**OVERVIEW OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

**A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH**

We recommend having your Bible with you, turning first to the Old Testament Table of Contents. We will be using the King James with the 39 book divisions.

This is a lesson that I would have appreciated knowing when I first started to seriously study the Scriptures. We hope that it helps to remove some of the uncertainty and/or sense of intimidation that some might have when trying to use the Old Testament. (OT)

Once this system is grasped, it can be used for everything from chronology studies to being able to align more scriptures on a specific topic and more.

The OT has been divided into 3 sections:

1. The histories: Genesis through Esther – 17 books. These are mostly listed in chronological order as the history they record took place. We say mostly in order because there is some overlap in several books as we shall observe.

These 17 books cover the history, from creation through Persia being the dominant power. While Genesis covers the six creative Days, each being 7,000 years in length, our focus is human history. We start in Genesis, with the creation of Adam in October 4129 BC. (We start to count the first full year with 4128 BC) It continues through Nehemiah, ending about 437 BC. This is a vast period of about 3,700 years!

1. The Poetical: Job through Song of Solomon – 5 books. Now the point of interest to us is that the Hebrew scribes started over, as it were, and listed these books in the chronological order according to the time they covered. Again, there is some overlap. It is believed that Job lived and wrote before the Law Covenant was given to Israel, as he was offering up sacrifices on his own. Br. Russell suggests he lived in Arabia and was a contemporary with Abraham, about 2000 BC. The Psalms were mostly composed by King David and the remaining 3 Poetical books by Solomon. We can readily see that we are able to INSERT these 5 books into the historical accounting. Particularly Job would fit into the book of Genesis and the remaining 4 into Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles.
2. The Prophets: Isaiah through Malachi – 17 books. Once again, we recognize that the Hebrew Scribes started listing the Prophets in the order that they historically prophesied or wrote. However, it is very important for us to note that they differentiated between the 4 “major Prophets” and the 12 “minor Prophets”. We observe that in order of writing they start with Isaiah and continue through Daniel. Then they start over in time with Hosea through Malachi. We will see that some of the so-called major and minor Prophets gave their messages at the same time as others. Hence, they were contemporaries. We can date Isaiah as the first, from about 829 BC and Malachi the last, about 442 BC. This covers a period of a little less than 400 years. And like the Poetical books, we can insert these 17 books into the appropriate historical books such as Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah.

We note that there was an approximately 400-year period between

the last book written in the OT and the beginning of the New Testament. There are historical accounts, but nothing inspired by God to be recorded.

Now we are ready to consider a systematic approach:

First, we consider the name of a book. Then we consider the first few verses and last few verses. Perhaps at times we will have to consider other verses within the book to place it historically, or by important events it relates to.

GENESIS = “Beginning”. It opens with “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” This refers to God shaping the affairs of earth to be a hospitable and eternal home for the human race and all the ecosystems related to such.

The closing of Genesis has the patriarch Jacob dying (Gen. 49:33) and Joseph and his father’s house (family) dwelling in Egypt and prophesying that God would visit them there and deliver them out of Egypt and bring them to the land promised Abraham (Gen. 50:22 – 26).

This book covers an immense period of time in earth’s history. But if we start with the creation of Adam – October 4129 BC – and continue to Jacob’s death, we have a little over 2,300 years! So many marvelous events are recorded in Genesis. However, if we can but remember if an event we are interested in transpired before Jacob’s death, or very shortly thereafter, we can turn to Genesis and find it. This is the book that gives us our Antediluvian world, with the creation of our first parents, the Eden accounts, both of the reasons for the dying process and great permission of evil, the great Flood and its’ cause along with the new beginning for humanity. We have our great Patriarchal Age, and the whole story of Abraham along with the Abrahamic Promise and Covenant. It closes with the death of the last Patriarch Jacob and how God would then start to work with his 12 sons, who would become the 12 tribes of Israel. In essence, we can trace the Seed of promise as told to our first parents, through the Flood, to Abraham and his Seed. We learn from the New Testament that there are two Seeds of promise, one Spiritual which would be developed at a later date, and one Natural or earthly. This is what we can continue to trace throughout the OT. It is the story of the nation of Israel and those nations they interacted with.

