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### Why the Old Testament Confuses Some People

Many people find the Old Testament difficult to read. They enjoy the stories of Moses and Samson and Esther and Ruth. They're familiar with the temple and the tabernacle, and they recognize the names of places like Sinai, Jerusalem, and Babylon. But these familiar names and places are hard to piece together. Making sense of the Old Testament is, for many, like putting a picture puzzle together without the puzzle's picture. They have the Moses piece and wonder whose picture they should put it next to. How does he relate to Samson or Esther or Ruth? Or does he relate to them at all? This lesson is designed to paint the Old Testament picture so you will know how to put the individual stories together in such a way that your big picture fits with the Old Testament's big picture.

### The Old Testament's Books

One reason people become confused by the Old Testament is that they try to read it like a history book or novel. These kinds of books begin at the beginning and end at the end. But the Old Testament isn't arranged that way. The thirty-nine books in the Old Testament are arranged, instead, by the kind of literature the books contain. It's important to know there are three kinds of books in the Old Testament. The first seventeen books, from Genesis to Esther, are written mostly as narrative. They tell the Old Testament's story and are arranged like chapters in a history book. But after the book of Esther, we enter the world of the Old Testament's five poetry and wisdom books. Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon don't tell us about Israel's history. They present Israel's beautiful poetry and wisdom writings. After the Song of Solomon, we begin reading Israel's seventeen prophetic books. Isaiah through Malachi record the messages of Israel's prophets.

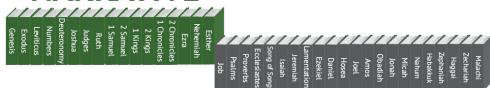
#### Why the Old Testament Confuses Some People



#### The Old Testament's Books

The 39 books in the Old Testament are arranged by the kind of literature they contain.

#### NARRATIVE



## The Old Testament's Books



So the Old Testament contains seventeen books of narrative, five books of poetry and wisdom, and seventeen books of prophetic writing. In lessons 2 and 3 we will study the relationships between these thirty-nine books so we can better understand how the Old Testament is organized. Then in lessons 4 through 10, we will explore these books in a little more detail. But before getting into the details of the Old Testament books, it's essential that we understand how the Old Testament works. In this lesson we will paint the Old Testament's picture so we can find out where each piece of the Old Testament's puzzle belongs.

## The Old Testament's Story

Let's get the Old Testament's story line fixed in our mind. Only then can we see where the Old Testament poets and prophets fit and make sense of them. We said that the Old Testament story is told in the first seventeen of the thirty-nine Old Testament books, and that's important to know. But we are going to make a further distinction here by dividing the seventeen story or narrative books into two categories. Even though all seventeen books *contribute* to the story, only eleven of the seventeen *move* the story forward. The other six books include important events that add details to the main plot. If you've listened to a storyteller who consistently digresses and lets the story get bogged down with too much detail, you can appreciate the difference between books that keep the story moving and those that add details that are important but don't contribute to the story's progress.

For the purposes of this lesson, we will call the books that move the story forward "time" books and those that add commentary on the story "color" books. For instance, Exodus is a "time" book. It moves the story forward. It tells us about the events at Sinai where Moses received God's Law. These 613 laws were essential to Israel's life and needed to be recorded for them—and for us. But Exodus is a narrative. It's a story. So Moses didn't list and describe all those laws in Exodus. He put them in a separate book called Leviticus, which adds essential details to the story of Sinai. It provides "color" to the events recorded in Exodus. But it doesn't advance the story chronologically and could bog readers down so they never finish the story Moses tells us about the exodus from Egypt and the events at Mount Sinai. Since this lesson is designed to give us the Old Testament's big picture, we will save our review of the "color" books for lesson 3 and only look at the "time" books in this lesson.

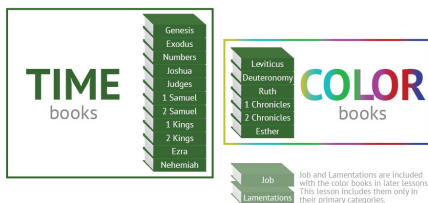
## The Old Testament's Story

The first 17 **NARRATIVE** books tell the story of the Old Testament.

