

HOW TO READ THE BIBLE

Part 2

THE STORY

The Old Testament (Part 2)

BEFORE WE BEGIN

**How would you describe Israel's ability to obey the commands that God gave them?
Are they largely successful, moderately successful, or largely unsuccessful?**

When you consider the leadership of Israel, who leads well? Who fails to lead well?

When do the prophets appear in Israel, and what role do they serve?

How does the story of the Old Testament end? Are things going well for Israel or not?



The Kingdom of God (Joshua – Judges)

- A. After the death of Moses, God appoints _____ to be the next leader of Israel.
1. Joshua has some of the characteristics of Moses, but he also has some discontinuity. He is a master military leader and less of an overt prophet.
 2. We might be tempted to think that Joshua is the promised seed of the woman from Genesis 3:15 and that Israel will finally be the kind of humanity that we have been waiting for all along. After all, in Joshua 1, God calls him to meditate on the Law day and night, never turning aside from its teachings, so that he and all of Israel might prosper. However, the previous experience we have with Israel in the wilderness should also make us skeptical of them, an attitude that bears itself out as they go into the Promised Land.
- B. Israel's entry into the land is marked by God's _____ as the waters of Jordan are parted and the priests lead the way with the Ark of the Covenant, but sin follows the people as well.
1. As with the Passover and other memorial markers, Israel constructs a monument of stones to remind later generations about what God did for them as they came into the land.
 2. Just as Moses sent spies into the land 40 years earlier, so Joshua sends spies into Jericho to scout the city. This time, Israel does not rebel but takes the city by following God's commands.
 3. Immediately, Israel brings sin into the land as Achan takes some of the forbidden spoil from Jericho (another Eden moment), bringing death to God's people (Josh 7).
 4. In another failure, Joshua makes an unlawful covenant with the Gibeonites, not realizing that they were inhabitants of the land and not journeying foreigner (Josh 9).
 5. Just as quickly as we had hoped that this people might be the true humans and the people who seek God with all of their heart, soul, and strength, we lose that hope and start looking forward for something better.
- C. As we hit the book of Judges, the author spares no criticism, explaining that Israel began a _____ of _____ from which God repeatedly rescues them but that they could never escape by their own power.

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1. We are introduced to a series of leaders, called judges, who range from good (Ehud and Deborah) to terrible (Jephthah and Samson). In each case, God shows how He can use even the sinfulness of His people and turn it for their good.
2. In each case, the primary failure by Israel is the worship of the gods of nations they did not remove from the land. In this way, Israel repeats again and again the sin of Eden, seeing and desiring things that God has forbidden, and then taking them anyway.

Waiting for New Humanity (1 Samuel – 2Kings)

- A. As Israel persists in the Promised Land, they eventually want a _____ other than God.
 1. The cycle of Judges shows how God can raise up leaders to deliver His sinful people, but He still remains the true King of Israel.
 2. When Samuel comes on the scene as the last judge of Israel, the people openly declare their desire to be like the nations around them (see 1 Samuel 8:1-9). The line of the serpent is once again tempting the line of the woman to abandon the wisdom and authority of God for autonomy and self-reliance.
- B. David and Solomon represent the high points of Israel's kings, but neither of them matched the kind of king humanity _____.
 1. While David was a "man after God's own heart," he has his own Eden failure moment when he sees Bathsheba from the rooftop, desires her, and takes her. He also looks like Cain in that he murders her husband to hide his own failure.
 2. Solomon most embodies the true human we have been looking for. When God offers him anything he desires, he asks for wisdom to rule and reign as God would desire (1 Kings 3:1-5). The narrative about Solomon as well as the writings attributed to him (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs) are full of Eden imagery, reminding us as readers of the kind of humanity that God desires to produce in his people. However, Solomon also fails when he sees the daughters of the foreign nations, desires them, and takes them. These foreign wives lead his heart away from fidelity to God and toward idol worship.
- C. The kingdom splits under Rehoboam, and almost every king in the north and south leads the people away from God and back to _____.
 1. The story of Israel after Solomon is largely the story of how God's people become Babylon and then go to Babylon in exile.



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- a. As bad as things are going in Israel and Judah, there are a few figures that give moments of hope that God has sent the seed of the woman. However, each of these kings fails in his own way and leaves us waiting once more.
- b. Hezekiah is the most prominent among these kings (see 2 Kings 18-20). He leads Israel in a robust spiritual reform and shows fidelity to God throughout his early reign. However, he loves life too much and begs God to spare him from a disease, which God does. After this moment, Hezekiah makes several mistakes of pride and ignorance, leading Babylon to consider taking over their kingdom.
2. The most important development during this period is the arrival of the prophets, who constantly remind the people who they should be and give a picture of what God plans to do with His people. Prophets do not first appear at this point—Nathan was a prophet to King David—but they take on a larger role in this period.
 - a. The first major prophetic figure, Elijah, arrives on the scene during the reign of Ahab (1 Kings 17). He will become the paradigmatic prophet to whom many others are compared. He will also become the prophet whose return we are waiting for at the end of the Old Testament story (see Malachi 4 and Mark 1).
 - b. The prophets not only show the short-term consequences of the people's decisions, but they give a vision of the ultimate kingdom that God will actualize in the future.
 - c. God's kingdom will invert the patterns of mankind's kingdoms, making the great low and the lowly great.
 - d. God's kingdom will come through the willing suffering of a true human whom God will exalt to be ruler over all, a new David and a better high priest.
3. Over the period from 740-722 BC, the northern kingdom of Israel was taken into captivity by Assyria (see 2 Kings 17). This group never received a promise from God that they would return to the land, and they never really did.
4. In 586 BC, Babylon conquered Jerusalem, and with it the entire southern kingdom of Judah. They took the Israelites into exile (returning to Genesis 11), but God had given a promise through the prophets that a remnant would return.

