

The Books of History -- Part 2

I Chronicles, II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther

The Bible contains the Old Testament and the New Testament. The former runs from creation through the early centuries of the nation of Israel up to where B.C. becomes A.D. The latter covers God the Father's sending to earth God the Son in the form of Jesus Christ, the watershed of history. And it takes us well into the first century, during the early days of Christianity.

The most important single statement in the Bible is that CHRIST ROSE FROM THE DEAD! The O.T. sets the stage for it; the N.T. describes it.

The Bible was written over 1,500 years or so by some 40 authors.

The first five books are the *Pentateuch*, written by Moses. They go from creation to where the Jews enter the Promised Land of Canaan. The Books of History start with Joshua and go through Esther.

The Old Testament once contained fewer books than it does today. That's because I and II Kings formed one book, I and II Samuel another, I and II Chronicles another, Ezra and Nehemiah yet another. When these were translated into Greek, they required a third more space than in Hebrew. Because the scrolls on which they were written were limited in length, translators divided Kings, Samuel, Chronicles and Ezra/Nehemiah into separate books.

OLD TESTAMENT TIMELINE

Up until 2000 B.C. history's headlines included the Creation (starring Adam and Eve), the Fall (the original sin), the universal Flood (Noah) and the tower of Babel (the birth of different languages).

2000-1700 B.C. was the age of the patriarchs and the migration of the Jews to Egypt (when Isaac, Jacob and Joseph lived).

This is all covered in the book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible.

1700-1450 B.C., described in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, the Jews are in slavery under the Pharaohs in Egypt, followed by the exodus (crossing the Red Sea led by Moses) and the 40-year wilderness trek (Joshua appears).

1450-1100 B.C., portrayed in Joshua, Judges and part of I Samuel, the Jews, led by Joshua, conquer Canaan (their Promised Land) where they live under judges while they move in and out of bondage and deliverance.

I AND II CHRONICLES

1100-600 B.C., depicted in I and II Samuel, I Chronicles and part of II Chronicles, the Jews form a monarchy, and the Kingdom of Israel is established with Saul, David and Solomon as its first three kings. Solomon builds the Temple in Jerusalem. When he dies, the nation splits as a result

of the sin of idolatry (worshiping other gods). Ten tribes under King Jeroboam form the northern kingdom and are soon captured by Assyria and taken into exile from which they never returned. King Rehoboam took the other two tribes, Judah (King David's tribe into which Christ was later born) and Benjamin, and remained in Jerusalem. They were hauled off by King Nebuchadnezzar to Babylonia where they lived in exile 70 years. 50,000 of them were then released by Cyrus, king of Persia.

500-400 B.C., as described in Ezra and Nehemiah, we see the southern kingdom of Judah return from exile under decree of Persian King Cyrus. Then begins a period of 400 years, about which the Bible is silent, setting the stage for the birth of Christ as the world transitioned from B.C. (before Christ) to A.D. (the year of our Lord).

Scholars think Ezra the prophet wrote First Chronicles which underlines King David's key role in developing the nation's concept of worship -- and the need to obey God in order to be blessed by Him.

In Second Chronicles we drill down into Solomon's reign, the world-class temple he built and the worship that happened there. Chapters 10-36 are a history of the two Jewish tribes known as Judah.

In 22:1-12 King Jehoram of Judah dies at age 40, "buried unmourned" at a funeral that no one attended! His son Ahaziah, 22, ascends to the throne, encouraged by his mother, Queen Athaliah, to do wrong (v. 3). So, he fell in with the descendants of wicked King Ahab whose counsel "led him on to ruin" (v. 4)." His disastrous reign lasted but a year, and his epitaph read, "He sought the counsel of men but not of God."

In ch. 24 young Joash, rescued from death at age one and hidden for six years in the Temple at Jerusalem, becomes King of Judah at age seven. For 23 years he leads his nation well. Then his Uncle Jehoiada, the High Priest, dies at age 130, leaving Joash without a godly mentor. Just a mere empty suit without his Uncle's support, "Joash abandoned the house of Jehovah, the God of his father, and worshipped groves and shame-idols (vv. 17, 18)." Joash remains today as an example of the undisciplined life, the person who mistakenly relies on someone stronger and more spiritually mature than he. As Paul warns (I Cor. 10:12), "So be careful! If you're thinking, 'Oh, I would never behave like that' -- let this be a warning to you. For you too may fall into sin."

