

# Old Testament Survey

## Week 1 — Orientation to the OT



## Why bother with the OT?

Why bother with the Old Testament (OT)? After all, it's the *Old* Testament. Isn't it obsolete? We've got a *New* Testament (NT) now, so surely we don't need the old one anymore. It's like when you move house: you don't live in the old one any more. There may be some nostalgic feelings if you visit it from time to time, but you can get along quite well without it. Someone else probably lives in the old house now, so it's not ours any more. That's how some Christians think about the OT: Judaism might live there, but we've moved on.

Okay, let's try that. Let's go to the NT instead. Turn to **Matthew 1**. Oh, dear: it's full of OT names, and the stories of Abraham, King David, and the exile to Babylon. That's irrelevant: we can tear that page out. Let's try **Matthew 2**. This chapter is built around quotes from the OT prophets (Mt 2:6, 15, 17, 23) so we can tear that chapter out too. **Matthew 3** describes another Jewish prophet: he performs Jewish washing ceremonies, quotes OT prophets (Mt 3:3), argues with Jewish sects (Pharisees and Sadducees), threatens those who think they are the beneficiaries of the promises to Abraham, and declares the coming of the one who will fulfil what the OT promised. It's totally based on the OT, so let's tear this one out too. Finally in **Matthew 4** we get to Jesus' ministry. Whew! Now we're really in the NT. It says that Jesus was tested in the wilderness, just as Israel was in the OT. He answers the tempter by quoting ... the OT! Three times (Mt 4:4, 7-10)! He starts teaching, and his sermons are based on the OT (Mt 4:14-16)! He assumes his hearers know the story of God's rule that needs to be restored (Mt 4:17). We've got NO chance of understanding Jesus if we bypass the OT.

Seriously: you cannot understand Jesus well if you do not understand the OT. Jesus was not a "Christian"; he was a Jew. He grew up in a Jewish family. His twelve disciples were Jews. They all grew up in Jewish villages, attended Jewish Synagogues on Saturday, and made the trip to Jerusalem for the three Jewish feasts each year. Jesus quoted the Jewish Scriptures and debated with other Jewish people about what they meant. For Jesus, the OT *was* Scripture: he never read any of the NT! So, the number one reason why you might want to get to know the OT is: to get to know Jesus, to understand how he thought and what he had to say with the culture and worldview of his people.

Trying to understand Jesus without reading the OT is like watching the last 20 minutes of a thriller with no idea of the story that came before. You won't understand what is being resolved if you don't grasp the preceding story line. The Bible is one continuous narrative. Like a great thriller, there are many twists and turns to the plot line, and Jesus is the central character who brings it all together, but you can't appreciate that unless you see how the story of humanity comes

together in him. The OT tells us where we came from, who we are, how things have gone so wrong, why there is so much suffering, and how that suffering is perpetrated. The OT tells us who God is, how he deals with humanity, and his astounding faithfulness in not giving up on his creation but working to overcome the present injustice. I have never read any thriller that even begins to compare to the narrative of Scripture. No wonder it's the best seller ever, year after year!

If you want to know who God is, read the whole story, for that's what it is: the revelation of God. We discover the character of our heavenly ruler in this book.

And yet, the picture painted of God in the OT can seem quite strange. The Israelites had to bring him animals to be slaughtered. He asked them to conduct wars, to kill their enemies. They owned slaves, and they treated women as possessions. Some had multiple wives. There was much bloodshed. There is much in the OT that we find offensive, and some of it was attributed to God. Christians don't reject the OT, but sometimes we ignore it because we don't know what to do with it.

Over the next six weeks, explore the OT with us. We'll try to give you an overview of how the grand plot fits together, so that when you are reading a part you can appreciate how it fits into the whole story.

