**The Old Testament Historical Books**

After the Pentateuch comes a series of books that continue, in roughly chronological order, the history of Israel. The Book of **Joshua** depicts Israel taking possession of the land of Canaan. **Judges** collects stories about the leaders of early Israel in the two hundred years before the emergence of the monarchy. After the tale of **Ruth**, a sort of interlude in the narrative sweep of these books, **1 and 2 Samuel** tell of the rise and fall of Saul, Israel’s first king, and the succession and successes of David. The **Books of Kings** take us from the death of David and the enthronement of Solomon, through the division of the people into the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah, to the destruction of the Northern Kingdom, Israel, at the hands of the Assyrian invader (722/ 721 B.C.), and the fall of Judah, the Southern Kingdom, to the Babylonians (587 B.C.) and its ensuing exile, the Babylonian captivity.

Except for Ruth, these writings bear the marks of a specific theological outlook, that of the Book of Deuteronomy, and together with that book as its introductory volume constitute what is called the Deuteronomistic History. In this theology, what has characterized Israel’s history, in the six hundred years from Moses to the Babylonian exile, has been a dynamic of fidelity or infidelity to Israel’s covenant Lord, and the consequent destiny Israel forges for itself of covenant blessing or covenant curse. This dynamic of choice and consequences serves to explain the disasters Israel incurs throughout its history, from the so-called conquest and the days of the Judges to the fall of the North. In its preexilic edition, the Deuteronomistic History would have stood also as warning and wake-up call to the surviving Southern Kingdom.

The **Books of Chronicles** recycle much of the material found in the previous works, but the author (“ the Chronicler”) treats it selectively, with a characteristic theological point of view; its focus is the Jerusalem Temple and its cultic arrangements, which by way of legitimation are attributed to David, the ideal king. The Chronicler’s interests carry through the Books of **Ezra** and **Nehemiah**, which recount the restoration of Jewish worship and life in the period of Persian rule following release from exile in Babylon. *Donald Senior; John Collins; Mary Ann Getty. The Catholic Study Bible (p. 2129-2130). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.*

**Joshua**

* 1. The Land-Taking (Jos 1: 1– 12: 24)
  2. The Distribution of the Land (Jos 13: 1– 22: 34)
  3. An Era Ends (Jos 23: 1– 24: 33)

The book of Joshua and its story were not written to describe the process by which the Israelite tribes came to dominate parts of Canaan. The book sought to encourage the exiles of Judah and Jerusalem to believe in the power of their ancestral deity to lead them from exile in Babylon back to the land promised to Abraham’s descendants. The fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of its Temple, the scattering of the priesthood, and the end of the dynasty and national state led the people of Judah to wonder about the power and the willingness of their God to save. *Donald Senior; John Collins; Mary Ann Getty. The Catholic Study Bible (p. 459). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.*

The great irony of the book of Joshua was that its stories about the Israelite army conquering great cities and annihilating their populace were written at a time when ancient Israel was at its lowest ebb— politically and militarily. The two Israelite national states no longer existed. Their territory was absorbed into the Babylonian provincial system. The leading citizens of Judah were taken to Babylon to prevent their fomenting of any resistance to the new order in the region. Those Judahites who remained in the land were subsistence farmers who were not in a position to challenge Babylonian rule. Certainly, the stories about the mighty Israelite army winning victory after victory under Joshua was a parody of the military and political impotence of Judah in the sixth century BC. Unfortunately, the stories of the book of Joshua have served to provide support for the wars of conquest waged by Christians over the centuries. *Donald Senior; John Collins; Mary Ann Getty. The Catholic Study Bible (pp. 459-460). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.*