EXODUS = “departure” or “exit”. We learn from the opening verses that there is a little overlap or backtracking with Genesis, for we have the account of Jacob and his twelve sons being in Egypt. Further on we have the background of Moses, his life, and then, in the 12th chapter, the first Passover and the departure or Exodus of the Israelites out of Egypt. We have their sojourning in the Wilderness, the receiving of the Law Covenant at Mt. Sinai, the instructions for the Tabernacle, the priesthood and sacrifices, as well as further instructions regarding the Law. In Chapters 36 – 39 they actually construct the Tabernacle and all things pertaining to it. Then in the last chapter, 40, they erect it and the glory of the LORD filled it.

LEVITICUS = relating to the Levites. The book opens with the first seven chapters giving the instructions for the various offerings the Israelites were to make. The book continues with the establishment of the Levitical priesthood, the fundamental national feasts and Sabbath days. The closing verse relates that God gave all these instructions through Moses while they were camped at Mt. Sinai.

NUMBERS = In Greek, “Numbers”, but in the Hebrew, “In the Wilderness”. It relates how Israel was at Mt. Sinai and then traversed in the Wilderness, ending the book with them in Moab at the border of Canaan, on the East of the Jordan river. It is entitled Numbers due to the two accounts in the book of the numbering of the people.

DEUTERONOMY in Hebrew = “These are the Words”. In Greek = “Repetition” of the Law. This is the 5th book of Moses. It is also known as the Torah (guidance, teachings, Law), and, in Greek, the Pentateuch (the 5 books). This is a most remarkable book, for in it Moses recounts the Law requirements, their wilderness experiences and prepares them for the transfer of leadership from himself to Joshua. Moses conveys all of this in a series of sermons or lectures, all within about a week of his death. The book closes with Moses on Mt. Nebo, seeing the Promised Land and then his death, followed by Joshua. It is hard to read the last chapter without being moved.

JOSHUA = It is the name of the new leader of the nation. Joshua can mean “deliverer” or “Savior”. The book opens after the death of Moses, with Israel still on the East side of the Jordan river. Joshua then leads them into the Land of Promise in the year 1575 BC. The book records the events surrounding the conquering and division of the Land for the various people and tribes. The book ends with the death of Joshua and the death of Eleazar (the son of Aaron).

JUDGES = as the name implies, this book details the difficult events that called for Judges as the leaders during the 450 years from Joshua until the time of Saul, the first King of the nation. The last verse states “In those days there was no king in Israel…”

RUTH = she is the remarkable Moabite who married into a Hebrew family (twice). She is the great grandmother of King David and is in the genealogical record for the man Jesus. This book records events during the period of the Judges (chapter 1:1). It concludes with a short genealogical record.

I SAMUEL = Originally 1 and 2 Samuel were one book, later divided. We learn that Samuel, as the last Judge, also anointed the first two Kings of Israel. The LORD used him to transition Israel from Judges to a Monarchy. In the first chapter we have Samuel born and dedicated. A note on 1:9 – “Temple” is probably a reference to the Tabernacle at Shiloh. In 7:15 we learn that Samuel was the last Judge. In 11:15 Saul is made king. In 16:13 Samuel anoints David (the first of three anointings). In 25:1 Samuel dies and all Israel mourns. The first book ends with the death of Saul and his three sons, including Jonathan.

II SAMUEL = continues after the death of Saul with the events of David’s life as the King thereafter. It closes with King David purchasing the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite, which would be the future place of the Temple.