## Why these 39 books?

Open your Bible to the Table of Contents. There are 39 books in the OT, written in Hebrew (with a bit of Aramaic), by many different people, over an extended period (more than 1000 years), before the time of Christ (BC). In our English bibles, the books are grouped according to the kind of literature they are (not chronologically):

<i>English Bible</i>		
<i>Section</i>	<i>Books</i>	<i>Count</i>
Pentateuch	Genesis – Deuteronomy	5
History	Joshua – Esther	12
Poetry	Job – Song of Songs	5
Major prophets	Isaiah – Daniel	5
Minor prophets	Hosea – Malachi	12
[Apocrypha]	[1 Esdras – 2 Maccabees (Catholic only)]	[14]

Many other books were written in OT times as well, but these 39 are the ones the **Jewish** people recognise as Scripture. Since they have no *New Testament*, they don't call them the *Old Testament*, but the *Tanakh* (pronounced tan-ARK). The *Tanakh* has the same 39 books, but groups them differently:

<i>Hebrew Bible (Tanakh)</i>		
<i>Section</i>	<i>Books</i>	<i>Count</i>
Law ( <i>Torah</i> )	Genesis – Deuteronomy	5
Prophets ( <i>Nevi'im</i> )	Joshua – 2 Kings (except Ruth) = <i>former prophets</i> Isaiah – Malachi (except Lam & Dan) = <i>latter prophets</i>	21
Writings ( <i>Kethuvim</i> )	Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastics, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, 1 & 2 Chronicles	13

If you open a Roman Catholic Bible, you'll find an extra 14 books between Malachi and Matthew. They are the **Apocrypha** of the OT, or the deuterocanonical books. Want to know how they got there?

In the centuries before Jesus, Greek was the main language of the Mediterranean, so Jews translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. Legend has it that 70 people translated it in 70 days, so it became known as the **Septuagint** (the seventy, LXX in Roman numerals). But the LXX translators included some other books that were not part of the Hebrew Scriptures. As the church spread into Asia Minor and Europe, they used these Greek translations. So, when they translated the Bible into Latin (the Vulgate), they also translated these extra books. That's how they found their way into the Catholic Bible.

The reformers like Luther and Calvin rejected the Apocryphal books, since they had never been part of the Hebrew Scriptures. So, Protestants do not have the Apocrypha in our OT: we have only the books that the Jewish people recognised as Scripture (Tanakh).

## Orientation to their culture

Parts of the OT can seem quite strange to us, quite alien to our culture and the way we think. The world was a very different place 3000 years ago. We cannot expect it to read it as if it was written by an Australian, in English, for us in our Western world. To understand what God was saying, we need to ask what it would have meant to them before we ask what it means to us.

For example, in our world we operate in a democracy where church and state are separate. We have learned that “power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” So, we have developed a system where power is distributed. We have federal, state, and local government. We have checks and balances built into our legal system, with upper and lower houses of parliament. Parliament makes our laws, but they don't enforce them: we have a separate judicial system

to do that: magistrates, state, federal, and supreme courts. And the courts don't make arrests: we have police to do that.

The ancient world was not like that. Back then, a kingdom was ruled by a king—one person who made the laws and policed them and executed whomever he wanted.

In our world, church and state are separate powers. In Australia, you can be Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, or Atheist and (at least in theory) you will still be treated the same way. Your faith and your citizenship are separate issues. It was not like that in the ancient world. There was a state religion, so the country's laws and religious requirements applied to everyone. For example, in ancient Israel you could be arrested if you worked on the Sabbath.

This wasn't just the case for Israel. The Israelites had many similar attitudes to other cultures of the Ancient Near East (ANE). It really helps us to understand the culture and their laws and their religion when we ask the question: *What was the same and what was different when you compare Israel to other cultures, laws, and religions of the ANE?*

The Israelites were not the perfect expression of God's ideal culture. God was dealing with fallen human beings who shared many of the beliefs and attitudes of the ancient world. For example, the Israelites had slaves. That does not mean that God is okay with slavery: it just means that God was working with broken humanity where slavery was accepted as a way of life. It was part of their world, common to other cultures too. We need to understand something of their culture in its ANE setting so we don't get stuck with issues like slavery.

