BEGINNING THE STUDY

INTRODUCTION

For centuries Christians and Jews alike considered the Old Testament a unified work. Jewish readers viewed the Hebrew Scriptures as a thorough account of their faith and history. Christians treated the Old Testament as the natural introduction to their New Testament. Neither group failed to acknowledge the many types of literature in the books, but both communities of faith found underlying themes and characters that bound the whole together.

In the last two centuries, however, the diversity of the Old Testament has been stressed. Children are taught that the Bible is not a book but many books. College and seminary students often analyze each biblical book in isolation from other Scripture. Therefore many individuals have little sense of the wholeness of Scripture. Few people can fit specific stories into a larger biblical picture. Lacking a grasp of the overall Old Testament plot and purpose, Bible students struggle to understand particular passages.

This book attempts to chart some elements that unify the Old Testament. Its purpose is to serve as a companion to Bible reading. Characters, plot, structure, themes, and historical settings are highlighted so the reader will know what is happening in the Old Testament. Theology and criticism are not absent, but they play a secondary role. The reader is referred to more detailed studies of these subjects. This book seeks to help readers appreciate the unity of the Old Testament. If students can master the introductory principles this book covers, they will then be prepared to move on to further study.

ORDER OF THE STUDY

Every Old Testament survey must choose a way to approach its subject. Some authors stress the theological content of the books. Others describe in detail the historical background of the Old Testament. Beyond these concerns many textbooks explain the books according to when they appear in the English Bible. Still others assemble the texts in historical order. For Christians it seems logical to study the Hebrew Bible as the early church did.
The first disciples’ only Scripture was the Old Testament. They believed it was inspired by God as their guide for faith and action (2 Tm 3:16). Their Bible was divided into three specific parts: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings (see Lk 24:44). That order will be followed throughout this book. Notice how the order of the books in the Hebrew Bible differs from the English Bible:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Law</th>
<th>Prophets</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Deuteronomy</td>
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<td>(Hosea–Malachi)</td>
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<td>1 and 2 Chronicles</td>
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Most students realize immediately that some books seem misplaced in the Hebrew Bible. After all, Ruth, Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1 and 2 Chronicles are not with the other historical works. Daniel is not among the Prophets, and Lamentations is not with Jeremiah. Some readers even doubt the Hebrew Bible’s counting system. Perhaps 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, or 1 and 2 Chronicles could be one book, but how can twelve Minor Prophets make one book? The same thirty-nine books are in the Hebrew and English Bibles, so why the differences? These are vital questions if one wants to understand the early church’s Bible. The answers to these questions help demonstrate the unity of the Old Testament.

Following the Hebrew order of books offers many advantages. First, the reader learns the basic events of Israel’s history from creation to the fall of Jerusalem. All succeeding books therefore have a historical context to which the reader can refer. Second, the student realizes that the Prophets explain Israel’s history. Third, the reader learns that the Prophets present a uniform message. Fourth, the student observes
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how the Writings comment on how faithful persons lived given Israel’s historical situation.

In other words the Hebrew Bible’s sequence shows what happened to Israel, why it happened, and how believers responded to both. By surveying the Old Testament in this order, the ways history, theology, and faith work together in Scripture become evident. Certainly the New Testament authors interpreted the Old Testament in this unified manner.

LITERARY ASPECTS OF THE STUDY

No piece of literature, sacred or secular, can be understood unless readers know some basic facts about the material. Characters and plot are the starting points for all literary analysis. They exist within specific historical settings. Themes and symbols add meaning to story lines. Different types of literature operate in different ways. Certainly some knowledge of these aspects of the Old Testament will aid beginning students.

Characters

Analyzing characters means more than simply noting who appears in a story. Once characters have been identified, the reader needs to know their natures. Is the character positive or negative in the story? Does the character make a significant impact on the account? What are the character’s motives? What do other characters say about the individual in question? Or does a disparity here point to character weakness or plot irony? Further, do the character’s actions and words agree? Asking these and other questions about Old Testament figures will guide the reader’s perception of the significance of each individual character. Normally, the characters who impact the plot the most are the most significant in the story.