I KINGS = I and II Kings were originally one work. Along with I and II Samuel and II Kings, they cover the entire period of the Kings, from Samuel’s anointing of Saul to the Babylonian’s taking captive the last king Zedekiah. A period of 513 years. This first book starts with King David being very aged. He selects his son Solomon to be king after him. David dies in 2:10. King Solomon sits upon the throne in 2:12. In this book we have the Temple built, the great revolt against King Rehoboam, and the resulting division between the 2 tribes and the 10 tribes, each following different kings. The book closes with the death of the Judean King Jehoshaphat, the reign of his son Jehoram, and the reign of the 10-tribe king, Ahaziah.

II KINGS = the history of the divided monarchies continues. In 18:10 we have the end of the 10 tribe kings, Hoshea being the last. They were conquered by the Assyrians approximately 130 years before the ending of the Judean kings. The book ends with the last King of Judah – Zedekiah – being taken captive to Babylon, the Temple burned, and Jerusalem destroyed, along with people being taken to Babylon with some going to Egypt. Thus started the 70 years desolation of the land in 606 BC.

I CHRONICLES = in Hebrew = “the events of the years”. I and II Chronicles were originally one writing. These two books recount the history of only the Kings of Judah. Be it noted that the number of years for the Judean kings is the same in Kings and Chronicles. This first book starts with a number of long genealogical datings, the first one starting with Adam. In the long re-capping, we have King Saul slain in 10:4, followed by the acts of King David, concluding with King Solomon on the throne.

II CHRONICLES = continuing from the first book with the reign of King Solomon, it concludes as II Kings did, with the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem. That ended the Judean kings and began the 70 years Desolation of the Land.

EZRA = He was a priest and a scribe. Actually, he did not return with the first wave of Hebrews returning after King Cyrus the Persian’s decree in 536 BC. He is recorded as returning in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes I, 467 BC, or about 50 years after the Temple had been rebuilt, 7:7. The book opens with the momentous event of King Cyrus’ decree, at the conclusion of the 70 years’ Desolation, to allow any willing Israelites to return to Jerusalem and reconstruct the Temple. The construction was completed about 20 years later in Ezra 6:15. The book ends with Ezra chastening the Israelites for taking wives from the Gentile strangers of the land and directing them to separate from them, which the vast majority did.

NEHEMIAH = He was of the tribe of Judah. He returned 13 years after Ezra, in the 20th year of King Artaxerxes I, 454 BC. The book opens with his return and how, under his leadership, the walls of the city Jerusalem were repaired. He, with Ezra, worked as leaders encouraging a complete returning to the Law of God and a cleansing of their daily lives. Ezra and Nehemiah give us the history of events after the Israelites returned from Babylonian captivity.

ESTHER = She, along with Mordecai, both Jews living in Persia during the time of King Xerxes (Ahasuerus being a title), created a great deliverance for the Jewish people throughout the Persian Empire. She became Queen and Mordecai second to the King throughout the Empire. The feast of Purim was started.

This book is the last of the 17 Historical books. It occurred during the time that the book of Ezra records. It would have taken place after the 2nd Temple had been completed.

As stated at the beginning, with the book of Job we have the Poetical writings. And we start over in a sense with Job, considered to be the earliest book of the 5 Poetical books.

JOB = The name of an actually righteous, God fearing individual, who, though wealthy himself, made efforts to assist the poor. This book was probably written later with the author relying perhaps on oral tradition. It is believed that Job lived during the Patriarchal Age, likely a contemporary of Abraham. Hence we can “insert” this book into the historical book of Genesis. Although written as a poem, it relates actual events. There is a suggestion that it was written after the great Pyramid of Gizeh was constructed based upon verses in chapter 38.

PSALMS = In Hebrew “Praises”, in Greek (The Septuagint), “Stringed Instruments”. However, it is a collection of poems and songs praising God, and for seeking help from Him. David has authored about half, and perhaps 6 or more wrote the rest. While the composers had praises on their minds, God intended them to write of many prophecies in their works. We can insert this book into the historical books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles.

PROVERBS = “Positive action”. Hebrew = “Parables” or “Oracles”. It tells that these were composed by King Solomon and most were, although a few toward the end were authored by others. It is thought that King Hezekiah finished compiling the book. We can insert this Poetical book into the historical books of Kings and Chronicles.