**Judges**

1. Understanding the Period of the Judges (Jgs 1: 1– 3: 6)
2. The Stories of the Judges (Jgs 3: 7– 16: 31)
   1. Othniel (Jgs 3: 7– 11)
   2. Ehud (Jgs 3: 12– 30)
   3. Shamgar (Jgs 3: 31)
   4. Deborah and Barak (Jgs 4: 1– 1– 5: 31)
   5. Gideon (Jgs 6: 1– 8: 35)
   6. Abimelech (Jgs 9: 1– 36)
   7. Tola and Jair (Jgs 10: 1– 5)
   8. Jephthah (Jgs 10: 6– 11,40)
   9. Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon (Jgs 12: 8– 15)
   10. Samson (Jgs 13: 1– 16: 31)
3. Israel’s Self-Destruction (Jgs 17: 1– 21: 25)
   1. Micah and His Shrine (Jgs 17: 1– 18: 31)
   2. The Outrage at Gibeah and Its Aftermath (Jgs 19: 1– 21: 25)

The book of Judges is the second book in the collection the early rabbis called the “Former Prophets” and modern interpreters the “Deuteronomistic History of Israel.” The author of the Deuteronomistic History created the period of the judges by organizing a collection of hero stories into a chronological framework. These were stories about several local Israelite leaders whose military achievements served to maintain Israelite presence in Canaan in the face of serious threats to their existence from various rivals for control of the region before the rise of the Israelite monarchy, which was a little known period of Israelite history. *Donald Senior; John Collins; Mary Ann Getty. The Catholic Study Bible (p. 462). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.*

The “judges” did not preside over courts of law but were charismatic leaders of the individual tribes or groups of several tribes. No judge was ever able to unite all the tribes to face those peoples who vied with Israel for control of Canaan’s limited resources. The judges had to deal with two problems: the failure of Israel to serve the Lord alone and the competition for control of the land from other peoples. The book presents these two problems as interrelated.

The author of Judges has painted a very bleak picture of the Israelite tribes. He leaves his readers with the by-now-familiar comment on the religious and civil anarchy that gripped the life of Israel in its land: “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in their own sight” (Jgs 21: 25). While the book of Joshua is a highly stylized portrait of Israelite beginnings, the book of Judges reflects the disordered state of life in Canaan at the end of the Late Bronze Age in Canaan. It was a very unsettled time in the region, and certainly the book of Judges gives some idea of the chaos that affected the Israelite tribes who were trying to gain a foothold in the region. *Donald Senior; John Collins; Mary Ann Getty. The Catholic Study Bible (p. 462 - 481). Oxford University Press. Kindle*. Edition.

**Ruth**

1. 1: 1– 5 Prologue:
2. A Family Dies 1: 6– 22
3. Naomi and Ruth in Bethlehem:
4. Emptiness and Uncertainty 2: 1– 23
5. Naomi, Ruth and Boaz
6. A Meeting with Possibilities 3: 1– 18
7. A Husband for Ruth 4: 1– 12
8. The Climax: Boaz Acts 4: 13– 17
9. A Son for Naomi 4: 18– 22
10. Epilogue: A Family’s Genealogy

The book of Ruth contains a rare and delightful story that continues to captivate its audience no matter how often it is read. It is a story of love and commitment set in challenging circumstances. Few can forget the loyalty of Ruth, the bitterness of Naomi, the forthright Boaz. The story has been of special interest to Christians since Matthew lists Ruth among the ancestors of Jesus (Mt 1: 5).

The book of Ruth is a short story, similar to the Joseph story in Genesis 37– 50. It is an artistically told tale with a simple plot. While the story of Joseph is set with the court of Pharaoh and deals with important personages and events, Ruth’s characters are ordinary people; its events, mundane. Its closeness to life enables us to identify with its characters, to sympathize with their situation, and to rejoice when their problems are solved.

The plot of the book is controlled by the problems that Ruth and Naomi have as they adjust to their new status as widows. These problems are resolved through the interaction of the book’s main characters: Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz, relieving the tension created by the uncertain future that the two women faced. The principal characters are exemplary persons whose goodness is rewarded in the end, reinforcing the belief that human events are in some sense under the control of a power that insures that good triumphs.

As story, its purpose is to entertain and delight, and this it does, but at the same time it also instructs. Though God never directly speaks or acts in the story, nevertheless it is clear that the story has something to teach us of the way that God is present in life.

