

Five-Minute Survey of the old testament

by Pam Gillaspie, Author of *Ablaze: Igniting Spiritual Passion for Life Through Reading God's Word*



In the beginning God creates. Adam is the first man created, Eve the first woman. They are created by God without sin but are quickly deceived in the Garden of Eden by the serpent (later identified as Satan). Eve actually eats the forbidden fruit (from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil) first and gives it to her husband Adam. Through this act of sin, death enters the world. Adam and Eve are banished from the beautiful garden, so they cannot eat of the tree of life which would cause them to live eternally in a state of alienation from God.

Although man rebels against God, God immediately predicts the coming of a Savior who will crush the head of the serpent (Messianic Covenant). This prophecy is later fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. However, in the meantime, sin has entered into the world, and death through sin.

Adam and Eve have many children, the most famous of them are the first two, Cain and Abel. Cain, resentful that God had accepted Abel's sacrifice and not his own, kills Abel, and sin really starts rolling. Things continue to go downhill from here until God has simply had enough.

Saying that He regrets having made man, God calls Noah to build an ark so that He can save him and his family from the coming destruction of the world by means of a flood. Noah obeys and God saves him, his wife, his three sons, and their wives. After the Flood, God puts a rainbow in the sky as a sign of His covenant with all living creatures that He will never again destroy the entire earth with a flood.

Noah's sons, Japheth, Shem, and Ham become the fathers of all the nations. Over time, the population of the world increases, and the people again begin to go off course when in their pride they determine to build a tower that will reach to heaven. In the midst of the construction, God confuses their languages, thereby thwarting their plans.

The next major player on the scene is Abraham, originally known as Abram. Abram and his wife Sarai (whose name is later changed to Sarah) live in the land of Ur. God tells Abram that he must leave the land that he is living in to go to a land that God will show him. Abram trusts God and goes, taking with him his wife and household. Although God changes his name to Abraham and promises to make him a great nation, Abraham finds himself really old with no children.

Taking matters into her own hands, Sarah decides to play God. She gives her handmaiden Hagar to Abraham so that the promise might be fulfilled through her seed on behalf of Sarah. Not a good idea. Hagar bears Abraham a son named Ishmael and Sarah is steamed.

Eventually, God does bless Sarah with a son in her old age. His name is Isaac, and it is through him that God chooses to fulfill His promise to Abraham. Like his father before him, Isaac finds himself in possession of a promise to be a great nation but without a child for quite some time. Isaac, though, prays for his wife Rebekah, and God causes her to conceive twins, Esau and Jacob.

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These babies certainly weren't twins of the identical variety. Esau was a tough, manly man, though an aisle shy in the brains department, while Jacob was an instigating, conniving, mama's boy. Although older, Esau lost both his birthright and blessing due to the trickery of his younger brother. Let's just say it's a good thing that they didn't have to look across the table at each other at Christmas dinner.

Warts and all, Jacob is God's chosen brother. Any guesses as to what Jacob's name becomes? That's right, Israel! Hence, the nation of Israel. (See, this isn't so hard, is it?) Rather appropriately, Jacob ends up with an extra wife after his uncle (also his new father-in-law) pulls a wedding day bait-and-switch on him. Thus, from Jacob, his wives Leah and Rachel, and their handmaidens are born what we know as the twelve tribes of Israel.

The most famous of Jacob's children is his son Joseph, the guy with the amazing technicolor dreamcoat. His father's favorite, Joseph was sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt. Eventually, God raises Joseph up to second in command in all of Egypt. He is reunited with his family who then comes to live with him in Egypt.

After Joseph dies, everything is still fine until eventually a Pharaoh rises to power who does not remember Joseph and the way God used him to save Egypt. This Pharaoh decides to enslave the family of Joseph, now called the Hebrews, who have grown to great numbers in the land. The Hebrews remain in bondage for 400 years until the time of Moses.

Because the Hebrew population in Egypt has grown so rapidly, the Egyptian Pharaoh issues a decree that all male Hebrew babies should be killed. He fears that the slaves may turn against him should a foreign country invade. During this time, the mother of Moses hides her newborn

son in a basket and sets it in the river to save him. The Pharaoh's daughter sees the basket with the infant and adopts him, raising him as her own. As an adult, young Moses intervenes in a fight between an Egyptian and one of his Hebrew brothers, killing the Egyptian. He subsequently flees Egypt and becomes a shepherd for forty years until God calls to him from a burning bush to go back and deliver the Hebrews from Egypt.

Although resistant at first, Moses eventually obeys and after a series of ten plagues and the Passover, he leads the Hebrews out of Egypt and on their way to the Promised Land. On the way, God parts the Red Sea, He feeds them with manna, and leads them with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire at night. Although they get to the Promised Land quickly, ten of the twelve spies sent into the land report that giants occupy the land. They shrink back in fear instead of trusting God's promise. Thus, God makes them wander in the wilderness for forty years before they are finally allowed to enter the Promised Land.

Moses sees the Promised Land from afar, but it is Joshua who leads the people into the Promised Land. Under his leadership, the famed walls of Jericho fall and the people, more or less, follow God. When Joshua dies, however, the people return to their wandering ways, having not driven out all of the people from the lands that they had conquered.

Into this rebellious situation, God sends the judges to help save the people when they call out to Him for help. Some of the more notable judges include Deborah, Gideon, Samson, and Samuel.

During the time of Samuel, however, the people of Israel cry out for a king so they will be like the other nations around them. Bad move. For in asking for a king, God says they are in effect rejecting not Samuel as a judge, but God, Himself, as their king. Israel which has been up to

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this point a theocracy, a government with God as king, now changes to a monarchy as God gives the people a king in the man Saul.

