

Introduction to the Historical Books

The main purpose of the Historical Books is not to give “scientific history”, but “theological history”.

Two very important aspects of this theological history demand more emphasis: the importance of the Covenant (“I will be your God and you will be my people” = God’s promise) but there is a big IF... namely, *if* you are faithful to the Covenant.

The Historical Books are not only the story that God will always fulfil his promise, but very explicitly that the rulers, be they judges or kings, were most of the time not faithful to the Covenant. There is a similarity of the narratives for all the judges (the Twelve Judges) insofar as they all began well, but ended badly.

This is also true of the Story of the Kings. The people, who asked Samuel for a king, wanted “*to be like the other nations*”, which they were not; they were the *People of the Covenant*, and should have been relying on God for protection and not on a king.

All kings, except three (e.g. Josiah) after Solomon were bad. Indeed it was Solomon’s foolish way of ruling that led to the split of the United Kingdom into Israel (North) and Judah (South) in 931 BCE.

Yet God still remained faithful to his Covenant and brought it to fulfilment despite these unfaithful and sinful kings.

The Historical Books are, therefore, telling the story of how their infidelity led to one disaster after another, the Fall of Samaria in 722/1 and the Fall of Jerusalem (587/6).

The Historical Books are subdivided into two main historical collections and some other books.

- The Deuteronomic History is made up by what the Jewish list calls “Former Prophets”. (Deuteronomistic History is a modern theoretical construct holding that behind the present forms of the books of Deuteronomy and Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, there was a single literary work).
 - *Joshua* is written like an eye-witness account of a military campaign
 - *Judges* is about the judges whose stories as temporary leaders of the people it relates
 - *1-2 Samuel* is about the prophet, who dominates much of its pages, and
 - *1-2 Kings*, which presents the story of the kings of Israel and Judah down to the destruction of Jerusalem and the sending into exile.

- The Chronicler's History comes from the hands of a Levite or Priest and are not just a retelling, but more a re-reading and even a re-interpretation from their point of view, who are allotted a much more important place in history than in the Book of Kings.
 - *1-2 Chronicles* are concerned with the affairs of Judah, the southern kingdom, for the most part. They come from Jerusalem and are concerned with the reconstruction of the Temple.
 - *Ezra* and *Nehemiah* are named after the architects of the reconstruction Temple and city after the return, Ezra the scribe and Nehemiah the builder.
- A third part of this group is made up of:
 - *Ruth* is named after the heroine, a pagan woman from Moab, who may have been a historical figure since she is named as the great-grandmother of King David but the author has fictionalised her story.
 - *Esther* is named after its fictional heroin who became queen.
 - *Lamentations* is the name given to five poems which were used to lament the sacking of the city of Jerusalem, the destruction of the first Temple and the exiling of the people of Judah in 586 BCE.
- The final part contains five deuterocanonical books:
 - *Judith* is named after its Jewish heroine, a beautiful, young and resourceful widow. The book is a work of fiction
 - *Tobit* is named after its Jewish hero, living in exile in Nineveh.
 - *Baruch* is named after the alleged author who claims to have written the work in Babylon after the Chaldeans had destroyed Jerusalem (586 BCE).
 - The Books of *1-2 Maccabees* are named after the name Maccabaeus, given to Judas, the central character of the story.

Joshua

The Book of Joshua continues to explore the living out of the covenant in the Promised Land of Palestine. Joshua describes its conquest and its fulfilment.

A favourite quote

“Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go (Joshua 1:9).

The Book of Joshua

The Books of Joshua and Judges continue the story of how Israel – under the leadership of Joshua – eventually succeeded to take possession of the “Country of the Promise”. It is very difficult to say exactly how this conquest took place. The Bible may give the impression that it was done quickly; but it is now generally believed that it was rather a slow and painful process as the Israelites met a lot of resistance from many quarters. They may have gained a foothold in the more mountainous areas; but it certainly took some two centuries for Israel to become strong enough to actually control the major parts of Palestine.