ECCLESIASTES = “Teacher.” 1:1 tells us it was written by the son of King David, and several hints in the book seem to point unmistakably to King Solomon. As Proverbs was written in Solomon’s best time of life, Ecclesiastes was written in the latter years of life, when he finally realized that the pleasures of life that lead one away from God were meaningless and empty. We can insert this book into the historical books of I Kings and I and II Chronicles.

THE SONG OF SOLOMON (AKA CANTICLES) = Hebrew – “Solomon’s Song of Songs”. Canticles – Latin = “Songs”. 1:1 tells us it is Solomon’s song of love. Br. Russell states that it is allegorical in nature and primarily represents the love between Christ and his Bride the Church. This is the last of the Poetical books, and we can insert it into the historical books of I Kings and I and II Chronicles.

The third division of the OT is the 17 books of the Prophets. It is striking that the first section or histories were 17 books and the last section likewise 17 books, suggesting a desire for balance, since the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles could have each been one book. Regardless, even though these are Prophets, they contain MUCH history as we will see. Dating these books is sometimes a challenge because some of the things they write about are – well – prophecies – events that would transpire sometimes years, centuries or even millennia in the future.

The 17 books of the Prophets are subdivided into Major (5), and Minor (12). The first of the Major is Isaiah and he is considered the earliest of the 4. Hosea is considered the earliest (that we can tell), of the minor, and we shall start over with our dating.

ISAIAH. 1:1 We are told he was a prophet to Judah and Jerusalem. He prophesied during the reigns of four Judean Kings – Uzziah (829 BC), Jotham (777 BC), Ahaz (761 BC) and Hezekiah (745 BC). Since Hezekiah reigned for 29 years, and Isaiah lived somewhat after Hezekiah died, perhaps his prophetic work was about 64 years long. He was married to a godly woman and had several children (two sons are mentioned). He lived not far from the Temple in Jerusalem. It is possible that Isaiah might have used several scribes to write as he dictated to them (other prophets did so also). His chapter 53 of the coming Messiah is much beloved and is credited with converting many a Jewish person to Christ. We read of him in several places in II Kings and II Chronicles, especially in his relationship with King Hezekiah (II Kings 20, II Chronicles 26:22 through 32:32). Isaiah was used by God to help save Jerusalem from the Assyrians. He gave prophesies that were current events as well as future events regarding Israel, First Advent and Second Advent. We can be sure he was contemporary with the Prophets Hosea, Amos, and Micah and perhaps others. We can insert this book in II Kings and II Chronicles.

JEREMIAH = In 1:1-3, we learn that he prophesied during the reign of the last 5 Kings of Judah: Josiah (Jehoahaz), Jehoiakim (Jehoiachin) and Zedekiah. He was a priest, the son of the priest who had found the lost books of the Bible during King Josiah’s reign. He prophesied just over 40 years. He suffered greatly for his faithfulness in proclaiming the Word of God. He was still in prison when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. He ended up going with some of the remnants of the Land into Egypt. He was contemporary with, although older than, Daniel and Ezekiel, as well as Micah and Zephaniah. His prophecy concerning the 70 years over the destruction of Jerusalem is what would be encouraging to Daniel at the end of those 70 years. (Daniel 9:1, 2) This book can be inserted in the historical books of II Kings and II Chronicles.

LAMENTATIONS = It is considered to be Jeremiah’s bitter discouragement over the destruction of the Temple Jerusalem and the desolation of his people.