Plot

Plot involves what happens in a story and why it happens. Good plots are formed by the ideas, dreams, and conflicts of its characters and are logically ordered. A mere tracing of events does not explain a plot. Rather, motives and explanations determine plot. The fact that Israel leaves Egypt (Ex 1) tells a story, but to know that God causes Israel to be freed uncovers a plot.

Generally plots may be comic or tragic. Tragic stories begin hopefully but eventually end sadly. For example, Israel’s failure to enter the promised land (Nm 13–19) is a tragic account. Comic plots are
not necessarily funny or satirical. When literary scholars say a plot is “comic,” they mean the story has a pleasant, or happy, ending. All may seem negative in the middle of the story, but any problems are resolved by the plot’s end. David’s rise to Israel’s throne despite Saul’s hatred (1 Sm 16–2 Sm 4) represents a comic plot. Realizing whether a plot is comic or tragic is vital to understanding Old Testament stories.

Themes

Locating themes in literature helps the reader understand the purpose behind characters and plots. Why certain accounts appear in Scripture can often be explained by a book’s theme. For example, the major theme of Judges is, “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Jdg 17:6; 21:25 NRSV). Therefore, the author includes many occurrences that may shock or repulse the reader.

Many students fear the word theology. Though the study of theology can become complicated, at its beginning level theology identifies and studies great Bible themes related to God and human beings. When readers begin to locate major themes in the Old Testament, they are doing basic theology. For example, to see that Isaiah stresses salvation is a first step toward defining salvation in the Old Testament.

Symbols

Simply put, symbols are images, words, or phrases that represent something beyond themselves. Symbols point to deeper meaning or reality. The temple represents God’s presence among Israel. Ezekiel uses his vision of dry bones (Ezk 37:1–14) to illustrate Israel’s renewal. In the Prophets, Hosea’s wife Gomer is unfaithful to her husband. Hosea then claims that Israel is just as unfaithful to God. So symbols make themes come alive. They challenge readers to envision and think about a message.

PROSE

Most of the Old Testament is written in a nonpoetic style. This statement is particularly true of the Law and Former Prophets. Prose is action oriented. It describes events and the importance of those events. Rarely will standard prose convey abstract meaning or reveal in great detail the inner feelings of a character. Books that have a fixed starting and stopping place, like Samuel and Kings, are best served by prose since they tell specific actions and events.
Prose proceeds logically. Whether a text describes the life of an individual, tribe, or nation, prose has a beginning, middle, and end. The author may comment on why events happen but always bases those comments on the story itself. Each story has unique elements that make it creative and artistic.

POETRY

Each major section (Law, Prophets, or Writings) of the Old Testament contains poetry. The Prophets and the Writings use poetry the most. Old Testament poets write sermons, songs, visions, complaints, and predictions. Obviously, then, ancient poetry is flexible.

Hebrew poetry differs from English verse. Rhyme seldom appears in Hebrew poetry, and stanzas are not immediately apparent in translation. Its rhythm does not always follow a set pattern, which separates it from much traditional Greek, Roman, Italian, and English poetry. Old Testament poetry has its own pattern, however, and uses imagery, word play, and other poetic devices.

Old Testament poetry is shaped by thought and sense patterns. Rather than two lines rhyming, Hebrew poetry matches the ideas of consecutive lines. Two lines may say basically the same or almost opposite things. Several lines often work together to present a message. At least three types of poetry appear in the Old Testament. The first type of poetry is called synonymous poetry; the second, antithetical poetry; and the third, synthetic poetry.¹

In synonymous poetry two successive lines say practically the same things, as in Psalm 3:1:

O Lord, how many are my foes!
How many rise up against me!

Together the two lines drive home the writer’s desperate situation. Proverbs 19:4 illustrates antithetical poetry, in which two successive lines state opposite ideas:

Wealth brings many friends,
but a poor man’s friend deserts him.