*Donald Senior; John Collins; Mary Ann Getty. The Catholic Study Bible (p. 485 - 490). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition*

**Samuel**

The books that we call 1 and 2 Samuel were originally one book. The division into two was the work of those responsible for the Septuagint, the third-century B.C. Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. Perhaps the translators thought it was necessary to make two shorter books out of one long one. The division was introduced into the Hebrew Bible in the sixteenth century A.D. and has become standard ever since. The books of Samuel cannot be used to reconstruct the early history of the Israelite monarchy since the archaeological record does not support the image of David’s kingdom as presented in 2 Samuel. The purpose of Deuteronomistic History was homiletical, not historiographic. *Donald Senior; John Collins; Mary Ann Getty. The Catholic Study Bible (pp. 499-500). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.*

**1 Samuel**

1. Samuel’s Birth (1 Sm 1: 1– 2: 10)
2. Samuel and the Sons of Eli (1 Sm 2: 11– 36)
3. Samuel and Eli (1 Sm 3: 1– 4: 1)
4. The Story of the Ark (1 Sm 4: 2– 7: 1)
5. Samuel and the Israelite Monarchy (7: 2– 8: 22)
6. Samuel and Saul Meet (1 Sm 9: 1– 10: 16)
7. Saul Defeats the Philistines (1 Sm 13: 1– 14: 52)
8. Saul and the Amalekites (1 Sm 15: 1– 34)
9. Saul and David Meet (1 Sm 16: 1– 23)
10. David and Goliath (1 Sm 17: 1– 18: 5)
11. Saul’s Jealousy (1 Sm 18: 6– 30)
12. David the Fugitive (1 Sm 19: 1– 28: 2)
13. Saul’s Tragic Death (1 Sm 28: 3– 2 Sm 1: 27)
14. End of Saul with dignity and sympathy (1 Sm 31: 1– 13). Saul died doing his duty as king.

*Donald Senior; John Collins; Mary Ann Getty. The Catholic Study Bible (p. 501-520). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.*

**2 Samuel**

* 1. David is portrayed as deeply affected by the deaths of Saul and Jonathan (2 Sm 1: 1– 27).
  2. David Becomes King (2 Sm 2: 1– 5: 25)
  3. The Ark in Jerusalem (2 Sm 6: 1– 23)
  4. Temple and Dynasty (2 Sm 7: 1– 29)
  5. David’s Kingdom and Its Administration (2 Sm 8: 1– 18)
  6. David’s Family and the Succession (2 Sm 9: 1– 20: 26)
  7. Miscellaneous Material (2 Sm 21: 1– 24: 25)
     1. A famine (21: 1– 14) - The lack of a river system to provide for irrigation made the land of Israel particularly vulnerable to famine.
     2. Military Exploits (21: 15– 22)
     3. A hymn of victory by David (22: 1– 51)
     4. David’s final hymn (23: 1– 7)
     5. Military Exploits (23: 8– 39)
     6. A plague (24: 1– 25)

As we read the books of Samuel and its tales of jealousy, rape, murder, and revolution, we can almost hear the author of the books of Samuel saying: “If you want a monarchy, this is what you get.” Samuel describes how Judah’s royal family began to consume itself. Though monarchies are, for the most part, relics of another age, nations still succumb to the temptation of making their political, social, and economic institutions into absolutes. Donald Senior; John Collins; Mary Ann Getty. The Catholic Study Bible (p. 521-531). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

**Kings**

First Kings takes up where 2 Samuel 20 ended, describing how the problem of the succession to David was resolved. The book then goes on to tell the story of Solomon’s reign and the two Israelite kingdoms that arose following Solomon’s death. The division between 1 and 2 Kings is artificial since it is made in the middle of telling the story of King Ahaziah of Israel. Second Kings ends rather abruptly after telling of the parole of King Jehoiachin of Judah from prison in Babylon. The book allows readers to drawn their own conclusions regarding the significance of this event. There is, then, no “happy ending” to the story of Israel in its land. Donald Senior; John Collins; Mary Ann Getty. The Catholic Study Bible (p. 533). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

1 Kings

1. Solomon’s Accession (1 Kgs 1: 1– 2: 46)
2. Solomon’s Reign (1 Kgs 3: 1– 11: 43)
3. Kings concludes its story of Solomon’s reign by mentioning three of Solomon’s rivals (1 Kgs 11: 14– 40). The first is Hadad, king of Edom.