While Saul starts out as a hesitant king, even hiding from the masses at the beginning, he becomes quite full of himself before long and falls out of favor with God by his blatant disobedience. Because of his rebellion, God chooses another to be king in Saul's place. The man God chooses is not a descendant of Saul, but a shepherd named David.

Before David becomes king, we hear of his exploits in killing the giant Goliath and of his deep friendship with Jonathan, King Saul's son, and of his first marriage to King Saul's daughter, Michal. Pursued ferociously by King Saul because he is perceived as such a threat to his kingdom, David lives on the edge for several years before King Saul finally takes his own life in battle, and David ascends to the throne.

Called a "man after God's own heart," David's life exemplifies what it means to seek and follow God, with the exception of the Bathsheba incident. Bathsheba was married to one of David's soldiers, Uriah. One day, when David's men are out fighting wars, David is home in his palace. From his high vantage point, he sees Bathsheba bathing. Immediately taken by her beauty, David sends for her. One thing quickly leads to another and before long, David is sitting in a soap opera of adultery and murder, having offed Uriah upon receiving the news of Bathsheba's pregnancy.

The prophet Nathan calls David on his sin, and David repents immediately. The damage having been done, David takes Bathsheba as another wife. After losing the baby conceived in adultery, Bathsheba eventually bears David his son, Solomon. Solomon succeeds his father David as king, but not before some of David's other sons, most notably Absalom, make a run at the throne.

It is Solomon who finally builds a permanent temple for the Lord. David had not been allowed to do this because, although he had followed God with all of his heart, he had been a man of bloodshed, a man of war. Solomon is best remembered for his wealth and his wisdom in ruling, but ironically, it is his lack of wisdom in the area of women that becomes his undoing.

Having wives and concubines that numbered in the hundreds, Solomon accommodated his foreign wives in the area of idol worship. Bad idea. Because of this, Solomon will have the kingdom torn from his hands during the reign of his son. Solomon is succeeded by his son, Rehoboam, who is not a good man. In fact, he is so bad that God tears a large portion of the kingdom out of his hand, leaving him only a small part because of His promise to David.

This is where it gets a little complicated, but once you grasp this, so much of the Old Testament will begin to hold together for you. Under Saul, David, and Solomon, Israel was one country with one king, the united monarchy with all twelve tribes of Israel under the king's control. When God pulls part of the kingdom away from Rehoboam, we move into the time of the divided monarchy. Rehoboam is still the king of what becomes known as the Southern Kingdom or Judah (comprised of the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin), while the Northern Kingdom or Israel (comprised of the other ten tribes) is given to a man named Jeroboam. The capital of the Southern Kingdom is Jerusalem; the capital of the Northern Kingdom is Samaria. Details? Yes. Important? Extremely.

Until you grasp this flow of history around the division of the kingdom, much of the Old Testament history and prophecy will stay extremely muddy. With a reasonable understanding of this, however, you can jump in and read anywhere in

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the Old Testament with at least some degree of ease. So, because of the importance of this, let's quickly review:

| Northern Kingdom | Southern Kingdom |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Israel | Judah |
| 10 Tribes | 2 Tribes |
| Non-Davidic | Davidic Line |
| Capital: Samaria | Capital: Jerusalem |

Once the kingdom divides a series of kings follow. The kings of Israel are bad. They are always bad. Okay, Jehu had some good moments, but in general, you can remember this: Israel, all bad, all the time.

The kings of Judah, on the other hand, are a mixed bag. Some are horrible, others okay, and at least one you could name a child after. More are bad than good, and most of the good ones still have reasonable shortcomings, but as a group, they prove to be better than Israel, which is why the ax falls on them later than it does on their brothers to the North.

Elijah and Elisha prophesy during the time of the divided kingdom. The other prophets are sprinkled throughout the times of the monarchy, the captivity, and the post-exile period.

If you hate historical dates, you may be inclined to skip over the next section, but I implore you, please don't. Unlike most history that is fraught with countless crucial dates, there are only two dates that you need to remember in studying the Old Testament. The first is 722 BC, the second, 586 BC.

In 722 BC, the nation of Assyria conquered and deported the Northern Kingdom of Israel as was prophesied. After deporting Israel and dispersing the people, Assyria resettled other people groups in the land of Israel. These people then intermarried with the remaining Israelites creating a half-breed people group referred to as

Samaritans. This becomes significant in the New Testament as we see the intense hatred that the "pure-bred" Jews had for their half-breed brothers. Due to the deportation and intermixing of the Northern Kingdom, these tribes are often referred to as the ten lost tribes of Israel.

Seeing their brothers carried away by Assyria does not have the impact on the Southern Kingdom that it should have. Although it takes a little longer and though there are pockets of revival along the way, notably that of King Josiah, eventually Judah goes the way of Israel. In 586 BC, Nebuchadnezzar conquers Judah and takes the people away into captivity in Babylon.

One of the people carried off to Babylon is Daniel. Probably the best known vegetable-eater of all time, Daniel, along with his three friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, were made servants in Babylon. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were thrown into a fiery furnace when they refused to bow down to a golden statue only to be saved by the power of God. Daniel, likewise, was thrown into a den of lions because he continued to pray to his God even when prayer to anyone but the king had been outlawed. He, too, was saved by the power of God.

After seventy years of captivity in Babylon, the people of Judah are released to go back to Jerusalem.

Nehemiah is in charge of rebuilding the wrecked walls of the city.

Between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament is a period of 400 years often referred to as the silent years.

With the Christ-event, God again speaks to His people beginning with His Word to Zechariah foretelling of the coming of John the Baptist who would prepare the way of the Lord.

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