EZRA

Rabbi Ezra lived during the reign of King Artaxerxes of Persia. He was a scribe, well-versed in the laws given by God to Moses. This Jewish priest was a descendant of Moses' brother Aaron, the Jews' first high priest. Five times during this book we read that "the hand of God was on him," meaning that God was definitely using Ezra in His service. When God's hand is on you, even kings take notice (Ezra 7:6, 27-28). Consider the reputation he had with the king under whose rule he was living as an exile (7:6-10). God protects all those who seek and worship Him, but He targets His anger at those who abandon Him because He is a God of principle (8:22). That may seem harsh, but He's God. And we aren't. God's hand was on Ezra (7:9) because he had committed himself to seeking and knowing the words of God, to practicing them in his daily

life, and to teaching them to his countrymen. We cannot learn about God unless we study His Word, the Bible. If you and I are “too busy” to do that, we *are* too busy with unnecessary activities. It’s time to realign our priorities. As my friend Ron Blance says, “Even a verse a day will change your life.”

In this book Ezra describes the Jews’ return to Jerusalem from Babylon, led by Zerubbabel.

NEHEMIAH

Nehemiah was a contemporary of Ezra. His life is one of history’s earliest templates for managerial leadership. He traded a life of ease in the court of Artaxerxes for a life of toil, danger and heartbreaks as he led a third group of exiles out of Babylon and managed a Guinness Book-like engineering feat in rebuilding Jerusalem’s wall. He was a man of prayer -- and a leader of unblemished character. He was fearless. Under his leadership Ezra the priest read the Pentateuch in public, causing the people to openly admit their disobedience to God, promising to always obey Him in the future. The story told in this book contains the final historical events recorded in the OT. Today we read Nehemiah 1 and 2 and 6:15-16.

ESTHER

Finally, a brief fly-by of the charming book of Esther whose author and date are both unknown. Esther and Ruth are the only two books in the Bible who bear the name of a woman. Esther lived during the reign of the great Xerxes (aka Ahasuerus), king of Persia.

Esther played a leading role on Israel’s stage. This brave Jewish girl who rose to become queen of Persia made it possible for her people to be saved from extinction, thus preserving the lineage through whom Christ the Messiah would later be born.

Ahasuerus deposed his queen Vashti because she refused to drop her veil and show her beauty to his party-animal friends during a 180-day long banquet at his massive palace in Persepolis (destroyed by fire in 331 B.C. by Alexander the Great). Home smarting from having led his army of five million men to defeat at the hands of Greece in the battles of Thermopylae and Salamis in 480 B.C., Ahasuerus made Esther his queen the moment he laid eyes on her. Esther outlived Ahasuerus on into the reign of his son Artaxerxes who allowed Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city wall. This favor was probably made possible by Esther’s influence as queen of Persia, an empire that covered half of the then-known world.

Ahasuerus’ wicked aide Haman tried to convince the king that all the Jews living under them in exile had committed treason and should be exterminated. But Esther bravely approached the king, something women did not do in that culture, and defended her people, saving them from mass destruction. All down through history the Jews have lived on the bubble. They and their Messiah have always lived in the world’s crosshairs, but God is committed to preserving them.

Esther’s courage and faithfulness, and the grace of God demonstrated by His snatching the Jews from the jaws of destruction, have been celebrated down through the centuries during Israel’s Feast of Purim.

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QUESTIONS:

Esther

- Each of us faces critical situations in life when we can choose to trust God. Knowing that choices have consequences, what is your personal system for avoiding wrong choices?
- Esther had the option of approaching her husband king as an advocate of her race. She was willing to pay the price (4:14, “If I perish, I perish.”) What would you be willing to die for?
- Believing that God is sovereign, and that He will carry out His plan regardless of whether we choose to cooperate with Him or not, are you willing to, like Joseph, take a few steps backward and be humbled, realizing that often the way up is down?
- Esther took full advantage of her royal rank to do what was right, to save her people from extinction, to preserve the line through which Christ was born. How do you see your career/job/current position as a platform for serving God and others?