Failure to Re-launch (Ezra / Nehemiah, 1&2 Chronicles)

- A. In 520 BC, _____ allows Israel to return to Judah and rebuild the kingdom.
 1. Cyrus's decision was, on the one hand, just part of a larger project for imperial stability, allowing people who had been deported from their homelands under Babylonian occupation to return to those homelands so long as they paid annual tribute.
 2. On the other hand, and as predicted in almost all of the pre-exilic prophets, it was a fulfillment of God's promise to bring His people back to the land and to give them another opportunity to be the kind of people He wanted them to be.



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B. In several waves, Israel returns to the land and rebuild the _____ the city of

_____ and the _____ around Jerusalem.

1. A first group of people come back to Jerusalem under the guidance of Zerubbabel (from David's line) and Joshua (the high priest). The question at this point is whether they will be able to succeed where every generation before them has failed.
2. Even this effort did not come without some problems. The people continually failed to keep the rebuilding projects going, often succumbing to the pressures of the kingdoms around Jerusalem and the threats of violence if they continued rebuilding.
3. God sent more prophets to Israel as a way to remind them of His promises and to keep them on track rebuilding the kingdom and reestablishing themselves in the land for the blessing of the nations. These prophets include Zechariah and Haggai (in the first wave) and Malachi (likely in the last wave).

C. Israel reestablishes the ritual feasts and the proper _____ of God...
for a little while.

1. Ezra, the leader of a second wave of returning exiles about 60 years after Zerubbabel, stands as a new Moses figure, giving the Law to Israel once again and reestablishing their covenant with God as they celebrate Passover together.

a. Despite some false starts, the Israelite people seem genuinely interested in building God's kingdom to what it should have always been.

b. The story of Ezra ends with an odd and unsettling scene, though. During the generation between Zerubbabel and Ezra, the people of Israel had intermarried with the people of the land. When they become convicted for having broken the Law (specifically, Deut. 7:1-6), they decide to divorce all of their foreign wives and send them away along with any children that resulted from those marriages. The text of Ezra does not tell us how to take this decision, whether it was good or bad. We have to meditate on the event and the reasoning Israel gave for their decision. In the end, it seems as though this was not the right thing to do.

2. Nehemiah bears a strong resemblance to Joshua as he leads the people militarily to retake the land and reclaim their kingdom.

a. Under his leadership, the Israelites not only reestablish the walls around Jerusalem in an extraordinarily short span, but they also reset the temple system, including tithes, portions for the priests, and proper temple etiquette.

b. We can already feel the chance for Israel to get things right slipping away. This hope is completely dashed by the end of the book. Nehemiah goes back to the king's court for a few years and then returns to Jerusalem when he hears bad reports coming from there.



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- i. He finds that everything he had worked to reestablish had failed.
 - ii. The foreign men who sought his life in his first visit now have married into the priestly line and have offices in the temple.
 - iii. The priests had all returned to their homes because no one was bringing the tithe.
- c. In response, Nehemiah literally throws items out of the temple into the street. He tears out men's beards in anger and does everything he can to get things in working order again. However, the book ends with Nehemiah's prayer that God essentially just remember that he tried to get things right but that Israel had totally failed.

D. The narrative story of the Old Testament ends with the need for _____

better, and _____ better to rule over humanity.

1. 1. While the narrative story of the Old Testament ends in Nehemiah, the last narrative book to be written was 1–2 Chronicles (the genealogies of 1 Chronicles go beyond even the first few generations of those who returned from exile).
2. 1–2 Chronicles retell the basic narrative of 2 Samuel–2 Kings, including quite a bit of new content and omitting any real concern with the northern kingdom of Israel after the national split. What we find in this retelling is a reinterpretation as well. The author of the book is looking with fresh eyes at the history of Israel, knowing that Israel will fail to ever establish God's kingdom and trying to show God's plan amidst the failure. The books' focus falls much more heavily on the Messianic line of David and the hope for a new kind of human who will fulfill God's Law in every way that Israel's kings failed to.
3. 2 Chronicles ends with a truncated form of Cyrus's decree allowing Israel to return. It is as though the author wants us to know that God's people await some other kind of kingdom that must be established in a different way.