Even though the phrases are opposites, they both show the relative importance of wealth. Since synthetic poetry normally uses many lines, an example will not be quoted. Passages like Zephaniah 1:14–16;

¹ These categories were first recognized by Robert Lowth in Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews (1753; repr., Andover: Codman Press, 1829).
Joel 1:1–20; and Psalm 139:1–6 illustrate that type of poetry. A succession of lines, images, and themes shape the poems here.

Like all other nations’ poetry, Hebrew verse is reflective in nature. Presentation of specific events gives way to statements about the poet’s feelings about life. For instance, 2 Kings 24–25 describes the fall of Jerusalem while Psalm 137 tells how the poet responds to that catastrophe.

Poetry will be discussed later in the book, so it is not necessary to master all its aspects now. Still, poetry appears as early as Genesis, so some understanding of its principles will help the beginning reader immediately. An appreciation of both prose and poetry will grow as the perceptive student sees both in the Old Testament.

HISTORICAL ASPECTS OF THE STUDY

Though this book focuses on literary content, it will not neglect historical matters. After all, much of the Old Testament’s plot grows out of major historical events. Events like the exodus, the entering of the promised land, and the destruction of Jerusalem help shape whole series of books. Therefore, some explanation of dates, customs, and leaders will be offered. When these historical references appear, however, every effort is made to fit them into the overall Old Testament story.

THE WORLD OF THE OLD TESTAMENT²

As far as we know, the writing of historical texts began c. 3100 BC in Egypt and Sumeria. Both the Bible and scientific research indicate people existed, used tools, hunted, raised animals, and farmed before 3100 BC. But we have no prior written evidence before that time. Biblical history includes accounts of the events, actions, and speech of the Bible’s people. Moses wrote the first books of the Bible as early as c. 1446 BC. He included materials relating human origins as well as the origins and early history of Israel. Subsequent writers continued

the biblical account for another thousand years. These writings are some of the oldest and most organized treatments of human events that we possess.

The Bible is not technically a history book. However, when it speaks of events, actions, and words of the past, it relates facts accurately. Some readers may wonder if the Bible can be truly accurate and believable if its authors are precommitted to expressing their belief in God as they relate what occurred in human history. In response, no purely objective historian exists or ever has existed. All historical writing is based on the author's foundational methodological principles. No writer begins with a blank moral or interpretational slate when writing. This is generally a good thing. After all, most of us do not wish to debate the merits of a Nazi view of history! We have already made up our minds on this matter.

Sometimes scholars are careful not to present their foundational principles of interpretation. However, the authors of this text want to make clear they affirm the inerrancy and infallibility of God’s Word. Therefore, they also believe that the Bible’s historical writing is based on solid historical principles. They believe there are good reasons to affirm what the Bible says on historical matters and that there are good reasons for using sound historical research when studying the Bible.

Many people groups populated the lands of the Old Testament. Each of these groups had a culture, religion, and language with its own morals and customs. Because of common language ancestry and proximity of neighbors and trading partners, similarities between these groups abound. Whether in language, religion, or cultural and legal customs, these similarities help us reconstruct to some extent the historical setting of the biblical text. Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Nehemiah lived alongside these peoples and interacted with them.

However, the differences between the Hebrews and the surrounding people groups are most telling. Israelite religion, culture, and legal codes dramatically set them apart from their neighbors. The Old Testament’s authors used these similarities and divergences between the Hebrew people and their contemporaries when describing the struggle of God’s relationship with the Hebrews.

The ties between the Hebrews and their neighbors can help the Bible student in two ways. First, correspondences shed light on the language, culture, and customs of the Bible. Second, divergences highlight the Hebrews as a distinctive people called out and set apart for God. Both help bring the people and message of the Old Testament
into focus—not as two-dimensional literary features but as real, three-dimensional, flesh-and-blood people with a vital message for today.

Six major people groups most impacted the biblical history of the Hebrew people: Assyria, Babylonia, Egypt, the Canaanites, Persia, and Aram (Syria). These groups were spread geographically across the Fertile Crescent. This term refers to the crescent-shaped swath of agriculturally abundant land which stretches from Egypt north to Syria and south through Mesopotamia.

