

2. Exodus

Theme: Redemption from bondage

Author: Moses

Date: 15th century B.C.

Verse: *I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.* Exodus 20:2

Exodus opens with the descendants of Jacob having multiplied from 70 at the time of Joseph's death to a nation of more than two million. The nation of Israel was enslaved by Egypt for many years, but God called Moses, who was raised in the pharaoh's palace, to lead his fellow Israelites out of Egypt. God brought 10 plagues on the Egyptians to pave the way for the Israelites' release. Through the miraculous parting of the Red Sea, the Israelites escaped from the Egyptian army. God showed His presence to His people with pillars of cloud and fire, but they soon began to grumble and complain against God.

Through Moses, God revealed another portion of His plan - the law and the tabernacle. When we think of the law, we tend to think of the Ten Commandments (Chapter 20), but that was only the beginning.

Did God really expect that Israel would be able to obey His laws? No, He was making a point. God knows that we need to be wholly dependent on Him, but we don't know that. So He gave the law to show us what we would have to do in order to be saved by our own efforts. None of us can keep the law, and that's the point. And that's why God included the sacrifices and ceremonies in the law. They can't rid people of sin, but they did cover the sins of the Jews until Christ's perfect sacrifice on the cross.

When Moses told the people about the law, they promised to keep it. Of course, they didn't. While Moses was on Mount Sinai talking with God, the people gave up on him and began worshiping a gold calf, as the Egyptians did.

4. Numbers

Theme: God's corrective discipline and continuing love

Author: Moses

Date: 15th century B.C.

Verse: *The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.* Numbers 6:24-26

Numbers is a sequel to Exodus. (The book is called Numbers because of two censuses, or numberings of the people, that are recorded.) It recounts the Israelites' journey from Mount Sinai to the land of Canaan, which God had promised them. It wasn't a smooth journey. The people complained almost constantly. When they reached the border of the land, 12 spies were chosen (one from each tribe) and sent to report on the land God had told them to possess. Ten of the spies reported that the people who lived in the land were too powerful. Once again, the Israelites refused to rely on God - they panicked and nearly stoned the other two spies, Caleb and Joshua, who trusted God and recommended that the Israelites enter the land.

As punishment, God would not allow them to enter because of their disobedience and lack of faith. The Israelites had to wander in the wilderness 40 years until the disobedient generation died out. A whole generation missed the blessings God had planned for them in the land. Everybody who was an adult on the day of the spies' report died in the wilderness except Caleb and Joshua. During the time in the wilderness, the people grumbled against God some more. God responded by sending poisonous snakes. Many Israelites died. On God's instruction, Moses set up a bronze serpent on a pole. Those who looked on the serpent in faith were healed. This serpent was a picture of the death of Christ on the cross.

7. Judges

Theme: Consequences of sin

Author: Unknown

Date: 11th century B.C.

Verse: *In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.* Judges 17:6

Judges covers the chaotic time in Israel's history between Joshua's death and the beginning of an organized government under King Saul, a period of about 340 years. God intended the nation to be governed by Him alone, with priests as administrators. He promised the people great blessings if they would only trust and obey Him. He also warned them that if they turned away from Him and worshiped false gods, He would *...bring a nation against you from far away, from the end of the earth, swooping down like the eagle ...* (Deuteronomy 28:49). That's exactly what happened when Israel repeatedly turned to false idols. Other nations invaded - just as God had promised. This was intended as discipline, to teach the Israelites to trust God alone, but the people sank deeper and deeper into sin. God is just and will punish sin, but He is also a God of grace and mercy. The 12 judges were actually military leaders whom God raised up to deliver His people from their enemies. Among them were Samson and Gideon, two of the Bible's best-known heroic figures. This cycle of sin-punishment-repentance-deliverance occurred seven times. The deliverance was always temporary, and even some of the judges were sinful. The lesson to be learned is that whenever people attempt to go their own way without God's guidance, disaster will follow.

9. 1 Samuel

Theme: History of Israel

Author: Unknown

Date: 12th-11th century B.C.

Verse: *Behold, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations.* 1 Samuel 8:5

First and Second Samuel, originally considered one book, cover approximately 150 years. First Samuel begins with the birth and childhood of Samuel and records his ministry as the last of the Israelite judges. Also included is Israel's demand for a king, the anointing of Saul to the throne as Israel's first king and David's life prior to becoming king.

10. 2 Samuel

Theme: History of Israel (continued)

Author: Unknown

Date: 11th century B.C.

Verse: *And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before Me. Your throne shall be established forever.* 2 Samuel 7:16

Second Samuel recounts the strife and struggle leading to the establishment of King David as ruler of Israel in Jerusalem. It also records David's military victories, his sin with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, Absalom's revolt and David's disobedience in numbering the people. (The full account of David's life extends from 1 Samuel 16:12 through 1 Kings 2:11.)

15. Ezra

Theme: Return of the remnant

Author: Ezra

Date: 536-457 B.C.

