

An Outline of the Old Testament¹

The Jewish community often refers to these Scriptures as the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. While the Christian Old Testament comprises the same books, it has them in a different order:

- Genesis to Kings: A story that runs from the creation of the world to the Israelite exile in Babylon
- Chronicles to Esther: A second version of this story, continuing it into the years after the exile
- Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs: Some poetic books
- Isaiah to Malachi: The teaching of some prophets

Here is an outline of the history that lies at the background of the books (I give no dates for events in Genesis, which involves too much guesswork) and in BCE (“before the common era”):

1200s	Moses, the exodus, Joshua
1100s	The “judges”
1000s	Saul, David
900s	Solomon; the nation splits into two, Ephraim and Judah
800s	Elijah, Elisha
700s	Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah; Assyria the superpower; the fall of Ephraim
600s	Jeremiah, King Josiah; Babylon the superpower
500s	Ezekiel; the fall of Judah; Persia the superpower; Judahites free to go home
400s	Ezra, Nehemiah
300s	Greece the superpower
200s	Syria and Egypt, the regional powers pulling Judah one way or the other
100s	Judah rebels against Syrian power and gains independence
000s	Rome the superpower

Joshua

Joshua takes up the story from the end of Deuteronomy, where the Israelites were poised on the edge of their promised land; Moses their leader had died, and Joshua had succeeded him as the person designated by God to take the Israelites into the land. The first half of the book of Joshua tells how he did so in a series of great victories but also with some reversals, and with many aspects of the task uncompleted. The book emphasizes the achievement, but between the lines

¹ John Goldingay, [*Joshua, Judges, and Ruth for Everyone: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*](#), Old Testament for Everyone (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press; Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2011), 1–6.

it acknowledges the extent to which the Canaanites remain in control of the country. Archaeological discoveries occasionally indicate that somebody won a great victory in some part of the country, Hazor being the spectacular example (see Joshua 11), but they generally suggest that the emergence of Israel as a people and its becoming the dominant people in the area was a gradual process.

The second half of the book describes how Joshua allocated the country to the various twelve Israelite clans, again acknowledging between the lines that they are thus given quite a task in connection with entering into actual possession of their land. In its last pages the book closes rather in the way the Torah did, with the leader (now Joshua, not Moses) challenging Israel to commit itself in covenant to God for the future.

Many modern people don't like the way the book portrays Joshua's leading Israel in killing many Canaanites, but there is no indication that the New Testament shares this modern unease. The New Testament pictures Joshua as a great hero (see Hebrews 11) and portrays God's violent dispossession of the Canaanites as part of the achievement of God's purpose in salvation (see Acts 7). If there is a contradiction between loving your enemies and being peacemakers, on one hand, and Joshua's undertaking this task at God's command, on the other, the New Testament does not see it.

We need to separate two issues in considering the questions all this raises. One is that the Old Testament sees the Canaanites as under God's judgment for their wrongdoing. The idea that God judges people for their wrongdoing runs through both Testaments; Jesus is tougher about it as he pictures God sending people not merely to early death but to hell, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. In the context of modernity, we do not care for this idea, but we need to note its prominence in Jesus' thinking.

The other issue is that the Old Testament sees God as using the Israelites as the agents of judgment. I'm not sure why we don't like this idea, but the concern people often express is that it could become the basis or justification today for making war against other people. But Israel itself never saw God's commission to dispose of the Canaanites as a precedent for its relationships with other people. Nor does the book of Joshua imply that Joshua's action was a pattern for Israel's future practice. Occupying Canaan and being the means of bringing God's judgment on the Canaanites was a one-time event from the beginning of its story.

