

An Old Testament Overview

The Old Testament is the *story* of:

1. God's good creation
2. Humanity's sin and rebellion
3. God's effort to restore his creation through a Israel

A simplified outline of the story:

1. God created everything and it was very good.
2. Adam and Eve rebelled against God, so God cursed them along with his good creation.
3. Humanity grew worse and worse so God sent a flood to start fresh with Noah's family.
4. God called Abraham to go to Canaan (the Promised Land) and to be the founding father of a nation of God's people.
5. A few generations later Joseph saved God's people but left them in Egypt for 430 years.
6. God called Moses to take his people out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, to Mount Sinai where he gave them His Law.
7. God started living in the middle of their camp in a tabernacle.
8. Moses took the Hebrews to the Promised land, but they were too afraid to enter so God made them wander in the desert for 40 years until a new generation arose.
9. Joshua took leadership of God's people when Moses died and brought them into the Promised Land where they battled the inhabitants for their homeland.
10. For a long time, the 12 tribes of Israel were ruled by random "judges".
11. God's people eventually called for a king, so the prophet Samuel anointed Saul as the first King.
12. Saul disobeyed God and David took his place as Israel's best king ever.
13. David's son Solomon succeeded his father and built God's Temple.
14. Solomon's son, Rehoboam, angered the people so much

that 10 northern tribes split and were called "Israel", while 2 tribes left in the South were called "Judah".

15. Israel (the Northern 10 tribes) didn't control Jerusalem where God's Temple was, so they worshipped golden calves and fell quickly into rebellion against God. Assyria destroyed them.
16. Judah was slightly more obedient to God than Israel, but they too became corrupt. Babylon destroyed them.
17. For 70 years, a remnant of God's people lived in exile in Babylon until the Persians took control.
18. King Cyrus of Persia let God's exiled people return to Jerusalem where they tried to rebuild.
19. The Old Testament ends with this fledgling remnant trying to rebuild their homeland. About 400 years later Jesus is born.

How to read each book:

I. Torah:

1. Genesis

- Genesis is an account of how everything got started, telling the story of:
 - i. Humanity's earliest history (1-11)
 - ii. Israel's earliest history, biographies of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph (12-50)

2. Exodus

- Exodus begins 430 years after Genesis and tells the story of:
 - i. Israel leaving Egypt (1-15:21)
 - ii. Israel in the Desert (15:22-18)
 - iii. Israel at Mount Sinai (19-40)

3. Leviticus

- Leviticus is a notoriously difficult book to understand.
- It is a collection of detailed rules and regulations on how God expected his people to live.
- The central chapter on the "Day of Atonement" (16) describes how Israel's sin was annually removed.

4. Numbers

- Numbers describes Israel's wandering years in the desert in two parts:
 - i. The disobedient generation who wouldn't take the land (1-25)
 - ii. The obedient generation who would take the land (26-36)

5. Deuteronomy

- Deuteronomy is a series of four speeches Moses gave the Israelites before he died. The speeches revisit themes from Genesis through Numbers:
 - i. First speech (1-4)
 - ii. Second speech: (5-26)
 - iii. Third speech: (27-28)
 - iv. Fourth speech: (29-30)

II. History:

1. Joshua

- Joshua tells the story of how Israel first conquered the Promised Land. It falls neatly into four sections:
 - i. Introductory speeches (1)
 - ii. Battles in the promised land (2-12)
 - iii. Reports and lists about settling the promised land (13-21)
 - iv. The Israelites confirm their covenant with God (22-24)

2. Judges

- Judges tells the story of 410 years of history when the Israelites were a loose organization of tribes, ruled occasionally by judges, not kings. The moral climate of Israel gets worse and worse as the book continues. It falls into three sections:
 - i. Israel's disobedience (1-3:6)
 - ii. The Judges (3:7-16)
 - iii. Stories of decadent depravity (17-21)

3. Ruth

- Ruth tells the short story of King David's great-great-grandmother.

4. Samuel

- Samuel was the prophet who anointed Israel's first kings. The book that bears his name describes Israel's first kings in five parts:
 - i. Israel's need for a king (1 Samuel 1-7)
 - ii. The reign of Saul (1 Samuel 8-15)
 - iii. The rise of David (1 Samuel 16-2 Samuel 4)
 - iv. The reign of David (2 Samuel 5-20)
 - v. Various notes about David's reign (2 Samuel 21-24)

5. Kings

- Kings tells the story of Israel's history from the reign of Solomon to the division of Israel into two kingdoms, to the fall of Judah. It's made up of three parts:
 - i. King Solomon (1 Kings 1-11)
 - ii. The kings of the two kingdoms (1 Kings 12-2 Kings 17)
 - iii. The last days of Judah (2 Kings 18-25)

6. Chronicles

- Chronicles is a later retelling of the story of Samuel and Kings. It was written to encourage the Israelites to live faithful lives to their God—they knew what disobedience led to!
 - i. Genealogical lists (1 Chronicles 1-9)
 - ii. King Saul, David, and Solomon (1 Chronicles 10-2 Chronicles 9)
 - iii. The rest of the kings (2 Chronicles 10-36)

7. Ezra-Nehemiah

- Ezra and Nehemiah describe Israel's release from captivity under the rule of King Cyrus of Persia. It is concerned with faithfulness to God and the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

8. Esther

- The book of Esther is an ancient historical novel about

how one faithful Israelite woman who remained in Persia (instead of returning to Jerusalem) saved her entire people. It's unique in the Old Testament for being the only book that never mentions God.