**Assyria and Babylonia**

Assyria and Babylonia were located in the area between and surrounding the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (modern Iraq). The region, home to Babylonia in the south and Assyria in the north, sustained an agricultural economy. The governing model was the city-state. A large regional city dominated the trade and political affairs of the local population. Each city had its king and patron cultic deity. Frequently one ruler and city rose to prominence by subjugating a league of cities.

Over time, waves of people migrated down to the river plains from the mountains of present-day Iran to the east and Turkey to the north. These people groups would eventually take over the cities and blend their forms of government, laws, language, and religion with those native to the region. The Babylonians displaced the Sumerians as rulers in this manner. The Assyrians repeated this process and subjugated the Babylonians for several centuries.

Abraham, a Semite (descendant of Noah’s son Shem), probably spoke a dialect of Akkadian and/or early Aramaic. Akkadian was part of the Semitic language family and was therefore related to Hebrew. It was written in cuneiform wedges impressed on clay tablets. Cuneiform was a pictographic language (similar to modern Chinese) in which picture symbols acted as words, phonetic syllables, or grammatical markers. The Semitic Akkadian language borrowed the Sumerian cuneiform signs as its written form.

The Mesopotamian dialect of Akkadian in the south differed slightly from the northern dialect (in Assyria), but the common Semitic language roots and the similar cuneiform sign-base enabled verbal and written communication across the whole Fertile Crescent. As shown by the Amarna letters, written by the city rulers of Palestine to the Egyptian pharaoh (c. 1390–1350 BC), Akkadian was the international language of diplomacy and trade.
The Babylonians and Assyrians based their cultic practices around a large family of idol gods who represented a force of nature (i.e., Marduk—supreme god of Babylon, Asshur—the supreme God in Assyria, Sin—moon god, Shamash—sun god, Ishtar—goddess of planet Venus). The names sometimes differed among different people groups, but the cult and attributes of deities remained similar (as in the Greek and Roman myths). The “heavenly” rank of these idols changed through time with the ascendancy of differing city-states that each had their own patron deity. The gods of the Babylonians, Assyrians, Canaanites, and Syrians may have reflected the administrative structure of the ruling class in both hierarchy and attributes.

Ruling gods were divided into two levels. The supreme deity, on the first level, represented the king. The other powerful deities, on the second level, represented the nobility. They were autonomous, impetuous, fickle, and fallible. The third level of the pantheon was made up of craftsmen gods who were proficient and always did their task well—this would have been the scribal class and skilled workers. The messenger gods made up the fourth level; they were sent on tasks and brought messages.3

The religious ceremonies often resorted to omen reading through the study of animal organs, fertility sacrifices, and cultic prostitution. Worship and sacrifices were offered both in temples and on elevated sites the Bible calls “high places.” A family would have had their idols set up in a shrine in the home, burning incense before them. The events on earth were seen as mirroring what happened in the heavens.

The people often lived in mud-brick houses on their land or in a city. When God called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees and subsequently from Haran, Abraham did not leave wilderness areas. He left urban population centers with civilized cultures. Assyria and later Babylon reigned supreme in their time. Each empire subjugated the land of Palestine and defeated Egypt. Assyria conquered and carried away the northern kingdom of Israel (722 BC) while Babylon exiled the people of Judah one hundred years later (605, 597, 587 BC).

**Egypt**

Ancient Egypt was located along the banks of the Nile River. The Egyptians divided their land in two ways. They called the fertile land next to the Nile the Black Land, and they called the desert waste further from the Nile the Red Land. They also called northern

Egypt Lower Egypt (since it was downriver and therefore lower), and southern Egypt was called Upper Egypt (since the Nile flowed from the south). Egypt became a united nation at the same time as the Sumerian culture rose in Mesopotamia (about 3100 BC).

Some key factors driving the development of Egyptian culture were: (1) an isolated river valley with regular seasons of flooding which provided rich farmland, (2) a multitude of competing gods (who represented all of creation ranging from the Nile River skyward) who must be appeased for the mortal to have a happy afterlife, (3) the idea that anything written down or inscribed on stone became reality, and (4) the concept of “Maat” or “divine order,” which led the Egyptians to maintain the status quo. Due to geography Egypt was seldom under any fear of foreign domination early in its history. The Red Land, or desert regions, insulated the fertile Nile valley to both the east and the west.