EZEKIEL = In 1:1-3 we learn that Ezekiel is a priest. He was taken prisoner to Babylon as a young man at the time of King Jehoiachin’s being taken captive. He prophesied during the 5th year of King Jehoiachin’s captivity (in Babylon), which was 612 BC – 6 years before the great 70 years Desolation. This would be the 6th year of King Zedekiah’s reign. Ezekiel prophesied to the Jews in captivity in the Babylonian Empire. He too suffered distress as a prophet. He gives us many dates in his writings. He records the destruction of Jerusalem. He offers most marvelous visions of God, of the futuristic Temple and city of Jerusalem, the Land divisions and great stream from the Temple – all picturing the great blessings of the Mediatorial Phase of the Kingdom of God. He was a contemporary of Jeremiah and Daniel, perhaps a little older than Daniel. His book could be inserted into the historical books of II Kings and II Chronicles.

DANIEL = In 1:1-3 we learn that Daniel was taken captive to Babylon as a young lad, perhaps 14 years old. Although it takes some reckoning, we suggest that the “third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, when Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon came and took spoils and captives”, is the year 620 BC. It was the last 3 years of Jehoiakim’s reign, dating from when Nebuchadnezzar had taken control over Judah. Compare II Kings 24:1, 6 and II Chronicles 36:4-8. For further reading we recommend “Great Pyramid Passages” Book 2, pages 27-32. Daniel lived over 100 years! He lived when the Temple and Jerusalem were destroyed. He lived long enough to see Babylon captured and Cyrus the Persian’s great decree for any of the Jewish people to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. Like Joseph so long before him, he too rose to power in a foreign empire! His detailed time and history prophecies are unmatched in the OT. Daniel’s writings are so remarkable when we consider what we learn from him in only 12 chapters when compared to the length of the 3 previous great prophets! He was contemporary with Jeremiah and Ezekiel. We can insert his book into the historical books of II Kings, II Chronicles and Ezra.

Before we consider the 12 Minor prophets, we want to repeat that we are going backward in time, to the time that we read of in the book of Isaiah.

HOSEA = In 1:1 we learn that Hosea prophesied during the same four Judean Kings that Isaiah did. However, he also mentions the 10-tribe King Jeroboam II (not the first rebellious King Jeroboam I). Hosea was a prophet to the 10-tribe or Northern Kingdom of Israel. He was a contemporary of Isaiah, Amos, and Micah. He lived and prophesied of the delinquency of the 10 Tribes and their impending punishments. He died about the time Assyria dismembered Israel, taking the northern and eastern sections captive, approximately 130 years before Judah and Jerusalem fell. We can insert this book into the historical books of II Kings and II Chronicles.

JOEL = there is nothing in the book to help us date it. Some, including Br. Meggison, think he prophesied during the early years of King Uzziah. He would have just preceded Isaiah, Amos, and Micah. This does not seem unreasonable as the Massorites (those who compiled the Hebrew Bible as we general have it from the 6th – 10th centuries AD) placed his book here. We can insert his book into the historical books of II Kings and II Chronicles.

AMOS = In 1:1 we learn he was a shepherd and prophesied during King Uzziah and the 10-tribe King Jeroboam II. He was specifically sent to speak warning and impending destruction on the Northern Kingdom. He was a contemporary of Hosea, Joel, and Micah. We can insert his book into the historical books of II Kings and II Chronicles.

OBADIAH = this is the shortest book in the OT. We do not know anything about the author. He condemns Edom/Edomites, the descendants of Esau, Jacob’s brother. They were historical enemies of Israel. In verses 10 and 11 there is a description of strangers invading and conquering Jerusalem and that Edomites partook of the spoils. Hence their condemnation. Many are the debates on the dating of this book, but nothing is certain. If it is of an earlier date – which would harmonize with its position as the 4th book of the minor prophets – perhaps it is during the invasion and spoiling of Jerusalem by the Philistines and Arabians during the reign of King Jehoram about 910 – 907 BC. If at a later date, perhaps a prophetic description of the yet future Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem. However, Obadiah makes no mention of the burning of the Temple or the City. This book can be inserted into the historical books of II Kings and II Chronicles, regardless of which dating you prefer.

