

# OLD TESTAMENT INTRODUCTION

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# Kings to Lead

## Look at: *1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, and 1 & 2 Chronicles*

Samuel—prophet and judge—initiated the monarchy to maintain Israel's national identity and hold the country together. For about 100 years the country functioned successfully as a United Kingdom, but King Solomon's ruthless efficiency was detested by the northern tribes, and after his reign they broke away.

For the next 200 years two kingdoms, Israel in the north and Judah in the south, coexisted. They were sometimes at war, sometimes in alliance; sometimes seeking to live as God's covenant people, more often turning away from God and ignoring the demands of the Law and the covenant. In 722 B.C. the northern capital, Samaria, fell to the Assyrians, Israel was exiled, and the Northern Kingdom ceased to exist.

Beyond this outline, the story revolves around people, their interrelationships, and their relationship with God. We learn about the lives of ordinary people, particularly in accounts of the work of Elijah and Elisha and in the writings of the prophets Amos, Hosea, and Micah. However, most of the records focus on the rulers and how they used and abused their power.

### Samuel

Samuel can be seen as the last of the judges or the first genuine national leader since Joshua. He was a prophet, priest, and king-maker, who succeeded in holding the people together and making them think about God. He did not cling to power himself, but handed over authority, first to Saul and then to David.

### Saul

Saul, the first king of Israel, was

chosen and called, but was not faithful. He was little different from the judges, except that his leadership was officially recognized and more permanent. But Saul became more interested in his kingly status than in the task God gave him; he began to assume that he could overrule God's commands—and therefore was replaced.

### David

Although David never sought the crown during Saul's lifetime, when Saul died in battle he was pleased to take it. After initial skirmishes with Saul's son Ishbosheth, David took over the entire kingdom. Though a good soldier and diplomat, a committed believer, and an able poet, he had a number of serious failings. He controlled the kingdom but did not always control himself or his own family, and he experienced major problems with his sons.

### Solomon

Solomon was in many ways the most gifted king of Israel. He

inherited his father David's poetic skills, was a gifted scholar, and brought prosperity to the nation. However, he led a life alien to God's pattern of kingship in Israel. Deuteronomy 17 states that kings should avoid stockpiling wealth, dependence on military strength, idolatry, polygamy, and oppressive rule; Solomon's reign was characterized by all these.

### Rehoboam

Solomon's son Rehoboam did not inherit his father's gifts, but he followed his father's oppression of the people. It is not surprising that the northern tribes rejected his kingship.

### The world at large

In addition to the regular feuding between northern Israel and southern Judah, Israel's relationships with surrounding nations were often strained.

In the northwest, Tyre (in modern Lebanon) was normally friendly toward Israel. In the north, Syria was growing more powerful, sometimes acting as an ally but more often as an enemy, devastating farms in border raids. East of Israel, Ammon, Moab, and Edom caused the Jews problems, although after Solomon's reign they were weaker than Israel and Judah, and easily contained. To the south, Egypt was declining in power,

David defeated the Jebusite inhabitants and made Jerusalem his capital city.







while Greece, to the west, was growing in influence: Homer was writing at this time, and the first Olympic Games took place at the time when the Northern Kingdom of Israel was disappearing. However, Greek influence had not yet reached so far east.

Assyria, to the northeast, beyond Ammon and Syria, was emerging

as the dominant power in the region. The Assyrian Empire initiated magnificent architectural schemes, but was famously cruel, with military power the key to its status.

Israel and Judah were situated on important trade routes between Egypt and Assyria. Particularly in the late ninth and early eighth centuries B.C., they had great opportunities for economic growth. Assyria first dominated then destroyed Syria, and for a time Israel was left to her own devices. But this period of prosperity proved to be illusory, and Israel was in turn destroyed.

### Israel: The Northern Kingdom

There were 19 kings of Israel, starting with Jeroboam. Although his reign began well, Jeroboam soon became more concerned with

### Reading between the lines

1. A good beginning is no guarantee of continuing faithfulness.
2. God will not give up on His people—but those who completely reject the covenant will be allowed to live with the consequences of their decision.
3. Economic prosperity and disaster were both used to make the nation recognize their need for God; but the people had to respond in obedience and faith. Prosperity is not in itself evidence that God approves of the nation's behavior.

maintaining power than obeying God. In the Books of Kings, all 19 kings are described as “evil”; but these books were compiled in the south, and their assessments may not be unbiased.

