

## INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORICAL BOOKS

### Joshua

*(The Baker Illustrated Bible Handbook)*

The typical general and generic term “Historical Books” can be applied to the books of Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1–2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings, 1–2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. On closer analysis, however, this long list of books falls into two distinct groups, which we will call “the Deuteronomy-based history” (Joshua through 2 Kings) and “the Chronicler’s history” (1 Chronicles through Esther).

The Deuteronomy-based history includes Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1–2 Samuel, and 1-2 Kings. These books are generally in chronological order, and they continue the story of the Pentateuch. The books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy present the Mosaic covenant, the terms by which Israel could live in the Promised Land and be blessed by the awesome God living in their midst. The question at the end of Deuteronomy, as the Israelites prepare to enter the Promised Land, is, “Will Israel be faithful to the Lord and the laws (the Mosaic covenant) he has given them and thus be blessed?” This question drives the plot of the story line throughout the Deuteronomy-based history (Joshua through 2 Kings). The tragic answer (already predicted by God in Deut. 31:14–21) is no. The books in the Deuteronomy-based history describe this tragic downfall of Israel, as the nation fails to obey God and follow him.

The beginning and the ending of the Deuteronomy-based historical books are in contrasting and ironic parallel. The book of Joshua opens with Israel destroying the city of Jericho and then moving in and possessing the Promised Land. Second Kings, in contrast, ends with the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of Israel from the Promised Land. Just in case the reader missed this significant parallel, 2 Kings 25:1–5 describes a small detail that pulls it all together. As Jerusalem falls, the disobedient and rebellious King Zedekiah sneaks out of the city and flees for his life. The Babylonians, however, overtake him in the plains of Jericho (2 Kings 25:5), where the whole story of conquering the Promised Land started.

Thus the Deuteronomy-based history opens with Israel going into the Promised Land (Joshua) and it closes with Israel being expelled from the land (2 Kings). In between, Israel will have several ups and downs. The book of Joshua is “up,” as Israel obediently conquers the land. Judges is definitely a “down,” as Israel quickly spirals down and becomes as corrupt and defiled as the Canaanites they were supposed to dispossess. Who will save them from the mess they are in? The book of Ruth answers this very quietly, providing a transition to David, who will be the one to save them and get them back on track. First and Second Samuel is about David, his rise to power and his reign. David completes the conquest and gets Israel back on track as far as worshiping God goes. This is one of the “ups” in the story—indeed, perhaps the high point



theologically. But David cannot sustain the role of savior. He is, after all, merely a great man. One night he looks down from his palace, sees the beautiful and naked Bathsheba, and his entire kingdom crumbles. So, while 1–2 Samuel starts out on an “up” beat, it ends with the story heading down. In 1–2 Kings, a few valiant, good kings try to stop the downward slide of Israel into idolatry and disregard of God’s law. But the momentum is too great, and most of the leadership in Israel (kings, prophets, priests, nobles) is encouraging, even leading, the downward slide away from God’s commands. The end is tragic, and just as God predicted in Deuteronomy, Israel loses the Presence of God and the right to live in the Promised Land. They are expelled from the land, carried off into exile in Babylon. Very little hope is expressed at the end of the Deuteronomy-based history, which is primarily concerned with explaining why the judgment of the exile occurred. For hope beyond the exile, we will have to listen to the prophets.

The Chronicler’s history ( 1 Chronicles to Esther) is written from a slightly different perspective. It does not focus on explaining why the exile occurred, but rather speaks to those who have returned to the land after the exile and points to the way forward, focusing on the everlasting promises of the Davidic covenant, on establishing true and faithful worship in the temple, and on trusting in God even if they remain weak and under foreign political domination.

As mentioned in Part II, the Hebrew Bible is divided into three main sections: the Torah (what we call the Pentateuch), the Prophets, and the Writings. In the Hebrew canon the books of the Deuteronomy-based history (Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1–2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings) are included in the Prophets, placed at the front of that group and labeled as “the Former Prophets.” They also follow Deuteronomy and provide a tight historical and theological connection to the Torah (Pentateuch). The authorship of the books in the Deuteronomy-based history is not stated in each book, but probably they were written by unidentified court prophets, perhaps one of the reasons the Hebrew canon refers to them as part of the Prophets.

Likewise, in the Hebrew canon, the Chronicler’s history ( 1 Chronicles through Esther) is located in the section called the Writings, which closes the Hebrew Bible. The order is slightly different as well, with 1–2 Chronicles falling at the very end and closing the Hebrew canon.