The Book of Joshua is named after Joshua, its hero. It reads like an eye-witness account of a military campaign – although it was written a long time after the events it records, probably 586 BCE. It tells the story of three military campaigns which turned the land of Canaan into Israel, to which is added a renewal of the people’s dedication to God. This book is a prophetic witness to God’s determination to his people, a book more to hope than to history.

Who or what is a prophet?

A prophet is not someone who announces the future, but rather someone who speaks in the name of God, someone who has been made privy to God’s plans and now sees everything through God’s eyes – someone who can dare to say that they can discern the mind of God and speak on his behalf. Prophets saw themselves as the guardians of the Torah. Consequently, they did not hesitate to berate kings for their short-comings and to admonish them on the necessity of mending their ways.

How was the book written?

The first verses of the book of Joshua (1:1-9) are written in the style and from the theological perspective of the Deuteronomic writer. Yahweh is represented as summoning Joshua to lead Israel across the Jordan into the Promised Land. He is told that there is one condition: that the “book of the law” (the Deuteronomic Law) must be obeyed and studied diligently (Joshua 1:7-9).

Canaan was already occupied by various clans grouped around small fortified towns on the hilltops who fought among themselves making their living from agriculture and trade. By force or by stratagem, sometimes by treaty, the Hebrew group became established in the centre of the country and the book of Joshua describes the

settlement in the Promised Land as a marvellous epic after they had wandered for 40 years in the wilderness.

Above all, this book describes it as the teaching of a lesson: the Hebrews conquered Canaan, but it was only because God had allowed them to do so. The conquest was a gift from God. At a great assembly held at Shechem, a religious bond was established between various tribes, who renewed their covenant with God. The book ends with the death of Joshua (Joshua 24:25-29).

Who wrote this book?

Traditionally assigned to Joshua, the book was written by an unknown hand long after its hero's death. In style and theology, it is very similar to Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings, and so it is often thought to form a collection of writings with them named by the scholars the "Deuteronomistic histories".

In all the Deuteronomistic histories

God's promises are very important. The idea you find time and time again is that God always does what he says he will. An important theme in this book is identity – the questions of what made God's people who they were. As you read, ask yourself what you can tell about who God's people were meant to be and what they were meant to do.

Question or issue arising about covenant

The book of Joshua is, basically, a book that tells about the covenant. The word "covenant" describes the agreement between people, or between God and his people, that binds one to the other. This is different than a contract, which involves the exchange of goods or services for money. There are many covenants in the Bible, some between people and some between God and people.

During the Church year, we hear readings from the book of Joshua

Our first reading from the Book of Joshua (Joshua 24:1-2, 14-17, 18b) in August is the story of Joshua and the people talking about our freedom to choose God. He is saying that they must make a choice as to whether they will serve God. It is the same for us: if we want to be true disciples, we must make that same free, loving choice. On the 4th Sunday of Lent we hear about the people coming to the Promised Land after crossing the Jordan River; and we hear God telling Joshua, "Today I have saved you and your people from the sufferings you had in Egypt" (Joshua 5:9a, 10-12).

How is it structured?

- 1:1-1:18 the commissioning of Joshua as leader
- 2:1-12:24 entry into and conquest of the Land
- 13:1-22:34 the division of the land among the tribes
- 23:1-24:33 Joshua's farewell and the renewal of the Covenant

God's promises are very important.

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Judges

In Judges, the settlement and struggle for survival continues to be explored through the stories of the twelve so-called judges, the temporary leaders of the people it relates to.

A significant quote

“I will never break my covenant with you” (Judges 2:1).

The Book of Judges

The book of Judges continues the story of Israel's conquest and gradual occupation of the whole of the Promised Land. It tells stories and legends of Israel's time of tribal life in Palestine which lasted about 200 years – from 1250 down to a little after 1050 BCE. The books of Judges and Joshua present an unsettled picture. Despite the promises of an unimpeded occupation of the land of Canaan, both books are dominated by virtually continuous fighting in wars.