Nevertheless, despite the ministry of such prophets as Elijah, Elisha, Amos, and Hosea, and the existence of many true believers, Israel eventually ceased to be part of God's covenant people. 2 Kings 17 serves as an epitaph for the Northern Kingdom, making it clear that its demise was totally deserved.

### Judah: The Southern Kingdom

During this same period, there were 12 rulers in Judah—11 kings and the notorious queen Athaliah, who killed her own grandchildren to retain her throne. Seven kings, six of whom reigned for 25 years or more, are described as “doing what was right in the eyes of the Lord”—though this does not mean that their reigns were perfect, as the writings of the prophets Micah and Isaiah make clear.

Corruption, injustice, and idolatry do not seem to have been much less common than in Israel. However, the “good” kings did make some attempt to lead the people within the requirements of the covenant. Possibly this led God to be merciful to Judah, so that the kingdom lasted for a further hundred years before being conquered by Babylon.



# Creation and Covenant

## Creation

**Look at:** *Genesis 1–3, Psalms, Isaiah 40–55, and Job 38–42*

It is taken for granted in the Old Testament that God exists—and that He created the world. Most of the writers' earliest thinking about God relates to the Exodus from Egypt or to the Covenant. Yet God's creative activity is a vital part of Old Testament teaching.

### Two creation stories

There are two creation stories in Genesis 1–2, neither of them written in scientific terms, but both expressing truth.

Genesis 1 is a structured account of creation, which is totally God-centered. God sees, creates, says, divides, calls, blesses, and makes. We learn that the world is ordered and purposeful; it is made the way

that God intended—"God saw that it was good." The climax of this creation is humanity; human beings are created to relate to God and to each other, and to take responsibility for their own actions and the world around them.

God's work in creation is presented in Genesis 1 as finished, yet also continuing. God is the Lord of nature, Who rules and maintains creation. He is not merely the Initiator of life, but the One Who sustains life, enabling the created world and the life it contains to continue.

### The Garden of Eden

The Genesis 2 account is more human-centered. It does not recount the creation of the world, but the story of what happened in a garden in one part of God's creation. But the central teaching of both accounts is the same: the world is created by God and

belongs to God; human beings relate to God and are responsible to God.

### God the Creator

Outside Genesis, when creation and God the Creator are mentioned, the focus of thought usually includes:

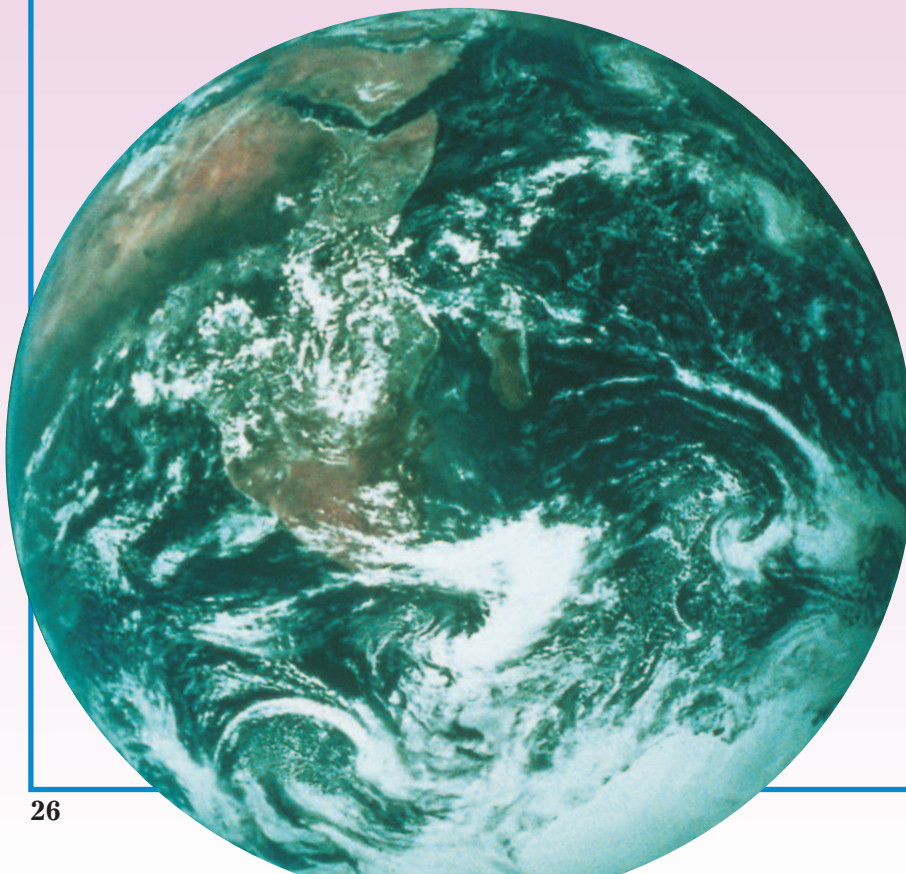
- The intricacy and complexity of the creation
- The order and structure of creation
- The beauty and power of creation
- The purpose of creation: it involves God's Will
- The uniqueness of the Creator
- The power and sovereignty of the Creator.

