on the Lord for victory; if Israel is united as a people; if the law of *herem* is kept and no one grows rich from victory in war—then and only then will Israel possess the land.

The Israelites are led by Joshua, the successor of Moses, and the book is at pains to show not only how Joshua carries on the work of Moses but how the “conquest” of Canaan is continuous with the exodus from Egypt. This is seen in the repeated insistence that, as the Lord was with Moses, so he is with Joshua; and, especially, in the crossing of the Jordan River, which is patterned after the crossing of the Red Sea.

The book preserves older traditions of Israel’s settlement in the land, especially in the division of the land among the tribes. As with Deuteronomy and the whole Deuteronomistic History (see introduction to Deuteronomy), the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722/721 B.C. shows its influence throughout. As addressed to the needs of a late pre-exilic audience, then, the book should be read not so much as imparting information about how Israel took over the land of Canaan, many centuries before the composition of the book, as teaching a lesson about how Israel is to avoid losing the land.

Modern readers may be put off by the description of battles and their aftermath, the destruction of everyone and everything in the cities taken under the “ban” (*herem*). The ban was practiced in the ancient Near East, in Israel and elsewhere, but in Joshua the wholesale destruction of the Canaanites is an idealization of the Deuteronomic idea that pagans are to be wiped out so they will not be an occasion for apostasy from the Lord (cf. Deut 7:1–6); note in particular the artificial, formalized description of destruction of towns in Josh 10:28–39. It should be remembered that by the time the book was written, the Canaanites were long gone. Progressive revelation throughout Israel’s history produced far more lofty ideals, as when the prophets see all the nations embracing faith in Yahweh, being joined to Israel, and living in peace with one another (Isa 2:2–4; 19:23–25; 45:22–25; Zech 8:22–23), and the New Testament teaches us to love even our enemies (Matt 5:43–45).

⁶ *New American Bible*, Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Introduction to the book of Joshua.

A comparison of Joshua with the account of Israel's early history found in the first chapter of the Book of Judges shows that Israel's emergence as the dominant presence in the land was a slow and piecemeal affair, not achieved at one stroke and with great ease: the Book of Joshua, with its highly idealized depiction of the "conquest," is a theologically programmatic cautionary tale about what the people are to do and not do in order to avoid the fate of the Northern Kingdom in losing the land.

The Book of Joshua may be divided as follows - (I) Conquest of Canaan (1:1–12:24), (II) Division of the Land (13:1–21:45), and (III) Return of the Transjordan Tribes and Joshua's Farewell (22:1–24:33).