

Introduction to the Historical Books

David Howard

The “Historical Books” of the Old Testament, which come after the Pentateuch, tell the story of (1) Israel’s entry into the Promised Land of Canaan under Joshua; (2) Israel’s life in the land under the judges and the transition to kingship; (3) the division of the nation into two rival kingdoms (Israel and Judah) and life in both; (4) the downfall and exile of each kingdom; (5) life in the exile; and (6) Judah’s return from exile. These books span close to one thousand years of history, so it is not surprising that their story includes many ups and downs, twists and turns. Yet, through it all, the God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever remains the focal point of all of these books.

The date of Moses’s death is calculated by working backward from 1 Kings 6:1, which states that Solomon began to build the temple 480 years after the exodus from Egypt. Comparing the information in 1 Kings with extrabiblical records indicates that the

Fig. 3.1 Historical Books Timeline

1406 [or 1220] BC	Moses’s death; Israel’s entry into Canaan under Joshua
1375 [or 1210]	Joshua’s death
1375–1055 [or 1210–1050/42/30]	Period of the judges
1050/42/30–1010	Saul’s reign
1010–971	David’s reign
971–931	Solomon’s reign
931–722	Divided kingdom (Israel)—19 kings
722	Destruction of Samaria (Israel’s capital) by Assyria; Israel’s resettlement
931–586	Divided kingdom (Judah)—19 kings, 1 queen
586	Destruction of Jerusalem and temple by Babylon; Judah exiled to Babylon
586–538	Judah’s exile in Babylon
561	Release of King Jehoiachin from prison in Babylon
539	Cyrus II of Persia captures Babylon
538	First return of Jews to Jerusalem under Jeshua and Zerubbabel
516	Temple rebuilding completed
478	Esther and Mordecai rise in the Persian court
458	Ezra’s return to Jerusalem from Babylon
445	Nehemiah’s return to Jerusalem from Babylon
445–???	Walls of Jerusalem rebuilt
433	Nehemiah’s visit to Babylon and return to Jerusalem

temple building began in 967 or 966 BC. The date of the exodus, then, would be 1447 or 1446 BC, and the date of Moses’s death, forty years later, would be 1407 or 1406. On the other hand, if one finds some symbolism in the 480-year figure (e.g., supposing it to result from twelve generations, with a generation taken to be forty years), one may arrive at a date for the exodus of about 1260 BC (which some believe allows for greater agreement with Egyptian history), yielding a date around 1220 for Moses’s death.

Other dates are certain with a high degree of confidence. The story of Esther and Mordecai took place in the time of Ahasuerus (Est. 1:1), who reigned over Persia 486–464 BC.

Note that the northern kingdom of Israel lasted slightly more than two hundred years (931–722 BC), with nineteen kings. All

of Israel's kings did evil in the Lord's eyes, and there were several assassinations and changes of ruling family.

In contrast, the southern kingdom of Judah lasted almost 350 years (931–586 BC), with the same number of kings. Thus, a greater degree of political stability existed in Judah—and, to some degree, spiritual stability, since eight kings in Judah did right in the Lord's eyes. All the kings in this lineage were descended from David, to whom God had promised there would always be a descendant of his line on the throne (2 Sam. 7:12–16).

The Babylonians attacked Jerusalem in 605 and 597 BC, deporting the cream of Judah's society (e.g., Daniel and his friends were deported in 605) before the final destruction and deportation of 586.

From the dates above, it appears as though the exile lasted only fifty years (586–538/537 BC), which seems to contradict Jeremiah's prophecy about the return from exile after seventy years (Jer. 25:11; 29:10). However, the round number "70" can be calculated by one of two methods: (a) from the first deportation (605 BC) to the first return (538 or 537) yields sixty-eight years; or (b) from the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (586) to the rebuilding of the temple (516) yields seventy years.

Unity

In our English Bibles, there are twelve Historical Books: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1–2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings, 1–2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. In the Hebrew Bible, the books are divided differently: Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, and 1–2 Kings are part of the second section of the Bible, titled the "Former Prophets," and the rest of the Historical Books are found among the third section, titled the "Writings."