The Egyptians believed that if they were not buried in the proper way in their homeland they had no hope of an afterlife. This belief could have had some effect on the effectiveness of their army on foreign soil. Egypt’s was a prosperous agricultural economy where labor was cheap. The pharaohs occasionally went on campaigns into adjacent regions (Canaan, Syria) to subjugate, take tribute, and enforce their rule. The building projects of the pharaohs employed thousands, who were paid daily in bread and beer.

The Egyptian language is known only from written sources and then only in part. Written in hieroglyphs (pictures that stand for either an object, word, phonetic syllable, or symbol), Egyptian was a pictographic language like Akkadian (see p. 8). Words written on tomb walls or on execration texts (burial spells and incantations to help one in the afterlife) were considered to be reality. An execration text would list all the bad things that the deceased had not done in order that he might be found guiltless when weighed on the scales of judgment after death.

The Egyptian pantheon of gods changed over time, depending on the city, dynasty, and region from which the ruling pharaoh came. These gods numbered in the thousands. Some of the chief gods were Amun, Ra, Isis, Osiris, Hathor, Set, Khonsu, and Ma’at. Each ruling dynasty had its deity triad (father, mother, and son) which it served. The people worshipped pharaoh as the representation of the sun god (Ra) on earth. Another myth states that pharaoh was identified with the god Horus, and when he died he became Horus’s father, Osiris.
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Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph and his brothers down to the generations of Moses (whose Egyptian name means “born of” or “drawn from”) had contact with or lived in the land of Egypt. Solomon married an Egyptian princess, perhaps the daughter of Pharaoh Siamun. Egypt overran Israel more than once, but eventually Judah looked to Egypt for help against the Assyrians and Babylonians. However, Egypt was never a good ally for Judah or Israel.

Canaanites

The Canaanites were the peoples living in the land promised to Abraham. They had migrated to this region in the millennia before Israel entered the land. For the purpose of this discussion, we will group several ethnic people groups together. These people groups (Amorites, Phoenicians, Amalekites, Ammonites, Moabites, Edomites, and Philistines) may be discussed in this manner because of their similarities in religious culture and for their adversarial relationship with the Hebrews (with the exception of the Phoenicians). The Philistines do not truly fit in this group, but for the most part they took on the culture and religion of the native Canaanites. The Philistines also regularly opposed Israel.

The Canaanites living in the land developed their agricultural and trade economies around the local city-state. A larger city, such as Hazor, at times would be the head of a league of kings and cities that would go out to battle together. Egypt dominated the Canaanites in Palestine in the Middle to Late Bronze Periods (1800–1200 BC).

The language of the Canaanites was a branch of Semitic close to biblical Hebrew. The people of Ugarit, north of Phoenicia, wrote in an alphabetic cuneiform script (one sign = one letter) which included the twenty-two letters of biblical Hebrew. Though there are differences, the Phoenicians were likely responsible for the spread of the northwest Semitic alphabet across the Mediterranean (seen in the comparison Hebrew: Aleph, Bet, Gimel, Dalet . . . Greek: Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta . . . ).

The religion of the Canaanites did not differ greatly from Assyria and Babylonia. The Canaanites chiefly worshipped Baal as the god of rain and fertility. Baal’s consort was Asherah, a fertility goddess. An “Asherah” was a wooden pole set up near altars to Baal. The common cultic fertility rites included prostitution and in some places child sacrifice. The Israelites were warned by God to stay away from the Canaanites and their idols, but they did not do so. As the Israelites interacted and intermarried with the Canaanites in the land, they fell into
idolatry. The Hebrew prophets denounced the cultic idolatry of the Canaanites. This same idolatry eventually caused Israel’s and Judah’s exile from the land.