We do not know who wrote the book of Joshua or when it was written. As well as leading on from Deuteronomy, it leads into Judges, Samuel, and Kings. It resembles one season of a long-running TV series whose authors know they are leaving loose ends that they will need to tie up before the series finishes. Genesis to Kings as a whole takes Israel's story up to the exile and thus could not have been brought to completion (at least in a remastered version) before that time, though there might have been an earlier, more basic edition. In the boxed-set version, Deuteronomy sets the agenda for Joshua through Kings and provides readers with the clues for understanding why the story unfolds the way it does.

Judges

Judges comprises another season in this epic, taking Israel from the death of Joshua to the eve of Saul's emergence as Israel's first king. Its title comes from the form of leadership it describes, though the English word *judges* does not help a great deal in this connection. While the word for "judging" can denote fulfilling a role in the administration of justice, this activity is a subset of exercising authority or leadership in a broader sense, and *leaders* or *rulers* would be less misleading English equivalents to the Hebrew word. During the period from Joshua to Saul, Israel has no one ruling the entire people in the manner of Moses and Joshua, and then in the manner of Saul and David, but from time to time God causes "leaders" to arise to cope with particular crises in particular parts of the country. They all have leadership ability but for the most part have little moral or religious sensibility. There is little linear development in the narrative; it is generally a sequence of parallel stories of disobedience to God, chastisement, mercy, and restoration. It thus illustrates ways in which Deuteronomy's account of the potential dynamics of Israel's story works out in practice. In this sense, Deuteronomy provides the framework for Judges as it does for Joshua.

Judges is one of the most unpleasant books in the Bible, a dispiriting story of rebellion against God and violence among human beings, not least violence against women (and sometimes violence by women). It thus speaks especially powerfully in a world characterized by such violence. The story becomes more dispiriting the more you read, and by the end you may wish you had not bothered. Thus one reason it is important, and perhaps the reason God might have wanted such an unpleasant work in the Bible, is that it forces us to come to terms with the reality of how things are in the world, and often in the church. It epitomizes the way the Bible is not escapist literature, nor is it focused simply on me and my personal relationship with God.

The book's great dilemma is to know what can be done about the horror it analyzes. More precisely, its dilemma is that leadership is both the problem and the solution. On one hand, it knows that God is supposed to be Israel's king; thus a hero such as Gideon refuses to be turned into a king. On the other hand, the increasing social and moral collapse that accelerates towards the end of Judges happens in a context in which people are doing "what is right in their own eyes" because "there was no king in Israel." In this respect it prepares the way for the introduction of the monarchy, which comes in 1 Samuel.

Ruth

Ruth is the story of how a woman's life falls apart through famine, displacement, and the death of her husband and sons, and then how it is put back together through the extraordinary love of her foreign daughter-in-law and of a distant relative back home. It is a kind of sidebar to the story of Israel, the large-scale story running through Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. In other words, in the original series Judges led straight into 1 Samuel. In the order of books in the Jewish Bible

the story of Ruth comes much later, in the company of some other shorter books such as Esther and the Song of Songs. This sequence likely suggests it was written later, in the same time after the exile as those other books. One aspect of its significance that would come home in that context is its portrait of a foreign woman's committing herself to her Israelite kin and to the God of Israel. While it does not question the idea that Israel needs to be wary of the influence of foreigners with their alien religion, it reminds Israel that its God wants to be the God of the whole world and that they need to be open to foreigners who want to join Israel and come to worship Israel's God.

The English Bible follows the order of the books when they were translated into Greek and moves Ruth to a different context that also makes sense, but in a different way. The first words of the story tell us that it takes place in the time when the "judges" ruled. (We have to keep reminding ourselves that the time to which a Bible story refers may be quite different from the time when it was written.) After the increasing horror of Judges, Ruth offers a much more encouraging portrait of Israel's life and takes away something of the bad taste in your mouth that Judges leaves. It also leads neatly into what follows in First and Second Samuel. It does so in two ways. Its more encouraging picture of everyday Israelite life (particularly women's lives) leads into the similar story of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1–2, and it closes by revealing that the son Ruth bears is none other than the grandfather of David.