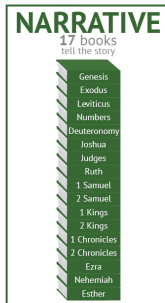
Genesis  
Exodus  
Leviticus  
Numbers  
Deuteronomy  
Joshua  
Judges  
Ruth  
1 Samuel  
2 Samuel  
1 Kings  
2 Kings  
1 Chronicles  
2 Chronicles  
Ezra  
Nehemiah  
Esther

## The Old Testament's Story

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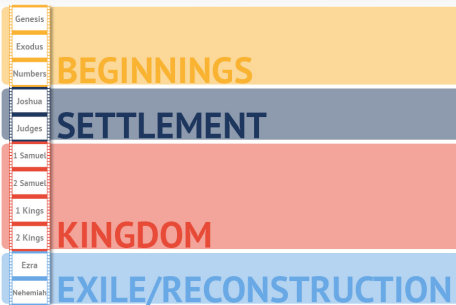
## The Time Books



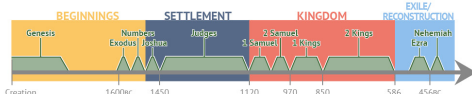
## The Time Books



## The Old Testament's Four Eras



## The Old Testament's Four Eras

*The Time Books*

Let's review that again. There are seventeen books that tell the Old Testament story. We call them the story books or the narrative books. And then we divided the narrative books that tell the Old Testament story into the two categories: the "time" books that move the story forward and the "color" books that add details to the story. The eleven "time" books are spliced together like a movie reel. One book picks up the story where the previous book stopped. But periodically the story needs elaboration or explanation. It's almost as if the Grand Storyteller said, "Hold on here. There's some important information we need to add to the story, but I don't want to slow the narrative down with too much detail." Rather than stop the story, God just added another book that gives us the details. So we have "time" books and "color" books that tell us the Old Testament story. In this lesson we will focus only on the time books so we can understand the main story. In lesson 3 we will plug the color books, the poetic books, and the prophets into the story and see how they contribute. But first we will paint the puzzle's picture so we can fit all the pieces into their proper place.

**II. The Old Testament's Four Eras**

The Old Testament story can be divided into four time periods or eras. We call the first period the time of Beginnings, and it includes three of the time books: Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers. The second era is described in Joshua and Judges and is called the Settlement era. Third is the Kingdom era, and it is recorded in 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings. At the end of 2 Kings, Israel was conquered by the Babylonians. Jerusalem's walls and temple were destroyed and her people were taken to Babylon as slaves. Seventy years later they were released by the Persians and allowed to return and rebuild their temple, their city, and their lives. That fourth period of the Old Testament story is called the Exile and Reconstruction era and is recorded in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

That's a very broad, bird's-eye view of the Old Testament story with its four divisions or eras: Beginning, Settlement, Kingdom, and Exile/Reconstruction. Now that we have the big picture, let's go through again and add a little detail. We will study each of these eras more thoroughly in lessons 4 through 10. But it's important in this lesson to get the bigger picture fixed in our

mind. If this Old Testament Basics course piques your interest, you should consider taking the more detailed courses taught by Dr. Douglas Stuart. (The courses, OT216–OT227, are listed in the CUGN course catalog.)

### *Beginnings*

Genesis means “beginning,” and the book tells us that everything began with God’s act of creation. The book opens by simply saying, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Chapters 1–11 tell us how God created the universe and the world and the first humans. It also describes the introduction of sin into the human condition and its tragic results. Noah’s story is included here to show how strong man’s rebellion against God was. Then Genesis 12–50 describe the beginning of Israel. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are referred to as the patriarchs, or fathers of the Jewish people. The rest of the Old Testament story is primarily about God’s relationship with Israel, and that story begins in Genesis 12. The book of Genesis ends with Abraham’s descendants living in Egypt as favored guests of the pharaoh.

Exodus is the second “time” book that moves the Old Testament story forward. During the four hundred years between the end of Genesis and the beginning of Exodus, Abraham’s descendants had become enslaved by the Egyptians and longed to get out of Egypt. God prepared a deliverer named Moses who, after a series of plagues on the Egyptians, led Israel out of Egypt, across the Red Sea, and down to Mount Sinai. There they received the Ten Commandments and the other 613 laws from God that governed their lives through the rest of the Old Testament.

The third “time” book is Numbers, and it opens with Israel at Sinai waiting for God’s command to move into the land of Canaan. When God led them to Canaan’s entrance, they refused to enter because they were afraid of the people who lived there. Numbers tells the sad story of Israel wandering in the wilderness for forty years, eating manna provided by God while the disobedient generation of Israel who came out of Egypt died in the Sinai desert. They begged God not to make them enter Canaan, and his answer to their prayer condemned them to a life of meaningless wandering in the Sinai desert. As Numbers ends, the children of those who refused to enter Canaan had grown to adulthood and were poised to enter the land God had promised to their parents and to settle down to life as God’s people.

