

THE OLD TESTAMENT

How much do you know of the Old Testament? Most of us will remember something of Abraham wandering around, the story of Joseph and the people going down to Egypt, the Exodus and settling in the Promised Land. Then there is King David, but beyond that probably things fade! In fact there is a long story covering the thousand years between David and Jesus. The events are important in themselves, but through the time there is also the growth of theological thought, and also the books of the Old Testament were being written.

The story

The story of Israel is summarised below under four headings, and you will notice that the bits best known all come from the first two headings! Under 'First Beginnings' you have the ancient myths and legends which have been put into a kind of chronological order from the creation down to the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Then they go down to Egypt where we have the ten plagues, the Exodus under Moses and the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. The first generations settled in Canaan are ruled by 'Judges': charismatic military leaders and local heroes.

With the rise of the monarchy under Saul and then David we come into firm history and the rise of the Kingdom. But Israel and Judah always operated semi-independently, and with the death of Solomon the two fell apart under separate kings. Judah, the weaker kingdom, had the prestige of the Temple in Jerusalem which over the centuries became more and more the centre of Jewish religious life.

The Destruction of the two kingdoms and the Exile are immensely important historically and theologically, but almost unknown at a popular level. Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians in 721BC and disappears as a political unit. In 597BC Judah was conquered by the Babylonians. After a revolt in 587 the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and the nation's leaders sent into exile. Normally in those days, when people thought of gods warring against each other, it would have been assumed that Judah's God, Yahweh (the original form of what we now call Jehovah) was defeated and even killed by the Babylonian gods. But instead the Jews became convinced that God was still very much alive and in charge – indeed this was the beginning of what we now call monotheism: the idea that there is only one God who created the world and is in sole charge of it. The creation story of Genesis 1 dates from this period.

Two generations after the Exile, the Babylonians were defeated by the Persians and King Cyrus allowed the exiles to return home. After early enthusiasm the difficulty of rebuilding the nation became clear. The scribe Ezra established the religious foundations of the state, Nehemiah rebuilt the civic city of Jerusalem. But it was a hard job giving shape and identity to a fractured people, and the leaders emphasised everything that made the Jews separate from their neighbours: the Law, the Sabbath and circumcision. The nation had a precarious existence under foreign powers: Persians, Greeks and finally the Romans. A period of independence under the Maccabees was marred by strife and corruption. But all this served only to heighten the Jews' hopes for God's deliverance which came to be focussed on the coming Messiah. God has revealed himself to be God even in disaster. He has saved us from the Egyptians and the Babylonians: the very fact we are still here is a sign of God's saving power!

Telling the story

We might naturally imagine each book of the Old Testament had a single named author who wrote then what we read now. For some books this is the case (the author is rarely named, alas), but many books, including some of the important ones, were later rewrites of earlier material. Genesis, the first book of the Old Testament, was one of the last to be written in its present form! (Obviously it uses many ancient traditions.)

Because so much was written later, it reflects the thoughts and concerns of the later period as much as the earlier times. But that is not so surprising when you come to think about it. Every week we find in the newspapers or on radio or television people invoking Magna Carta, the Battle of Agincourt, Trafalgar or Dunkirk; and what is important is not just what "really" happened long ago but what those events have come to mean over the years. So it is with the Old Testament: the history of the moment is only part of the story, and the other part is what it has come to mean for later generations. And so scholars can see evidence in the Bible of the old stories been told and retold, interpreted and re-interpreted down the years.

The most obvious example of re-interpretation is that Yahweh is presented from the very beginning as the only God. Any other gods which might have appeared in the ancient records have been written out of the story. There is nothing dishonest about this: it is the way in which, when we have reached any goal, we look back and only then understand the road we have taken. This is the story of the discovery of God.

THE OLD TESTAMENT

The story	Themes at the time	Books of the Old Testament
<p>FIRST BEGINNINGS</p> <p>Ancient myths (Adam and Eve, Noah, Babel etc.) ? Abraham, Isaac and Jacob wandered around ? Entry of tribes to Egypt (Joseph and all that)</p> <p>c.1250 Exodus from Egypt under Moses, receive Law at Sinai c.1200 Beginning of settlement of Canaan Tribes ruled by various leaders: the 'Judges'</p>	<p><i>While the Bible stresses the single God throughout the story, originally Israel regarded Yahweh as only one god among many who adopts them as his people. Probably only one or two tribes of Israel were in Egypt; the others united with them later on.</i></p>	<p>Traditions and laws that go into the later books: many stories were of local heroes but not yet in the 'grand unified scheme' in which the later books place them.</p>
<p>THE KINGDOM</p> <p>1020-1000 Saul king of Israel 1000-961 David king of Israel Solomon builds the first Temple</p> <p>925 Kingdom splits into two: Israel and Judah. Israel is the larger and stronger one, Judah has the prestige of being centred on Jerusalem</p> <p>721 Israel conquered by Assyrians and ceases independent existence. Judah survives</p>	<p><i>David and Solomon were the kings that later generations looked back to as the glory days of the past when they dominated the region. But with the split into Israel and Judah their strength was divided and other nations grew. The Jews became a political football between Egypt in the South and Assyria, then Babylon, in the North. Still Yahweh seen as one god among many.</i></p>	<p>Much of the history goes into 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings. The later story of David and the rise of Solomon (2 Samuel into 1 Kings) is graphic contemporary history. Interesting prophets: Amos a prophet preaching God's justice Hosea a prophet preaching God's love The prophet Isaiah is a major figure</p>
<p>DESTRUCTION AND EXILE</p> <p>597 Judah falls to Babylonians, after revolt in 587 the leaders are exiled to Babylon. Jerusalem and Temple destroyed. Synagogues first organised for regular teaching.</p> <p>538 Persians conquer Babylon. Edict of Persian king Cyrus allows exiles home.</p>	<p><i>The destruction of Jewish society and the exile of its leaders provoked a huge crisis – where is God now? The answer: God is in charge even in disaster and will bring them through. Rise of the idea of God as the only God.</i></p>	<p>The prophet Jeremiah challenges the leaders of Judah during their disastrous last years. During the Exile Ezekiel projects a picture of restoration. Much of the book of Isaiah written at this time, especially its later chapters.</p>
<p>RESTORATION, DISAPPOINTMENT AND HOPE</p> <p>400s Gradual rebuilding of Jerusalem and Temple, still impoverished. Domination by Persians and then Greeks after Alexander the Great</p> <p>167 Revolt of the Maccabees against Greek rule. Independence again!</p> <p>63 Pompey conquers Palestine for Romans</p> <p>37BC – 4AD Herod is Romans' puppet king, rebuilds Temple on grand scale</p>	<p><i>The nation is rebuilt among fierce nationalism, tightly defining what it is to be a Jew against other nations and groups. The Law, circumcision and Sabbath all gain new prominence. The Greek persecution of the Jews further fuels Jewish separateness, the veneration of martyrdom, the notion of life after death, the expectation of a future 'Messianic' golden age when Israel's enemies are destroyed and she emerges as top dog.</i></p>	<p>History: Ezra and Nehemiah recount the refounding of the nation. The 'books of Moses' (Genesis to Deuteronomy) reach their final edition.</p> <p>The later history is not found in the Jewish Bible but 1 and 2 Maccabees are in the Christian Old Testament 'Apocrypha' (a kind of appendix).</p>