Like the reigns of his predecessors Saul and David, Solomon’s began with great promise but ended with an unfavorable picture of the king thus presaging the story of the people of Israel in their land. The book notes that Solomon was buried in the City of David after a reign of forty years and was succeeded by his son Rehoboam. Donald Senior; John Collins; Mary Ann Getty. The Catholic Study Bible (pp. 525-544). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

2 Kings

1. The Two Kingdoms (1 Kgs 12: 1– 2 Kgs 17: 41)
2. The Final Years of the Kingdom of Judah (2 Kgs 18: 1– 25: 30)

Like the other books that make up the Deuteronomistic History of Israel, the books of Kings put in sharp focus the consequences of failing to remain absolutely committed to the Lord and to the pattern of life given to Israel in the book of Deuteronomy. What the books illustrate is a continuing pattern of failure to live responsibly. Although Kings focuses almost exclusively on the actions of the ruling class, it certainly intended its message for a wider audience. These books remind believers today that they bear a responsibility to act on the Word. Election offers no guarantees; rather, it calls believers to greater commitment. Donald Senior; John Collins; Mary Ann Getty. The Catholic Study Bible (p. 544-567). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

**Chronicles**

Written in the fourth century B.C., 1 and 2 Chronicles originated as a unified work by a writer whom we today call the Chronicler. The division into two books occurred when the texts of the Hebrew Bible were translated, in the second or third century, into Greek for Jews living in the Diaspora. The Chronicler’s work, moreover, is related to the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Although the four books did not have common authorship, as was once thought, they are naturally grouped together. Read sequentially, the narrative of these four books begins with Adam and concludes in the fifth century in postexilic Judah.

About half of the material in Chronicles comes from the books of 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings. Like Samuel and Kings, the books of Chronicles describe and explain the rise and fall of the Israelite kingdoms, Judah (the Southern Kingdom) and Israel (the Northern Kingdom). If Chronicles were considered a supplement to or midrash on Samuel and Kings, it would explain why the Septuagint places Chronicles immediately following the books of Kings. Jerome also followed this order in the Vulgate (his Latin translation of the Bible). English Bibles used by both Protestant and Catholic Christians also follow this order. Donald Senior; John Collins; Mary Ann Getty. The Catholic Study Bible (p. 569-571). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

**1st Book of Chronicles**

1. The Genealogical Lists (1 Chr 1: 1– 9: 44)
2. The History of David’s Reign (1 Chr 10: 1– 29: 30)

The Importance of the Temple Proper worship of the Lord requires a temple, and Chronicles— like the books of Kings— recognizes the legitimacy of only one such place, the Temple at Jerusalem. Valid worship could be conducted at this site alone because David and Solomon built this Temple under divine guidance, according to plans given by the Lord (1 Chr 28: 19). When the Chronicler was writing his history, the worshippers of Israel’s ancestral deity were not unanimous in recognizing Jerusalem’s Temple as the only legitimate place of worship. The Temple Personnel Chapters 23 through 27 appear to be secondary to the Chronicler’s story about David and Solomon, but they are central to the Chronicler’s concern to describe in detail the proper worship of God.

The Chronicler recognized the priests as the chief religious officials. Among the duties of the priests, there was the responsibility to blow the trumpets (1 Chr 16: 6), to minister to the inner sanctuary (2 Chr 5: 14), to offer sacrifice on the altar (2 Chr29: 21), and to burn incense (2 Chr 26: 18). Although the books of Samuel and Kings recognized that others besides the tribe of Levi could serve as priests, the Chronicler makes no exception other than David himself.Donald Senior; John Collins; Mary Ann Getty. The Catholic Study Bible (pp. 572-578). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

**2nd Book of Chronicles**

The story of Solomon (2 Chr 1– 9) deals exclusively with the building of the Temple as envisioned by David. The Chronicler does not repeat the negative aspects of Solomon’s story that 1 Kings recounts. The remaining chapters of the book (10 through 36) rehearse, from the perspective of the Chronicler, the story of Judah up until the Babylonian Exile; 2 Chronicles passes over much detail in 1 and 2 Kings because of its focus on the liturgy of the Temple. Donald Senior; John Collins; Mary Ann Getty. The Catholic Study Bible (p. 581-582). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