JONAH = In 1:1, 2 we learn that Jonah is the son of Amittai. This will prove helpful. He was sent to prophesy against Nineveh, the capitol of the hated Assyrian Empire. We have a very helpful reference in II Kings 14:23-25. We read that Jonah, son of Amittai, a prophet (from Galilee), prophesied during the 15th year of the reign of the Judean King Amaziah. This would be 843 BC. Highly unusual in every aspect, he was sent to prophesy against a cruel, foreign people right in the midst of their capitol city! His disobedience (for a time), his repentance and then disappointment, all go to give us an insight to this prophet and the LORD’S working with him. Jesus mentions him without a word of reproach. We can insert his book into the historical books of II Kings and II Chronicles.

MICAH = In 1:1 he prophesied during the Judean Kings Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. He spoke of the idolatry in both the 2-tribe and 10-tribe kingdoms. His words in 3:12 of Jerusalem’s future destruction are quoted at a later day as recorded in Jeremiah 26:17, 18. He was a contemporary of Isaiah, Hosea, and Amos. We can insert his book into the historical books of II Kings and II Chronicles.

NAHUM = We cannot date this book with accuracy except that the theme of his prophesy is the impending destruction of Nineveh. This would date him after Jonah’s preaching in Nineveh and their repentance, which reversed itself after some time, for Assyria came and carried off the Northern, 10-tribe kingdom about 736 BC. It is thought that Assyria and Nineveh fell to the Medes and Babylonians about 625 BC. He was still pronouncing the yet to come destruction of Nineveh and Assyria (2:13). We can insert his book into the historical books of II Kings and II Chronicles.

HABAKKUK = We cannot date this book with certainty as he does not provide any definite dating. However, due to his prophecies in 1:6 and 3:16, it seems to be before the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. He would have been a contemporary with Jeremiah and perhaps Ezekiel. We can insert his book in the historical books of II Kings and II Chronicles.

ZEPHANIAH = In 1:1 we learn here that he was the great, great grandson of King Hezekiah! He was a cousin to King Josiah, in whose reign he prophesied. It was before the destruction of Nineveh which was during the following reign of Jehoiakim. He might have been a contemporary with Jeremiah. We can place his book in the historical books of II Kings and II Chronicles.

HAGGAI = In 1:1 he writes of his messages starting in the second year of the Persian King Darius (Hystaspes) in the year 520 BC. He is the first of the 3 post exile prophets. His recorded prophecies span 4 months. He went to Jerusalem approximately 16 years after King Cyrus had made his great proclamation, as we considered in Ezra and Nehemiah. He was a contemporary of Zechariah and together they encouraged the returned Israelites to complete the construction of the Second Temple (which was finished about 4 years later). We can read of Haggai and Zechariah in Ezra 5:1, 6:14. We can insert his book into the historical book of Ezra.

ZECHARIAH = In 1:1 we learn that he started to prophesy just 2 months later than Haggai, in the second year of King Darius I (520 BC ). He was also a priest (Nehemiah 12:16). And he prophesied for at least 2 years – Zech. 7:1. He was contemporary with Haggai, and we can insert his book into the historical books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

MALACHI = the last of the prophets as found in the OT. We cannot be sure but Br. Russell thinks he prophesied during the absence of Nehemiah, in Jerusalem about 442 BC. We can insert his book into the historical book of Nehemiah.

Of the 4 major prophets and 7 of the minor, we are able to date by the kings they prophesied during. That leaves 5 minor prophets that we cannot be as certain to their dating.

We see that none of the Books of the 16 Prophets (Lamentations by Jeremiah), that we can date with certainty, are before King Amaziah – the twelfth king of Judah. Hence, we can confine our historical books for the Prophets to II Kings, II Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah.

If we are studying about a King or a prophet, we can now correlate the appropriate books together and gather more scriptural information for both historical and interpretive understanding.

If we want to date an event in the OT, we can use the chronological tables found in the Second Volume, pages 42, 43, 44 and 50, and insert these into our overview of the 39 books. Then, with minimal effort, we can determine the date(s) of almost any important event in the OT using the Biblical method instead of trying to rely on Nominal Commentaries with their faulty chronological schemes.

End.

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