At this point, the tribes were far from being a nation; instead, the links were a loose (sometimes very loose) confederation of tribes. Judges tells the story of the ups and downs of their early life in the Promised Land. Some would say that Judges is the tragic sequel to Joshua.

The Twelve Judges

This book follows the exploits of the twelve judges during this period (one for each tribe): Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah, Gideon, Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon, and Samson. They are the leaders who arose in times of great need and led the tribes to victory in one or more battles. The main theme underlying these stories remains unaltered: God will be with Israel if they are faithful; but will abandon them to their enemies if they are not. It is framed in an identical pattern throughout the Book of Judges: (1) the people did evil and sinned in the sight of Yahweh; (2) Yahweh, in his anger, delivered them to an oppressor; (3) the people cried out to Yahweh; (4) Yahweh sent a hero to deliver them and (5) the land had peace all the days of the judge's life.

One example of this pattern is Samson, who was called from birth to begin the deliverance of Israel from Philistine oppression (Judges 13:5). He was a man of great physical strength but he was morally weak. When he fell in love with Delilah, he abandoned his God-assigned mission to please the woman. His indiscretion led to blindness, imprisonment and powerlessness. When you read the account of his downfall with Delilah, you might think Samson was a failure but God used his failures and mistakes to accomplish his God-assigned mission and, through his death, Samson destroyed more of his enemies in one sacrificial act, than he had previously killed in all the battles of his life.

Question arising: who or what is a judge?

Judges were people who served roles as military leaders in times of crisis, in the period before an Israelite monarchy was established. Their first work was that of deliverers and leaders in war; they then administered justice to the people, and their authority supplied the want of a regular government.

Who wrote this book?

Ancient Jewish tradition says that the Prophet Samuel is the author. He was a key leader in Israel in the period between the end of Judges and the beginning of the Hebrew monarchy under Saul. In style and theology, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings are very similar to one another. The scholars have named this collection to “Deuteronomistic histories”.

During the Church year, we hear readings from Judges

Judges is appointed to be read only briefly and rarely in the liturgy: Samson is seen as a precursor and figure of John the Baptist at his birth. In August (Year 1), we are given four readings from the Book of Judges at Mass as part of the two-month journey of God’s guidance through the history of Israel (Judges 2:11-13:25).

How is it structured?

- 1:1-3:6 laying out the problems
- 3:7-16:31 stories about various judges (including Deborah, Gideon and Samson)
- 17:1-18:31 the theft of Micah’s idol and the relocation of the tribe of Dan
- 19:1-21:25 the outbreak of civil war

A message from the book of Judges

The stories of the Judges show that God works for the oppressed, that nothing can succeed without the support of God and that even defeat presents an opportunity for living according to God’s Law.

Ruth

The book of Ruth tells the story of a faithful Israelite woman from the time of Judges.

An inspiring quote

Ruth said, “Do not ask me to leave you. Let me go with you. Wherever you go, I will go, wherever you live, I will live. Your people shall be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die and there I will be buried. I pray that with the Lord’s help nothing will separate us but death” (Ruth 1:16-17)

The Book of Ruth

The Book of Ruth appears in our Bibles right after the Book of Judges because its heroine is an ancestor of King David, whose story is told in the next books we will hear about: 1 and 2 Samuel. It tells the story of an Israelite woman, Naomi, who marries a Moabite man and goes to live in his country. They have two sons; but she loses her husband and sons in death and she decides to go home to Israel. One of her daughters-in-law, Ruth, although a Moabitess, decides to follow Naomi to take care of her – even though it will take her far away from her own people.

This well-known and well-loved story tells of Ruth’s dedication to her mother-in-law following Naomi back to her home and finding ways to take care of her, which ultimately ends up with her marriage to Boaz and her giving birth to one of David’s ancestors. There are two levels on which to read this story: the surface level which reveals a story of love and commitment, and the deeper level which reveals a message of what “foreigners” (even hated foreigners like the Moabites) might contribute to God’s story of salvation.