#### Beginnings

### **Genesis:** “Beginning”

#### Beginnings

### **Exodus** “I will take you as my people, and I will be your God.” 6:7



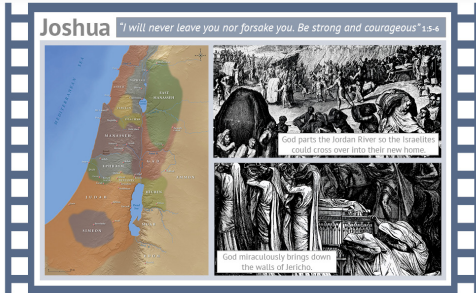
#### Beginnings

### **Numbers** “For forty years . . . you will suffer for your sins. . .” 14:34



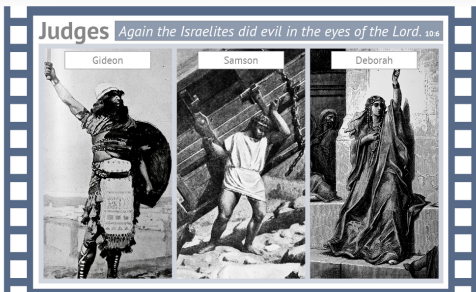


## Settlement

*Settlement*

Joshua and Judges are referred to as the books of the Settlement period. Joshua is the book that describes Israel's success and victories as they conquered their new land. The book moves the story forward to Israel's conquest of Canaan and describes how they divided the land between the twelve tribes and settled down. God opened the Jordan River so they could cross over into their new home on dry land. Their confidence in God's presence was bolstered by the supernatural battle for Jericho. Just as God had provided a miraculous exodus from Egypt, so He reassured His children of His presence by a miraculous entrance into Canaan.

## Settlement



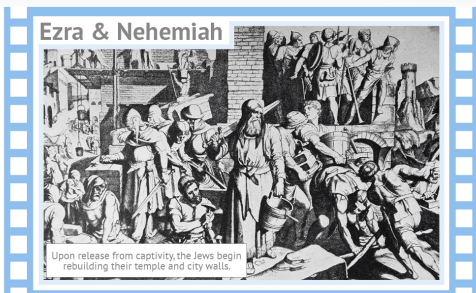
After Joshua their leader died, the people rebelled against God's laws. The book of Judges describes Israel's rebellion and its tragic results. Israel continually violated their covenant with God, and He allowed various local nations to plunder their land. Each time, Israel would cry to God for help and in response God would raise up a deliverer or judge to drive out the enemy. In Judges we read the stories of judges like Gideon, Samson, and Deborah.

## Kingdom Era

*Kingdom Era*

The theme of Judges was that everyone did what was right in their own eyes. That anarchy contributed to Israel's desire for a king to rule over them and ushered in Israel's Kingdom era. Samuel was Israel's last judge, and he introduced the kingdom era and anointed Saul as Israel's first king. Second Samuel describes David's reign and Israel's most glorious days. First Kings tells of Solomon's reign and his construction of Israel's beautiful temple. But this book also introduces the seeds of Israel's destruction. Beginning in 1 Kings 12 and on through 2 Kings we read how Israel ripped itself apart and became two nations, Israel and Judah. A series of evil kings in Israel and a mixture of evil and godly kings in Judah eventually led to the destruction of both nations.

## Exile and Reconstruction

*Exile and Reconstruction*

Judah's defeat by the Babylonians included the destruction of Jerusalem and Solomon's temple and the deportation and enslavement of her citizens. Their exile lasted for seventy years until the Persians defeated the Babylonians. The Persians released the captive Jews and provided resources for them to rebuild their temple, their city walls, and their lives. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah record the events of the reconstruction era. And that is where the Old Testament story ends.

## Conclusion



## Conclusion

The Old Testament story includes great success and tragic failure. It's a story of God's faithful involvement with His people. It's a story of Israel's abuse of their freedom to make choices. It describes the tragic consequences that occur when God's gracious directions are ignored. But the best part of the story is that at the end of the Old Testament, God has not abandoned His promises to His people. He still loves and patiently cares for them—just as He does with us.