Why did the Chronicler retell the story of Israel’s monarchy from a Judean perspective? After all, 2 Samuel through 2 Kings already communicated that story. Indeed, the Chronicler derived much of his story from these books. The purpose of this new version of the story of David and his dynasty was to guide the Jerusalem community as it was reestablishing itself in the centuries following the exile. In the eyes of the Chronicler, the lasting contribution from the monarchic period of Israel’s history was the Temple, its rituals, and its priesthood. Once the people rebuilt the Temple and restored the proper form of its liturgy, the essential elements of Jewish life were in place. Donald Senior; John Collins; Mary Ann Getty. The Catholic Study Bible (p. 585). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

**Ezra**

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are products of the Persian period and tell a remarkable story. In the Babylonian Exile (587– 539 B.C.), lost were all the important legacies of ancient Israel: the Temple, the monarchy, and the city of Jerusalem itself. Undoubtedly some Judeans wondered whether their covenant with God had been broken, perhaps permanently. After roughly fifty years, however, waves of returnees from exile along with Judeans who had remained in the land began to create a new future by rebuilding the city of Jerusalem along with its Temple. Indeed, virtually all the legacies of ancient Israel— the Jerusalem Temple, the monarchy, the covenant, and the law— were reconsidered and recast to form the foundation of Judean life after the exile.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah document this restoration and describe it as a dynamic and creative process of renewal. Both books narrate episodes where community is formed through grace and faith. Challenges are met by trusting in God and following the law of God. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah recount, on occasion, controversial practices on the part of the postexilic community, such as forcible divorce for those members who did not marry a fellow Judean (Ezr 9– 10). While some in the community may have supported this type of initiative unequivocally, it in fact raises questions about the best means of preserving group identity and remaining faithful to that identity.

Originally the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were a single work. The book of Nehemiah does not have a title in the Hebrew Bible; there is simply a superscription (Neh 1: 1) that reads “The book of Nehemiah.” In most editions of the Septuagint (the second-century B.C. Greek version of the Hebrew Bible), the two books form a unit. Their division into two separate texts dates at least to the time of Origen and is to be found after that in Jerome’s Vulgate (the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Latin). On the basis of Jerome’s work, Ezra and Nehemiah became separate books in our English Bible. Donald Senior; John Collins; Mary Ann Getty. The Catholic Study Bible (pp. 590-592). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

The book of Ezra falls into two parts, each covering a period of postexilic history.

1. Chapters 1 through 6 treat the return from exile and the rebuilding of the Temple.
2. Chapters 7 through 10 describe the mission of Ezra to reconstitute Judah as a community living in accord with the Torah.

Donald Senior; John Collins; Mary Ann Getty. The Catholic Study Bible (p. 595). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

**Nehemiah**

The book of Nehemiah deals with the political and administrative side of the restoration, while the book of Ezra focuses on the establishment of Torah as the guide by which the returned community lived.

1. The book describes the work of Nehemiah (1: 1– 7: 72) and the place of Torah in the restored community of Jerusalem (8: 1– 13: 31).
2. The Rebuilding of Jerusalem (1: 1– 6: 19)
3. The Population of Jerusalem (7: 1– 72)
4. The Public Reading of Torah (8: 1– 10: 40)
5. The Resettlement of Jerusalem (11: 1– 13: 31)

Donald Senior; John Collins; Mary Ann Getty. The Catholic Study Bible (pp. 603-604). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

The Books of Maccabees give us two overlapping but somewhat differing accounts of Jewish resistance to Seleucid persecution in the early second century BC, and the assumption of power by the leaders of the resistance, the Maccabees or Hasmoneans. The traditional designation of these books as “historical” describes their scope and contents, and is not meant to assert factual verifiability; while they contain much valuable historical information, in the narrow sense, their purpose is theological rather than historiographic.

**Biblical Novellas**

The Books of Tobit, Judith, and Esther are sometimes reckoned among the historical books, but they differ from the writings sketched above, and call for special treatment; see the introduction to those books.