Who wrote this book?

No one knows anything about the author of this book. It could have been almost anyone from a village storyteller to someone keen to tell the story of the king’s ancestry.

How was the book written?

The Book of Ruth is a short story with a strong theological message about loyalty, faithfulness and loving kindness and depicting love and generosity between members of a family where wealth and power are rightly used.

The theme of the book

There are many important themes in the book of Ruth. The two main themes are *kindness* and *redemption* (Ruth 2:20). Ruth shows kindness to her mother-in-law, Naomi, by leaving her homeland to care for her (Ruth 1:16–17; 2:11, 18, 23). Boaz shows kindness to Ruth as he welcomes her to Israel, acts as her kinsman-redeemer (Ruth 4:9–10), and marries her (Ruth 4:13). His human kindness reflects the Lord’s kindness toward his people. Redemption is linked to kindness and is at the heart of the story.

During the Church year, we hear readings from Ruth

We only hear readings from the book of Ruth twice – both of them in the autumn during the 20th Week in Ordinary Time, Year 1. On the Friday, we read the beginning of the book of Ruth about how Naomi went back with Ruth the Moabitess to Bethlehem (Ruth 1:1, 3-6, 14-16, 22). And, on the Saturday, we read about how the Lord did not leave the dead man without next of kin to perpetuate his name in Israel (Ruth 2:1-3, 8-11, 4:13-17). The intention of the author of this book is to demonstrate to his readers that Yahweh cares for those who faithfully serve him and rewards them for their faithfulness.

There is a verse from the Book of Ruth, however, that we hear at every Mass in the greeting of the priest, where Boaz calls out to Ruth, “The Lord be with you” to which Ruth replied, “The Lord bless you” (Ruth 2:4).

How is it structured?

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|---------|--|
| 1:1-22 | Naomi returns home with Ruth bereft |
| 2:1-23 | Ruth gleanes wheat to survive and meets Boaz |
| 3:1-18 | Ruth enacts a risky plan to ensure a safe future for her and Naomi |
| 4:1-12 | Boaz honours Ruth and ensures her future safety |
| 4:13-22 | Ruth has a child (which she gives to Naomi) and ensures her line which stretches onwards to King David |

God speaks to us

Through the story in the book of Ruth, God tells us how he restores those who look to him with hope. It’s about God’s covenant faithfulness and it contributes to the overall covenant storyline that unifies the entire Bible.

1 Samuel

1 and 2 Samuel continue to explore the living out of the covenant and the growing need for, and coming of, its first kings in Saul and David.

A key verse

“For this child I prayed and the Lord answered my prayer” (1 Samuel 1:27).

The Book of 1 Samuel

1 Samuel picks up the story where Judges left off and ends with the death of King Saul. The book opens at the shrine of Shiloh, where Eli the priest guards the ark of the Covenant so that members of the twelve tribes could come to worship on the great feast days of the year. Hannah had been barren for many years and she went there to pray for a child (1 Samuel 1:9-11). When her son was born, she dedicated him to serve at the shrine under Eli and it was there that Samuel received a special call from God (1 Samuel 3:1-18) and eventually developed into a judge (1 Samuel 7:15).

The people demanded a king from Judge Samuel, saying: "Look, you are old, and your sons are not following your example. So give us a king to judge us, like the other nations" (1 Samuel 8:5). Israel was going through a critical period in its history, as the danger from the side of the Philistines was so great that the tribes themselves realized they would have no chance unless they would act under an effective, single military leader. Samuel reluctantly agreed, after having tried in vain to make them change their minds (1 Samuel 8:10-18). The people, however, refused to listen to Samuel. They were determined to have a king, so that they could be like the other nations, with their own king to rule them and lead them and fight their battles (1 Samuel 8:19-20). Saul was chosen as their first king; and he reigned from 1030 till 1010. But it was especially under King David (1010-970) and King Solomon (970-931) that Israel became a mighty and powerful nation.

Who wrote this book?