Each book evidences a different style of writing. In Joshua, for example, the accounts of Israel's entering and settling into the land of Canaan in chapters 1–11 and 22–24 are interrupted by the

lists of land distributions in chapters 12–21. In Judges, we find a cyclical history spiraling downward through the regimes of successive judges. Ruth is a self-contained and beautifully told story of God's grace in the life of one family of David's ancestors. First and 2 Samuel tell of the establishment of the legitimate Davidic monarchy in a richly textured account of the events; much in these books has the feel of an eyewitness account. By contrast, 1 and 2 Kings tell the story of Israel's kings after David in a much more stereotypical manner, structured around repeated formulas of the accession, main exploits, and deaths of the successive kings, all leading eventually to exile. First and 2 Chronicles portray similar events to those found in 2 Samuel and 1–2 Kings. As with the composition of Kings, Chronicles enlists and shapes an array of literary and historical materials to address a new set of concerns now facing the postexilic people of God. Ezra–Nehemiah contains first-person and eyewitness accounts, lists, and correspondence about the return from Babylonian exile and postexilic life. Esther is like Ruth in being a self-contained and well-told story; it deals with life events affecting Jews in Persia in the postexilic period.

Despite the differences, all of these books present history from a God's-eye view. That is, they are not "history for history's sake," but rather, they are *theological* in nature. They tell about God's repeated in-breakings into history, whether by dramatic accounts of miracles, or by God's speaking directly to his people, or by his indirect presence, visible in the providential outworking of events. And, in the telling of all these events, the authors' perspectives are God's perspectives. So it should not surprise us that many of the books' themes echo each other and also carry forward some of the great themes of the Pentateuch.

Themes

Each historical book has its own unique themes. But many of these can be tied into larger, overarching themes that have their

roots in the Pentateuch and unfold across many books. Five overarching themes pervade the Historical Books: God's sovereignty, presence, promises, kingdom, and covenant.

1. God's Sovereignty: Over Israel and the Nations

God is consistently presented in the Historical Books as sovereign over all of creation, including the elements of nature and the affairs of individuals and nations. The most spectacular way in which the writers demonstrate God's sovereignty is through various miracles. These occur throughout the Old Testament but tend to be especially prominent in the book of Joshua (the stopping of the Jordan River and various victories over enemies) and the books of 1–2 Kings, especially in the stories of Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 17–19; 21; 2 Kings 1–9; 13).

Also, Israel is consistently presented as under God's authority, care, and protection, and therefore obligated to return to him their love, trust, and obedience. Even the other nations were subject to God—from the small city-states and peoples in the times of Joshua, the judges, Saul, and David (e.g., the Philistines, Moabites, Canaanites), to the great empires of Assyria, Babylon, and Persia. These circumstances form the backdrop to the events of 1–2 Kings, 1–2 Chronicles, Ezra–Nehemiah, and Esther.

2. God's Presence: Near and Far

In most of the Historical Books, God is close at hand. He designated Joshua as Moses's successor, raised up the judges in response to Israel's dire straits over several centuries, and designated Saul and then David as his chosen kings. He was a source of help to the godly kings who sought him, and to bold prophets who spoke in his name (Nathan, Gad, Elijah, Micaiah, Elisha, Huldah, and others). He empowered Jeshua, Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah to be bold leaders after the trauma of the exile. The prayers of godly kings such as David (2 Samuel 7), Solomon

(1 Kings 8), Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 20), and others show the closeness of their relationship with God.

And yet at times God seemed more hidden. Most often, this was because of Israel's sin. Such was clearly the case in Judges (ch. 2), Samuel (1 Sam. 4:19–22), and repeatedly in 1–2 Kings and 1–2 Chronicles. Sometimes, however, God's hiddenness is not attributed to sin; it is simply a fact, and his presence must be inferred indirectly. In Ruth, for example, the author quotes the characters' references to God many times, but only mentions God in his own words twice (Ruth 1:6; 4:13). In Esther, God is not mentioned at all. Cases such as these (esp. Esther) signal that sometimes Christians have to look for God's presence in very intentional ways, and that sometimes God chooses not to reveal himself as directly as at other times.