But just as they were affected by the culture around them and sometimes failed to see God's ideal, so are we! We are affected by the postmodern Western twenty-first century culture we live in too. Reading ancient books like those in the OT can help us to recognise our own cultural blindness, to call into question things that we otherwise just assume as normal. This enhanced self-awareness is one of the side-benefits of studying the writings of ancient peoples.

## **Do we find the New Testament in the Old?**

As Christians, we tend to read the OT from the perspective of the NT. Ever since the early church, Christians have looked for Jesus in the OT, noticing parallels between Jesus and OT characters like Joseph. Some become preoccupied with finding these "types and shadows." It is true that the OT story is fulfilled in the NT, that Jesus does resolve the unresolved parts of the OT story. But the OT exists in its own right: most of the OT characters did not understand very much about how Jesus would resolve their story. It would be better to try to

understand the OT in its own right first, rather than to begin by reading it through the lens of Jesus.

Jesus himself was a Jew. He read the OT the way first-century Jews read it. The way that Jesus and his followers read the OT is therefore much closer to the OT perspective than our culture is. That means we can learn from their perspective.

Particularly, everything that Jesus did and taught was focused on what he called *the kingdom of God*. Christians of all persuasions recognise this as the centre of Jesus' teaching and ministry. And yet there are so many divergent understandings of what he meant. Part of the problem is that Jesus never defined what he meant by the kingdom of God. He didn't need to, because the other Jewish people in his audience knew what it was. They understood that Israel was God's kingdom. It was their story, their history ... or at least it was what their story should have been. At its core, the kingdom of God is nothing more or less than God reigning, i.e. God as their sovereign. Jesus tells kingdom stories that begin, "The kingdom of God is like ..." He could just as easily have said, "When God is reigning, it's like this."

(By the way, the gospel writers use the phrases *kingdom of heaven* and *kingdom of God*. interchangeably. They mean the same thing, and Jesus was not talking about going to heaven when you die. Heaven is where God is, so to be under heaven's rule is to be under God's rule. God already reigns in heaven, and if things were running right on earth he would be reigning here too. That's why Jesus taught us to ask our Father in heaven for his kingdom to come here also, i.e. for his will to be done on earth just as it is in heaven. That was his picture of the kingdom.)

Some people get hung up about the question of *when* the kingdom of God comes, arguing about whether it is past, present, or future — already, or not yet. But the *when* question misses the point! If the kingdom of God means God reigning, it makes no sense to ask, "When does God reign?" The only sensible answer would be, "Always." God reigned in the past (e.g. Psa 99). God reigns in the present (for he is Lord). And God's reign will be complete in the future when every knee bows and every tongue confesses Jesus as Lord. The kingdom of God isn't about *when*: it's about *Who*!

If Jesus was right, then the main story of the OT is about God as sovereign, as ruler of the earth, as our king. Let's read the OT story and see if that is how it plays out. Remember, we are not importing Christian ideas back into the OT; we are seeking to read with Jewish eyes.

## Genesis: God plants his kingdom

There is no human government in the first eight chapters of Genesis. The heavenly sovereign ruled his earthly realm directly. That's how he designed his realms to operate. The great lights in the heavens remind us that earth operates under heaven's rule (Gen 1:16-18). We were designed as royal agents, ruling over the other creatures on his behalf (1:28-30). That is the original picture of the kingdom of God: humans ruling over the animals, and God ruling over us all. He was very pleased with this arrangement (1:31).

Our sovereign gave us the most beautiful and bountiful existence: all manner of richness flowed from his providence (2:11-12). As sovereign, he set limits on what we could do (2:16-17). But humans refused his limits, convinced that we could decide good and evil for ourselves. We wanted to be like a god, not under God (3:4-5). He investigated this violation of his sovereignty. We have the transcript of this court case in Genesis 3. It reads not as a punishment but as an explanation of the trouble we brought on ourselves by violating the order he had established. We introduced conflict and struggle: conflict between animals and humans (3:14-15), struggles in our relationships (3:16), and the daily struggle to survive (3:17). Ultimately, we lose that struggle (3:19). In dismissing God (grasping at his power), we cut ourselves off from the source of our life, so we die. He never gave up on us, but he closed the path to his palace and posted guards (3:24).