Ancient Jewish tradition attributes the authorship of 1 Samuel 1-24 to Samuel and the rest of 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel to Nathan and Gad. In style and theology, it is very similar to Joshua, Judges, 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings so it is often thought to form a collection of writings which scholars call “Deuteronomistic histories”.

How was the book written?

This is a history book but it falls into the category of what you might call theological history – history with a purpose. It is not telling the events solely so that you can know what happened but so that you can understand why they happened.

So, what happened and why?

In a battle with the Philistines, the Israelites had lost many men. The two armies stood on opposite sides of a deep valley. A great Philistine giant named Goliath that

stood over nine feet tall came to the front of the Philistine battle line each day for 40 days and mocked the Israelites and their God. King Saul and the Israelites were scared and did nothing when Goliath called them to fight. David was a young man who had only been sent to the front lines by his father to bring back news of what was happening from his brothers.

David heard about Goliath and he volunteered to go and fight him with only five smooth stones and a sling. Goliath laughed at David but David had faith and trust in God and he was there in the name of the Lord Almighty. He put a stone in his sling and swung it at Goliath's head. The stone sank into the giant's forehead and he fell; and David then picked up Goliath's sword and killed him with it by cutting off his head – and Israel won the battle (1 Samuel 17:1-58).

Through this story of David and Goliath, the absolute sovereignty of God and the triumph of his righteousness are conveyed.

During the Church year, we hear readings from 1 Samuel

Shortly after Christmas, on the 2nd Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B), we hear the familiar story of the call of Samuel (1 Samuel 3:1-11, 19). It focuses on “call and response”. Samuel says, “Speak to me God, I am listening” eliciting our response, “Here I am, Lord, I come to do your will”. On weekdays in Ordinary Time (Year II), weeks 1 and 2, we have 12 readings given to the great figure of Samuel, the last of the judges and to the rise of David.

How is it structured?

- 1:1-7:17 the rise of Samuel and the demise of the house of Eli
- 8:1-12:25 the advantages and disadvantages of kingship and the selection of Saul as king
- 13:1-31:13 the conflict between Saul and David, ending with the death of Saul and David's rise to power at the end of the book

The message

In tracing the development of Israel from the anarchy of the period of the Judges, from Samuel the prophet and kingmaker through Saul, the people's choice, to David, God's chosen king—the hand of God is seen at work.

2 Samuel

1 and 2 Samuel continue to explore the living out of the covenant and the growing need for, and coming of, its first kings in Saul and David.

An inspiring verse

“As for God, his way is perfect. The word of the Lord is proven. He is a shield to all who trust in him” (2 Samuel 22:31).

The Book of 2 Samuel

2 Samuel tells the story of King David. The Bible gives a lot of information about him. No wonder as only Moses was regarded as more important than David. 1 Samuel 16-31 traces his rise to power and narrates how Samuel transferred his blessings to him. Saul tried to trap David but did not succeed. King Saul died on in the battle against the Philistines on Mount Gilboa (1 Sam. 31:6ff) and David became the undisputed leader. He is first consecrated King of Judah at Hebron (2 Sam. 2), and later, in chapter 5, was also anointed King of Israel.

With this the United Kingdom is a fact. Chapters 1-8 narrate the glorious aspects of David's reign: he captures the stronghold of the Jebusites, Jerusalem, defeats many of his enemies, and grows very strong. He makes Jerusalem the political capital of the kingdom and the central sanctuary of worship for Yahweh. He even wanted to build a Temple for Yahweh, but through the Prophet Nathan, Yahweh forbade this and assured him that He, Yahweh, would build him a house: "Your dynasty and your sovereignty will ever stand firm before me and your throne be for ever secure" (2 Samuel 7:16).

Indeed, the Old Testament looks upon David as a symbol of God's love for Israel. Psalm 89 is a song in praise of God's promise to David and his family. Similar thoughts are found in Psalms 20; 21; 78 and 132. The special promise of a dynasty is found back in Psalms 2 and 110. The New Testament will emphasise that this prophecy is fulfilled in Christ, "Son of David".