3. God's Promises: Present and Future

The Historical Books carry forward the stories of the Pentateuch, including some of its great themes. One consistent theme is God's promise to be with his people, going back to Abraham (Gen. 17:8) and continuing with Moses (Ex. 3:12), Joshua (Josh. 1:5, 9), David (2 Samuel 7), Ezra (Ezra 7:6), Nehemiah (Neh. 2:8), and many others. The important promises to Abraham—sometimes called the "Abrahamic covenant"—included the land of Canaan (Gen. 12:7; 13:15; 17:8), many descendants (Gen. 12:2; 15:5), and blessings on Abraham and, through him, on the nations (Gen. 12:1–3). The Abrahamic covenant, then, forms the foundation of much that is in the Historical Books: (1) The stage on which the books unfold is the Promised Land of Canaan; (2) Israel became a mighty nation among its immediate neighbors, with thousands upon thousands of descendants of Abraham; and (3) Israel and Judah were repeatedly blessed when they followed God. Even non-Israelites were blessed when they turned to the

God of Abraham (e.g., Rahab in Joshua 2 and Naaman in 2 Kings 5). God did not forsake his promises to his people.

4. God's Kingdom: Both Divine and Human

The Bible teaches that God is king over the earth (e.g., Ex. 15:18; Ps. 93:1). As noted above, the exercise of his rule can be seen in his sovereignty over all nature, people, and nations.

God also chose to exercise his rule through human kings. As far back as Abraham's day, God had promised that kings would come from Abraham's line (Gen. 17:6, 16; 35:11; 49:10). He carefully prescribed that these kings should not be like the kings of neighboring nations, where warfare and foreign alliances were their primary features; by contrast, Israel's kings were to be rooted in a study of God's Word, and to let God fight Israel's battles (Deut. 17:14–20; Judg. 8:22–23; 1 Sam. 8:5, 20). The king was God's representative on earth, and God's earthly kingdom was entrusted to him. We can see this clearly in texts such as 2 Chronicles 13:8, which refers to "the kingdom of the LORD in the hand of the sons of David," and 1 Chronicles 29:23, where Solomon is chosen to sit "on the throne of the LORD."

God was a father to the Davidic kings, and they were "sons" of God in perpetuity (2 Sam. 7:11–16); these promises are known as the "Davidic covenant." While most of Israel's and Judah's kings did not live up to the ideals set out in Deuteronomy 17 and 2 Samuel 7, nevertheless the model was one where the king exercised his rule in connection with God's will and in dependence upon God. The New Testament highlights the kingdom theme as the ultimate "Son" of God was born from the lineage of David: Jesus, the Christ (Matt. 1:1; Rom. 1:3). It is with the proclamation of the kingdom that the Messiah's ministry commences (Matt. 4:17; Mark 1:14–15; Luke 4:16–21). With his resurrection and ascension Jesus began his reign as the Davidic king (Acts 13:33; Rom. 1:4), to carry out the long-awaited work of bringing light

to the Gentiles (Matt. 28:1–20; Rom. 1:5). The church, now as Christ's representative presence in the world, is called in the power of the Spirit to proclaim and live out that kingdom reign (Acts 8:12; 19:8; 20:25).

5. God's Covenant: Reward and Punishment

The Abrahamic covenant required obedience to God in all realms of life. God said that Abraham had "obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws" (Gen. 26:5). In other words, Abraham—who lived centuries before the Mosaic law was given at Mount Sinai—had lived his life in relationship with God in full accord with what later would be understood as keeping the law. The collections of Mosaic laws, and the attendant promises and obligations, have come to be known as the "Mosaic covenant," which spelled out how Israel was to shape the life of the nation under the Abrahamic covenant, which continued to be in effect through the promises of land, seed, and blessing to the nations (Gen. 12:1–3).