Verse: *And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, "For He is good, for His steadfast love endures forever toward Israel." And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid.* Ezra 3:11

The two major events recorded by Ezra are the return of the Jewish remnant from Babylon to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel and the rebuilding of the temple. Ezra, a priest, returned to Jerusalem following the return of the faithful remnant. Ezra is the first of six books (Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi) written after Israel's captivity.

After the Israelites returned to their homes, the people started marrying wives from pagan nations. Ezra was upset because this was the same sin that had resulted in the captivity in Babylon. Ezra prayed before the people, thanking God for what He'd done and for His kindness toward Israel. He confessed the nation's sins. The gathered crowd made a covenant to rid the nation of the wives and children who worshiped other gods. Three days later, the entire nation gathered and came to an almost-unanimous decision - they would rid themselves of the sinful influence. It's just as true today as it was in Ezra's time - if another person is influencing you to focus on things other than the Lord, the relationship is wrong.

16. Nehemiah

Theme: Rebuilding Jerusalem's walls

Author: Nehemiah

Date: 446-434 B.C.

Verse: *Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision."* Nehemiah 2:17

In 538 B.C., a small group of Jews was allowed to return to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel from their captivity in Babylon. The temple was rebuilt in 515 B.C. and Ezra called the people to spiritual restoration in 457 B.C. But in 444 B.C., almost 100 years after the first Jews had returned, much of the destruction done by the Babylonian army hadn't been repaired. Israel was surrounded by enemies and in danger.

Nehemiah, a court official under King Artaxerxes, heard about the condition of the city and asked permission to return to his homeland and rebuild the walls. His enemies did everything they could think of to discourage him. After a nighttime inspection, Nehemiah called the Jewish officials together and encouraged them to rebuild the city's defenses.

Finally, in spite of discouragement and threats, the work was finished. Nehemiah ends his work with an account of the nation's spiritual revival and the dedication of the walls. In this book, Nehemiah prays 11 times. This book records the last historical events of the Old Testament, although Malachi was probably written some 60 years later.

22. Song of Solomon

Theme: Human and divine love

Author: Solomon

Date: 11th century B.C.

Verse: *He brought me to the banqueting house, and His banner over me was love.*
Song of Solomon 2:4

Picture in your mind any music video you've seen. Chances are that you noticed a few things. The lead singer switched wardrobes several times, often returning to one or two main outfits again and again. A backup chorus danced on and off the screen a few times. The activity that was going on sometimes had very little to do with the words that were being sung.

The Song of Solomon is very like a music video - 900 B.C.-style. There are two main leads, one male and one female, who sing about their pasts, their hopes, their dreams and their feelings. There is a backup group known as the Daughters of Jerusalem. And there is a lot of symbolic, poetic language that doesn't mean exactly what it appears to say - for example, the poet compares his love's hair to a flock of goats.

The main characters include the Shulamite bride and the king. The book demonstrates that physical desire between a man and woman who are married to each other is a good thing in God's sight. We were created with our desires. Yes, sin has perverted them as it has perverted everything else in this world. But as long as we stick to God's guidelines, the physical desires He gave us are good.

31. Obadiah

Theme: Doom of Edom

Author: Obadiah

Date: Ninth century B.C.

Verse: *For the day of the Lord is near upon all the nations. As you have done, it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head.* Obadiah 1:15

Obadiah, known as the doom song, is the smallest Old Testament book. Way back in Genesis, we read about Isaac's twin sons, Jacob and Esau. Jacob's name was changed to Israel and his offspring became the 12 tribes of Israel. Esau's descendants became the Edomites, a nation located to the south of Israel. During the reign of Jehoram, around 850 B.C., the Philistines and Arabians invaded Judah. Edom joined up with Judah's enemies. Obadiah, about whom we know very little, prophesied Edom's approaching destruction: *Because of the violence done to your brother Jacob, shame shall cover you, and you shall be cut off forever* (1:10).

In 1812, the unique ruins of this ancient nation were discovered. They stand as a silent witness to the fulfillment of Obadiah's prophecy.

33. Micah

Theme: Judgments

Author: Micah

Date: Eighth century B.C.

Verse: *He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?* Micah 6:8

Micah ministered for approximately 25 years (at the same time as Isaiah), spanning the time when Israel was conquered by Assyria. He mentions the sins of both Israel and Judah and implores the people *to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God* (6:8b). He closes with a courtroom scene in which God brings His people to trial and finds them guilty. Micah also condemned wealthy landowners and merchants for taking advantage of the poor. Although Micah was a prophet of doom, he offered words of hope, predicting that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. The name Micah means “Who is like the Lord?”

37. Haggai

Theme: Encouragement to rebuild the temple

Author: Haggai

Date: Sixth century B.C.

Verse: *Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the Lord.* Haggai 1:8

Haggai's two chapters contain five messages. Cyrus, king of Persia, allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem. They got off to a good start worshiping God, but after 16 years, the temple still wasn't completed. In 520 B.C., Haggai stepped forward to encourage everyone to get to work. Twenty-three days later, the people resumed constructing the temple. ... *Consider your ways. Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the LORD* (Haggai 1:7-8).

Note: Eighty years later, the Jews still hadn't rebuilt the wall around Jerusalem. It was Nehemiah who finally accomplished that task and brought about a spiritual revival in the nation.