

5. The Three Stages of Biblical History

There are three major stages in Bible history. One has the **Promise Story** as its top layer, with much earlier material underneath. It ends as Joshua leads the people to enter the Land, kill the natives, and take it for themselves.

In the coming of the **Kingship**, the Yahweh party redefines itself as a nation rather than a people. A Temple is built. David is King, and a Promise to David guarantees everlasting rule for his successors.

Then comes the **Exile**. The nation is obliterated; the Temple is destroyed. An unexpected Return under the Persians followed. Some envisioned a renewal of the Promise to David; others, unconvinced, and felt that all had been lost.

Here is an outline of the three phases, with representative persons:

The Promise Story

1. **Adam** was the founder of Canaanite tradition, the starting point from which all else begins (Gen 2-3).
2. **Abram** is the leader of the northern pastoral people. He and Lot divide the Land between them (Gen 13:8-13), but Yahweh then intrudes, in the very next passage (Gen 13:14-18) to substitute his own Promise of the Land.
3. That promise is repeated for **Isaac** (Gen 26:1-3), and in due course also for
4. **Jacob** (Gen 35:9-12). He and his sons are relocated to . . .
5. Egypt, which is ruled by his lost son **Joseph** (Gen 37-50). There Jacob dies.
6. **Joshua** later leads Jacob's descendants, as they enter the Land by conquest. This chapter is fictitious; it is a military exaggeration of a more gradual entry.

The Kingship

7. **Samuel** is the pivotal figure; he deplores the Kingship, but later anoints Saul (1 Sam 9-10). The waning of the priestly order is marked by statements of corruption in the priesthood (1Sam 2:12, Eli; 1Sam 8:1-3, Samuel himself).
8. **Saul** proved unsatisfactory, and the Promise was instead given to . . .
9. **David**, despite his highly unsavory beginnings. David's son
10. **Solomon** confirms the Second Promise by building the Temple, to fulfil David's vow. A new and stable situation seems to have been reached.

Exile and Return

11. **Job** and **Qoheleth**, unconvinced by the Return, express total pessimism.
12. **Jonah**, a satire on prophecy, sees signs of hope, albeit in an entirely new direction; a hope reinforced by **Ethical** considerations; see §65.

That more hopeful strand shows the persistence of ancient Canaanite ideas.

There is of course much more; we will take up some of it in later chapters. But this much may help, as we conclude this Orientation, and turn to reading the Biblical texts themselves.