Although he had a close relationship with God, David was a flawed husband and father. When he spotted Bathsheba, a beautiful woman (2 Samuel 11:2), David asked his servants about her and was told she was Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, one of David's mighty men (2 Samuel 23:39). Despite her marital status, David summoned Bathsheba to the palace, they slept together and she became pregnant. So that he could marry her, David had Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, killed in battle; but God was displeased with what David had done and he sent the prophet Nathan to David to call him to account (2 Samuel 12:1). David repents; but because by this deed he had scorned God, Nathan told him that the child that was born to him would die and he did (2 Samuel 12:13-15).

Who wrote this book?

Ancient Jewish tradition attributes the authorship of 2 Samuel to Nathan and Gad. (Nathan was a court prophet who lived in the time of King David.)

How was the book written?

Like 1 Samuel, this is a history book but it falls into the category of what you might call theological history – history with a purpose. It is not telling the events solely so that you can know what happened but so that you can understand why they happened.

So, what happened in this book and why?

David captured the Canaanite city of Jerusalem from the Jebusites and he brought the Ark of the Covenant back to where he lived and placed it in a tent. He tells Nathan about his plans to build a house for it, and Nathan prevented him from constructing the magnificent temple he wanted (2 Samuel 7:2–3). However, the Lord promises that he will build David a house and that he will be with him and his family forever.

During the Church year, we hear readings from 2 Samuel

On the 4th Sunday of Advent (Year B) and on Christmas Eve, we hear the story of the promise God made to David – that a member of his family would be a great king whose kingdom would last forever (2 Samuel 7:1-5,8-12, 14,16). On more than one feast day, the first reading is the fundamental promise to David of a messianic dynasty. On the 11th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C), we hear about forgiveness. Nathan tells David that God asked why he had not obeyed him, why he had done evil things. David confessed to Nathan that he had sinned against God; and Nathan told David him that God had forgiven him.

How is it structured?

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|------------|--|
| 1:1-3:5 | David is made King of Judah (just the Southern two tribes) and rules at Hebron |
| 3:6-5:16 | David is made King of the whole of Israel and moves the capital to Jerusalem |
| 5:17-8:18 | David attempts to consolidate the Kingdom, defeats the Philistines and brings the Ark to Jerusalem |
| 9:1-20:26 | the personal life and struggles and the waywardness of David |
| 21:1-24:25 | epilogue |

The message of this book

The message conveyed in this book is about God's fidelity and care for David, from which God's people will benefit.

1 Kings

1 and 2 Kings continue to explore the living out of the covenant and they trace the history of religious infidelity in the kings that followed David down to the end of the monarchy in about 586 BCE”.

A key verse

“And may your hearts be fully committed to the Lord our God, to live by his decrees and obey his commands, as at this time” (1 Kings 8:61).

The Book of 1 Kings

In 1 Kings, the story of David continues from where it left off in 2 Samuel. The book opens with David, in his old age, about to die, and the attempt to establish the kingly succession after his death. Despite the fact that Solomon was a younger son, through the efforts of his mother Bathsheba and the prophet Nathan, he was named as king. Solomon was the biblical king most famous for his wisdom.

Solomon’s wisdom is conveyed in a story in which he ruled between two women both claiming to be the mother of a child. Solomon revealed their true feelings and relationship to the child by suggesting that they cut the baby in two, with each woman to receive half. One mother did not contest the ruling; the other begged Solomon to give the baby to her rival – just as long as he was not killed. Solomon declared the second mother the true mother since a mother would rather give her baby up if that was what was necessary to save his life.

Who wrote this book?

1 and 2 Kings traces the history of religious fidelity in the kings that followed David down to the end of the monarchy about 586BCE. The author is unknown; but is more than likely that the author had access to court records, a sort of Annals of the King compiled by court historians.

How was the book written?

This book, again, is a history book but it falls into the category of what you might call theological history. Early editors combined the war stories with the lives of the prophets in order to emphasise the control of Yahweh during these desperate times, especially when he spoke through the words of his prophets.