III. Wisdom:

1. Job

- Job wrestles with this question: why do bad things happen to good people?
 - i. Job's misfortune (1-3)
 - ii. Job and his friends (4-37)
 - iii. God's speech (38-41)
 - iv. The end result (42)

2. Psalms

- Psalms is both the Jewish and Christian hymnbook. It's full of poems attributed to David, but includes other authors as well. It's an excellent resource for learning to pray.
 - i. Introductory Psalms (1-2)
 - ii. Book 1 (3-41)
 - iii. Book 2 (42-72)
 - iv. Book 3 (73-89)
 - v. Book 4 (90-106)
 - vi. Book 5 (107-145)
 - vii. Conclusion Psalms (146-150)

3. Proverbs

- Proverbs is the foremost collection of wisdom in the Hebrew Bible. It's full of pithy sayings arranged almost randomly. Because there are 31 chapters, many people choose to read a chapter each day of the month.
 - i. Talks about Wisdom (1-9)
 - ii. Short-but-wise sayings (10-31)

4. Ecclesiastes

- Ecclesiastes is a sceptical book. The author begins by saying that everything's meaningless, but ends with the conclusion we should "fear God".

5. Song of Songs

- Song of Songs is a love-poem. Many people have interpreted it as a metaphor between God and his people, but a literal reading gives us a celebration of romantic love.

IV. Prophets (The first five are called "major" because they're longer than the following twelve)

1. Isaiah

- Isaiah the man was a prophet to Judah during the time of King Ahaz. The book that bears his name begins with him, but ends centuries later:
 - i. Prophecies around the time of King Ahaz (1-39)
 - ii. Messages of hope written centuries later to comfort those about to leave exile (40-55)
 - iii. Messages of hope written to the returned exiles (56-66)

2. Jeremiah

- Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet. His ministry began during the time of king Josiah of Judah, and continued throughout the fall of Jerusalem.
 - i. Introduction and Jeremiah's Call (1)
 - ii. Prophecies about Judah (2-45)
 - iii. Prophecies about the nations (46-51)
 - iv. Conclusion (52)

3. Lamentations

- Lamentations is like a PS on the book of Jeremiah. It consists of five acrostic poems (the verses follow the order of the Hebrew alphabet) describing the horror of Jerusalem's destruction.

4. Ezekiel

- Ezekiel's ministry overlapped Jeremiah's, covering twenty years which saw the fall of Jerusalem.
 - i. Messages of Judgement to Judah (1-24)
 - ii. Messages of Judgement to the nations (25-32)
 - iii. Messages of Hope for all Israel (33-48)

5. Daniel

- Daniel was one of the first exiles out of Jerusalem. The book bearing his name describes his life in Babylon. It is well known for its apocalyptic sections.

6. Hosea

- Hosea was a prophet to the northern kingdom during the reign of king Jeroboam II of Israel. God told him to marry a prostitute who would be unfaithful to him in order to graphically demonstrate Israel's unfaithfulness to God.

7. Joel

- We don't know when Joel prophesied, or which kingdom he prophesied to. The book of Joel is famous for Pentecostals because he prophesied a massive Spirit-outpouring.

8. Amos

- Amos was a prophet from Judah who prophesied to Israel during the reign of King Jeroboam of Israel. He told the people that God would judge them and preserve only a remnant.

9. Obadiah

- We don't know when or to whom Obadiah prophesied. Obadiah is known for being the shortest book in the Old Testament, detailing God's judgement of Edom, one of the nations that surrounded Israel.

10. Jonah

- Jonah was a prophet from Israel who ministered during the reign of King Jeroboam II. He was called to prophesy to Nineveh, an Assyrian city.

11. Micah

- Micah was from Judah, and prophesied about the destruction of both Israel and Judah. He ministered during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah.

12. Nahum

- Nahum prophesied to Judah about the impending fall of Nineveh (something Jonah wanted to do!) during

the reign of Manasseh

13. Habakkuk

- Habakkuk prophesied to Judah about God's use of Babylon to judge his own people.

14. Zephaniah

- Zephaniah was a descendent of king Hezekiah of Judah who ministered during the reign of Josiah. He spoke of the day of judgement that was coming.

15. Haggai

- Haggai contains four short messages to those trying to rebuild the temple after exile. It's the second-shortest book in the Old Testament.

16. Zechariah

- Zechariah was a Levite born in Babylonian exile who returned with his people. His book is full of fantastic night visions.

17. Malachi

- Malachi ministered about a century after the Jews were allowed to return from exile. While most of us know it for the tithing verses, there's a lot more to explore here.

"Son of man,
feed your belly with this scroll that I give you
and fill your stomach with it."
Then I ate it,
and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey.
(Ezekiel 3:3, ESV)

Your testimonies are wonderful:
therefore my soul keeps them.
The unfolding of your words gives light;
it imparts understanding to the simple
(Psalm 119:129-130)