Genesis focuses not on our individual plight, but on the kind of society that develops when humans grasp the reins to take over God's role as ruler. The sovereign warned **Cain** to take control of himself: grasping control of his brother's life opens the door to evil (4:7). Cain did not obey. The sovereign investigated the murder. (This is how it worked in the early days under God's direct rule). Once again, the heavenly ruler did not punish Cain by taking his life as the community would have expected. Instead he marked Cain as under royal protection (4:15)—unbelievable grace! Yet in a sense, Cain forfeited his life, for his community no longer accepted him. He was an outcast.

So Cain left the community where YHWH was present (4:16). He established his own community (4:17), focused on human cleverness (4:21-22). This community did not wait on YHWH for justice: they take revenge. Just like any Hollywood action movie, their answer to violence is greater violence (4:23-24).

Think how this story is developing. What kind of world will this become when the godly Abel dies without children, but the murderer lives on? Cain's descendants establish an alternative society, away from God's presence, based on violence. Is this world doomed?

But YHWH has not given up. He gives Seth to replace Abel. The community-in-God's-presence lives on (4:25). This community seeks justice not through revenge but by *calling on* YHWH (4:26). Their descendants recall God's image (5:1), walk with God (5:24), and wait on God to bring relief to human suffering (5:29). The hope of the world rests with these godly sons.

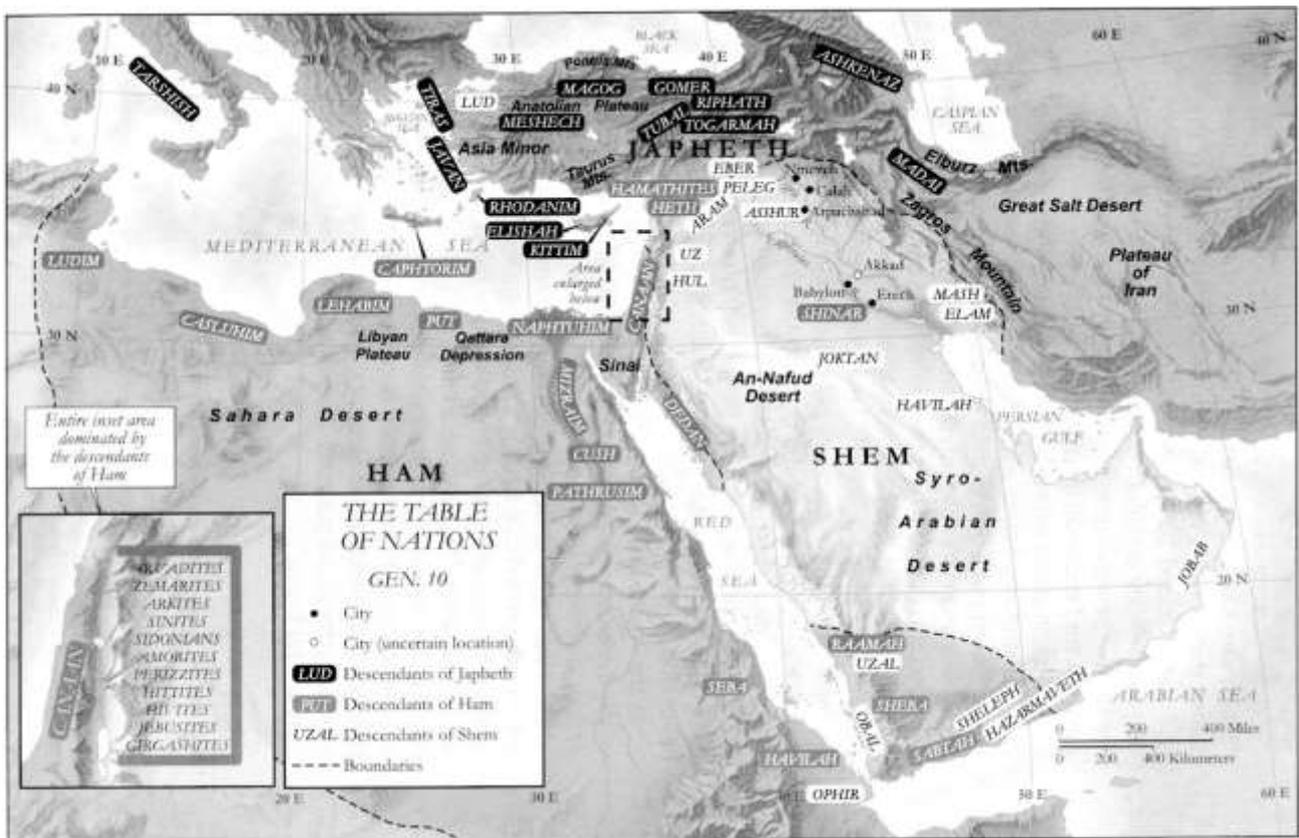
But then it all falls apart! The distinction between these two communities—the one that lives as sons of God, and the one that relies on human power—breaks down. The godly lose their distinctive values, caring only for physical beauty (6:2). They brag about human power, making themselves larger-than-life legends (6:4). The whole world sinks into anarchy, uncontrolled violence (6:5, 11). Without the godly, even God loses hope (6:6). He must take responsibility for his failed realm. He does. It's not pretty. With deep grief, he announces the end of his out-of-control realm (6:7).