**Aram (Syria)**

The Arameans more than likely began as a tribe in the foothills of the Zagros Mountains in northeastern Iran. The tribe spread from upper Mesopotamia into Babylonia. Abraham was from Aramean ancestry and was living in Ur in southern Mesopotamia, when he was called by God to leave (Dt 26:5). The Arameans grew in number and split into many tribes speaking roughly the same dialect. They formed small states in northern Mesopotamia that caused problems for the Assyrians. Eventually these tribes became powerful enough that they aligned under one ruler and became a nation. The Arameans were herdsmen dwelling in tents. Their society was ruled by tribal chiefs. Hadad, the storm god, was their patron deity and was joined by a large family of idol gods. Each city and tribe had its own significant deities as well. They worshipped at high places with sacrifices and offerings.

The Aramean state of Syria (literally Aram in the Hebrew) came to power in Damascus during a weak period in the Assyrian dynasty (ninth century BC). They were rivals and trading partners with the northern kingdom of Israel. The balance of power between the two kingdoms flowed back and forth. In 853 BC, Ahab of Israel joined a coalition of twelve armies with Aram to fight the Assyrian army at the battle of Qarqar. They were victorious; but Hadad-idr, the king of Aram, eventually turned on Ahab of Israel. Several wars were fought between Ahab and Haddad. War continued when Hazael usurped the throne of Aram in 842 BC. Hazael oppressed Israel and Judah and managed to hold the rising Assyrian power to a stalemate. Hazael also invaded south and besieged and conquered the Philistine city of Gath; and at that time he was bribed by Jehoash, king of Judah, to spare Jerusalem (2 Kg 12:17–18). In the middle of the eighth century, 737–735 BC, King Rezin of Aram formed a coalition with the king of Tyre and Pekah, king of Israel. This coalition tried to intimidate Ahaz, king of Judah, into joining them. Ahaz appealed to Assyria for aid, and Aram was eventually defeated.

Aramaic was the language of the people of Aram. They adopted the Phoenician alphabet around 1100 BC. When the Assyrians conquered Damascus, they came to see the superiority of communicating in the Aramaic alphabetic language. Aramaic was eventually given approval as an official language of diplomacy and communication. The Aramaic
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language became the common international language until the time of Alexander. Parts of the book of Daniel were written in Aramaic (2:4b–7:28).

**Persia**

Persia followed Babylon as the world's great power (539 BC). Cyrus II, the son of a Persian and a Mede, united the Persians and Medes by defeating his Median grandfather Astyages in battle in 550 BC. The Persian Empire thus began in what is now western Iran and spread to all of western Asia and eventually Egypt. The Persians were polytheistic but worshipped their patron god, Ahuramazda, as their supreme deity. Later the prophet Zoroaster popularized his version of this religion (Zoroastrianism).

The Persians had a different governing strategy from their predecessors. Cyrus II allowed exiled Israelites to return to their homelands in 538 BC. A copy of Cyrus’s proclamation is found in Ezra 1:1–4. Old Persian became the official language while Elamite, Akkadian, and Aramaic were still used. Many Hebrews had become used to life in Mesopotamia and did not return from exile. The returning Israelites were given favorable treatment by later Persian kings: Darius I (522–486 BC), Xerxes (Esther, 487–465 BC), and Artaxerxes I (Nehemiah, 465–424 BC).

**CONCLUSION**

No survey can cover every important aspect of the Old Testament. The greatness of the subject makes that attempt impossible. Hopefully this study can provide a basic grasp of the Old Testament that will lead the reader to further analysis and greater insight. Most importantly, if learning the basics of the Old Testament helps the reader to enjoy the text, a lifelong love for the Bible may result.
## MAJOR EVENTS IN OLD TESTAMENT HISTORY*

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<td>Egyptian Period</td>
<td>1800–1450 (1290 BC)</td>
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<td>The Exodus</td>
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<td>Wilderness Wandering</td>
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<td>Period of the Judges</td>
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<td>The United Kingdom</td>
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<td>The Divided Kingdom</td>
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<td>Fall of Northern Israel</td>
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<td>Return to Israel</td>
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<td>Temple Rebuilt</td>
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<td>Careers of Ezra and Nehemiah</td>
<td>c. 458–425 BC</td>
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*All dates approximate (see below).*