### The consequences of creation

The Old Testament teaching about creation brings meaning to a world of meaninglessness. All life belongs to God; He has the right to make demands on human beings. They are accountable to Him, and owe Him awe and worship as their Creator. God, as the everlasting Creator, also has an ongoing responsibility to His creatures. He knows, understands, comforts, strengthens, and enables His creation. He created the world and subdued chaos, and He was also willing to subdue chaos in the lives of His people.

### Problems in the world

Yet the Old Testament writers are also aware of the problems in the world. Creation as it exists today is not beautiful in every aspect; alongside it is an ugliness that is not solely the result of human mismanagement. The story of the Fall, found in Genesis 3, is only the first of many reflections on how it is possible to comprehend the glory and the dreadfulness of the created world as it is.





## Covenant

Look at: *Genesis 12–25, Exodus, Deuteronomy, 2 Samuel 7, and Jeremiah 31*

God created the whole world, but set up a covenant relationship solely with Israel. Covenants, or treaties—common within the Ancient Near East—were a kind of contract formalizing an alliance between partners. They were not necessarily equal partnerships, but called for commitment and responsibility from both sides. The Old Testament develops this concept when it speaks of the relationship between God and His people as a covenant. Covenant is a very significant element of Old Testament teaching.

### Contemporary treaties

The covenant between God and Israel is similar to contemporary treaties between imperial powers and vassal states. These so-called “suzerainty” treaties followed a common pattern: they set out the history of the agreement, laid down rules the vassal must keep, formulated arrangements to keep the covenant document safe and to give periodic public readings, explained the benefits or protection that would be provided, and described the punishment for breaking the rules.

“I will be your God . . .”

In Israel, the covenant is established by God alone; He sets the terms. It is seen as a relationship between God and Israel. The so-called covenant formula “You/they will be My people and I will be your/their God” is repeated in different forms many times, and lies at the heart of Israel’s understanding of her life and faith.

However, the covenant was not forced upon Israel without her consent. She had the freedom to accept and confirm the relationship. The obligations of the covenant were not arbitrary; they summarized what it meant to be holy and explained how Israel should behave if she were to enter this relationship with a holy God.

### Judgment

If human responsibility is taken seriously, judgment and punishment also become involved, guaranteeing the covenant, and opening up the possibility of repentance, forgiveness, and restoration.

However, the setting aside of the covenant also remains a possibility.



The commitment that God makes is unbreakable; yet the covenant ends the moment its obligations are broken. It is clear that, with Israel’s constant disobedience and disloyalty, it was only God’s grace and mercy that allowed the covenant to continue.

The promise of covenant renewal (Jeremiah 31:31–34) is fulfilled in part after the people’s return from the Babylonian Exile. The faithful remnant, as in the days of Elijah (see 1 Kings 19:18), was epitomized in the death of martyrs during the persecution of Antiochus IV (see 2 Maccabees 6:18–7:42).

### Five covenants are mentioned in the Old Testament.

1. *The Noachic covenant*, made between God and the whole creation. This was unconditional, with no human obligations; God committed Himself never again to use a flood to destroy the earth.
2. *The Abrahamic covenant*, in which God makes promises to Abraham and his family. The obligations on Abraham and his family are not spelled out in detail, but they were called upon to remain in relationship with, and obedient to, God.
3. *The Mosaic, or Sinaitic, covenant*, the major covenant with Israel—so called because Moses acted as go-between when it was set up between God and Israel at Sinai.
4. *The Davidic covenant*, in which God made special promises to David about his descendants.
5. *The New Covenant*. Jeremiah and Ezekiel speak of a new relationship, in which God’s Law will be written on people’s hearts and they will know and follow God.