But in the same moment, our sovereign's generous character leads him to rescue someone (6:8), tasking him with rescuing the animals (6:19). Noah obeyed (6:22). The earth is cleansed in the great flood. God saves **Noah**, and Noah saves the animals.

That's now God replanted his kingdom. He recommissioned humans to care for the animals, even though humans are harsh rulers (9:2). He conceded that humans can kill and eat animals, but he insists they must not continue the violence that led to the flood. He gives humans authority to deal with murderers (9:6). This is the first time God has given humans power over the lives of other humans. In this simple act, God permits human **government**, precisely because humans did not submit to divine government, sinking into anarchy. And yet, human government is vastly inferior and more destructive than God's government: what humans do with a murderer is nothing like what God did with Cain in Gen 4.

So, if God has given authority for human government, does that mean God has given up on ruling us? No way! The heavenly ruler gives us a binding contract—a **covenant**—that he will never give up on ruling the earth, no matter how disobedient we are (9:9ff).

But as soon as God gives humans authority over each other, we abuse that power. Noah shames himself by getting drunk and lying naked. One of his sons spreads the gossip, while the others try to cover Noah's indiscretion. When he realises what happened, Noah reacts as flawed human rulers do: with anger at the one who blabbed about his indiscretion. He curses his grandson, and the curse is: slavery (9:25)! As soon as God gives humans power over the life of other humans, it results in slavery—the crushing abuse that always characterises human rule!



Source: Paul R. House and Eric Mitchell, *Old Testament Survey*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2007), 26.

Now that God has given authority for human government, it results in nations (Gen 10). The nations Israel knew were descendants of Noah. That means they were the recipients of the covenant God made with Noah to rule over them forever. But the nations behave independently of God, not as his kingdom. They prey on each other to increase their power. Nimrod calls himself “a mighty hunter” (10:8-9) but his prey is not animals. Nimrod’s family settled in Africa, but he takes territory from Shem and Japheth. He is making war, hunting humans, making a great name for himself through conquest. What he has started grows into the empires of Assyria and Babylon, the superpowers that caused so much trouble for God’s people in OT times (10:10-14).