The book of Deuteronomy lays out most fully the rewards and punishments that would follow obedience or disobedience (Deuteronomy 27–28), and this perspective governed most of the writing of the Historical Books: when people followed the Lord, they were blessed, and when they did not, they suffered. We see this over and over again in Judges, 1–2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings, and 1–2 Chronicles. When the people turned from God, they suffered (e.g., Judges 2). The kings who sought the Lord, such as Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:7–8), were blessed, and punishment followed those who did not, such as Manasseh (2 Kings 24:3–4). In 1–2 Chronicles, especially, the author explicitly makes the connections between sin and punishment: see the accounts of Saul's death (1 Chron. 10:13) and Uzziah's leprosy (2 Chron. 26:16–23). As in Deuteronomy, the focus of these books is not so much on

the individual person as on the moral condition of the people as a whole, with the king as their representative.

Distinctives

The largest single literary genre (type) in the Historical Books is prose narrative. Other genres are inserted in the narratives, including poetry (e.g., Judges 5; 1 Sam. 2:1–10; 2 Samuel 22; 1 Chron. 16:8–36), genealogies (e.g., Ruth 4:18–22; 1 Chronicles 1–9), lists (e.g., Joshua 13–21; 2 Sam. 23:8–39; 1 Kings 4:1–19; Ezra 2:1–70; 10:18–44; Nehemiah 11), letters (e.g., Ezra 4:11–22; 5:7–17; 6:2–22), and more. Prose narrative is found elsewhere in the Bible as well, not just in the Historical Books (e.g., all or parts of Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Jonah, and Haggai, as well as the Gospels and Acts).

The historical narratives are presented as straightforward accounts of real events, and they treat miracles in the same narrative fashion as they do everyday events (e.g., the matter-of-fact mixing of the two in the Elijah and Elisha accounts). But narrative texts differ in several respects from poetic or prophetic texts. For example, as a rule, Hebrew narratives are not as selective as poetic texts (cf. the prose account of the Israelites' victory under Deborah in Judges 4 with the more sparse poetic account in Judges 5). Also, poetic texts can be much more figurative than prose texts (cf. Judg. 4:23–24 and 5:4–5, 20 on the Lord's victory; or Judg. 4:21 and 5:26–27 on the death of Sisera). In narrative, often the main story line is contained in the words of the characters, not in the prose narrative "framework" (e.g., Joshua 1 or 1 Samuel 8). Narrative texts are also usually concerned with past events, whereas prophetic texts are much more commonly present- or future-oriented.

Historical narratives are not, however, simply clusters of facts. Their authors used their God-given talents and creativity to tell the stories of real events from certain perspectives and to highlight

certain facts and truths. The best way to see this is by comparing parallel accounts in 1–2 Kings and 1–2 Chronicles (in the same way in which one would compare parallel events in the Gospels); the authors of those books often relayed the same event from different, complementary perspectives, the later narrative sometimes borrowing directly from the earlier.

Notes on Critical Scholarship

Critical scholars (i.e., those whose chief concern is the origin and editorial history of the texts) in the past two centuries have provided many helpful insights into the nature, composition, and messages of the Historical Books. This should not surprise us, since all truth is God's truth. However, many critical scholars have also been profoundly skeptical of the Bible's claims, and so their results must be weighed carefully.

For example, one common theory postulates that the books of Deuteronomy through 2 Kings (minus Ruth) were editorially shaped during the exile to explain why Israel and Judah had fallen. This theory helpfully highlights many themes from Deuteronomy that are played out in the Historical Books. However, it can be used to loosen the connection of Deuteronomy with Moses (which the Bible affirms), and it is skeptical about the authorial integrity of most books as they stand today.

Many scholars today also seriously question the historical reliability of almost everything in the Historical Books. The most extreme scholars deny that any of the events described in the Historical Books took place, and they claim that all of the books were written after the exile. Other scholars are less skeptical than that but still deny that many events occurred (e.g., all the miracles, and the events before the time of Solomon). Evangelical scholars have provided helpful responses to such skeptics.