God tolerates these nations and kingdoms, but limits them. They want to build an administrative centre (“city”) with a tower touching heaven so they can take over God’s role as ruler of the world. God intervenes —confusing their languages (11:4-9). He allows humans to rule nations but not to take over his role as ruler of the world.

The nations go their own ways. The heavenly ruler plans to plant a nation of his own—through **Abraham**. His goal is to restore to the nations the blessing they are missing (12:3), the blessing of God’s reign. Abraham and Sarah are representatives of the kingdom of God.

Yet Abraham and Sarah are flawed representatives who create trouble rather than blessing for Pharaoh, the most powerful human ruler of the region. Even so, their heavenly ruler rescues them (12:17).

Abraham does a better job of managing conflict within his family, showing grace to Lot who chooses the best farmland (Gen 13). Lot doesn't realise that warring kings fight over exactly that—the best land. Lot is taken as a prisoner of war (14:12). Abraham rescues Lot and the other captives. Do the Canaanite kings recognise the blessing of the heavenly ruler on Abraham? Some do (14:17-20); but others care only about getting people back under their control (14:21-24). It's the first hint of how the nations respond to the kingdom of God.

The heavenly sovereign enters a formal agreement making Abraham his ambassador (Gen 15), marking him as belonging to God (Gen 17). Because of this **covenant** Abraham's descendants are God's representative kingdom for the rest of the OT. This covenant does not replace the wider covenant God made with Noah. God still rules the nations, e.g. he still takes action against the evil in Sodom (Gen 19).

Abraham and Sarah regularly misrepresent their sovereign. Even when they are unfaithful, he is faithful and rescues them (Gen 20). As promised, **Isaac** is finally born (Gen 21). Abraham feels called to sacrifice this son, but again God intervenes (22:12). **Isaac** must marry not a Canaanite but a woman who recognises “the God of Abraham” (24:27; 42; 48).

Of Isaac's two sons, Esau does not value the promised kingdom of God (25:33) so the promise is passed on through **Jacob**. Jacob is a cheat (Gen 27). He flees to save his life. As he leaves, he sees a dream that convinces him he must return to this land, for this is the place where heaven and earth meet, where the heavenly sovereign's messengers pass between the two realms (28:10-22).

Fourteen years later Jacob returns with his two wives, and dreams again as he enters the Promised Land. He wrestles with God all night, and ultimately receives a new name: Israel, meaning “he who wrestles with God” (32:28). The Israelites are the descendants of Israel. He has twelve sons, who ultimately become the twelve tribes of Israel (35:23-26). Esau fathers another nation—the Edomites (36:1).

One of the Canaanite princes raped Dinah, a sister of the twelve brothers. Levi and Simeon tricked the locals and then killed them all. Is this how God's representatives should respond to ungodly rulers (Gen 34)?

Reuben is the oldest of the twelve sons, but Joseph dreams of reigning (37:7, 9). The jealous brothers sell Joseph as a slave instead. Can God re-establish his reign through this family? Judah's sons are so evil that they die (38:7, 10). Judah is too mean to care for their widows (38:11), though he has money for prostitutes (38:15). Can God's reign come from this family?

Meanwhile, Joseph is on-sold into Egypt, where he is falsely accused and imprisoned (39:20). He's left in jail for ages—the total opposite of reigning. But Pharaoh has a dream and Joseph interprets it (41:25-36). Joseph's wisdom helps Pharaoh manage the good years well. As a result, Pharaoh is ready to save his people when the bad years come.

(It's surprising how rarely governments do this. For example, during the good years of the mining boom instead of preparing for the needy years ahead our WA government increased the state's debt from 2 billion to more than 20 billion dollars.)

So, the book of Genesis reaches its satisfying conclusion with a great-grandson of Abraham bringing God's blessing to the Gentiles, so that many lives were saved. Jacob speaks of the blessing that lies ahead for Joseph's two sons (Gen 48) as well as for his own twelve sons who will become the twelve tribes of Israel (Gen 49). They look forward to the day when they will return from Egypt to the Land God promised Abraham (Gen 50).

## Conclusion

The Bible is the story of the kingdom of God. Genesis explains how and why God conceded human government to the nations, and how he planned to re-establish divine government through the nation of Israel. It's a story with many twists and turns. Stay tuned!

## Memory verse

### Genesis 1:26 (NIV)

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

## Take home exercise

Open your Bible to the table of contents. Can you identify the sections within the OT? Which books form the Law? The history section? The poetry section? The prophets (major and minor)?

Each week, we will suggest four chapters for you to read in preparation or our next session. For next week, we suggest you read:

- **Genesis 9:** God makes a promise (covenant) that he will never give up ruling humanity.
- **Exodus 19:** Delivered from human rule, Israel is the nation that represents God's rule.
- **Leviticus 19:** Spells out how Israel was to represent their holy sovereign in practice.
- **Numbers 14:** They are God's nation, but Israel refuses to trust God to give them the Land.

## Reference

Here's a summary of the story running through Torah and the history books:

What's in each book?	
Genesis	YHWH rules heaven and earth, but humans grasped power, resulting in a violent society. Through Abraham, he planned to establish his representative nation, so the others would return.
Exodus	YHWH released the Abrahamic family from the oppression of human rule, and formed them into his own nation, with his laws. They built a tent (tabernacle) for their king to live among them.
Leviticus	YHWH instructed Israel in how to express their devotion to him. He is holy (devoted to them), so they must be holy (devoted to him).
Numbers	YHWH led Israel to the Promised Land, but they did not trust him to lead them in. They stayed in the wilderness until that generation died.
Deuteronomy	YHWH's laws are repeated, so the next generation makes their commitment to him also.
Joshua	Under Joshua's leadership, Israel fights the people of Canaan to take the Promised Land. They divide the Land up among the twelve tribes of Israel.
Judges	Israel struggles against invaders who oppress them. God raises up leaders to sort out this injustice ("judges"), but without any on-going human rulers they keep falling into trouble.
1 Samuel	Israel is not satisfied with YHWH as their king, so God gives them a human king. King Saul causes much trouble trying to prevent David becoming king.
2 Samuel	David is a much better king, so God promises David's dynasty will continue. Nevertheless, David abuses his power and suffers abuse from his own sons.
1 Kings	Solomon builds the temple, but the taxes and forced labour split the nation when he dies. The northern tribes choose their own kings and worship centres. Only Judah (in the south) keeps the kings of David's line and worships at the temple.
2 Kings	All Israel's kings are godless. Eventually Israel is destroyed by Assyria. Some of Judah's kings are godly while others are godless. Eventually Judah is exiled to Babylon.
Ezra/Nehemiah	After their exile, some return to rebuild the temple and the city of Jerusalem. They dedicate themselves to live by Torah.
Esther	The Persian kings have no idea how to reign, but they threaten to obliterate God's people. The Jews survive and gain permission to kill their enemies.

<b>Locating people in the OT books</b>	
Genesis	Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph
Exodus – Deut	Moses, Aaron
Joshua	Joshua, the twelve tribes
Judges	Deborah, Gideon, Samson
1 Samuel	<i>Samuel</i> , Saul, David
2 Samuel	David (as king)
1 Kings	Solomon, Rehoboam, Jeroboam, Ahab, <i>Elijah</i>
2 Kings	<i>Elisha</i> , Jehu, Jeroboam II, Hezekiah, <i>Isaiah</i> , Josiah
Ezra/Nehemiah	Ezra, Nehemiah, Zerubbabel

## Recommended reading

Craig G Bartholomew & Michael W Goheen. *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004).

Gordon D Fee & Douglas K Stuart. *How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).

Paul R House & Eric Mitchell. *Old Testament Survey*. (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2007).

John W Drane. *Introducing the Old Testament*. (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 2000).

William S La Sor, David A Hubbard, & Frederic W Bush. *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996).