The lesson of the Books of Kings

For the Books of Kings, the lesson above all is that *infidelity to God’s covenant given through Moses will lead to disaster and destruction*. The authors understood that God had spoken words of both blessing and threat through the mouths of prophets but the people when they refuse to listen to them, God took away the land he promised, first from the northern kingdom and later from the people of Judah and Jerusalem.

During the Church year, we hear readings from 1 Kings

1 Kings is full of images of the Temple and of Israelite worship; these are picked up in the liturgy (e.g., Dedication of Lateran Basilica 9th November) and prepare for Christian worship.

On the 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A), we hear the story of God appearing to Solomon in a dream. He said, "Ask me for whatever you want". God was very pleased that Solomon asked for wisdom – rather than riches or personal gain (1 Kings 3:5, 7-12). During the Summer, on the 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C), the focus again is on call and response and Elisha is called to follow Elijah (1 Kings 19:16b,19-21).

How is the book structured?

- 1:1-2, 12 Solomon becomes king
- 2:13-11:43 the story of Solomon's success
- 12:1-16:28 the split of the kingdoms and the beginnings of their separate lives
- 16:29-22:53 the confrontation between Elijah and Ahab and Jezebel

Message

The purpose of the author of these books is to show that success or failure depends entirely on fidelity to the Lord.

2 Kings

1 and 2 Kings continue to explore the living out of the covenant and they trace the history of religious infidelity in the kings that followed David down to the end of the monarchy in about 586 BCE”.

An inspiring quote

“Before him [Josiah] there was no king like him, who turned to the Lord with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him” (2 Kings 23:25).

The Book of 2 Kings

Unlike other historical books, 2 Kings begins right in the middle of a story. With all the others, the previous book ends in one way or another (the death of Saul; the glory of David’s kingship, etc.) but between 1 and 2 Kings there is simply a pause for breath before it continues once more.

Elijah is perhaps the most beloved prophet in the Bible. His lifetime is chronicled in Kings I and King II—including the miracles he performed, the inspiration he caused, and his dramatic ascent to heaven. When the time comes for him to finish, Elijah is told to anoint Elisha as a prophet in his place – and he obeys. Elisha takes up the mantle of Elijah and continues his ministry with numerous demonstrations of the effectiveness of the prophetic word in every aspect of life, including dealing with poverty, feeding the hungry, healing an enemy general, floating an axe head, providing military victory, restoring a widow's property, and even raising a dead child.

Why was the book written?

Following the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem and shortly after the Judeans were sent into exile, it is believed that these books were written to explain why the exile had happened at all. It is thought that they reached their final form in the 6th Century BCE. It is clear that the people would have been feeling hurt, despairing and lost. More than any other historical book, 2 Kings communicates the bewilderment and loss that was felt when the kingdoms fell.

The popular song “By the rivers of Babylon” expresses the lamentations of the Jewish people while they were in exile following this conquest. (The song is based on the words of Psalm 137:1-4. You can listen to the Boney M rendition of it on [YouTube.com/ watch?v=ta42xU2UXLA.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ta42xU2UXLA))

The lesson of the Books of Kings

For the Books of Kings, the lesson above all is that *infidelity to God’s covenant given through Moses will lead to disaster and destruction*. The authors understood that God had spoken words of both blessing and threat through the mouths of prophets but the people when they refuse to listen to them, God took away the land he promised, first from the northern kingdom and later from the people of Judah and Jerusalem.

Judges and seers appeared in Israel before Elijah, but the reality of what a prophet is begins to develop with him. His image is decisive and strong, overwhelming and compelling. He is an uncompromising prophet of zeal for the honour of God; and, at the same time, he is a champion of true worship and justice. He is a beloved folk hero whose special gift is working miracles as the protector and defender of the poor, bringer of peace and reconciliation and teacher of wisdom. Elijah saves the faith of worthy and suffering individuals, especially those who practice hospitality.

Elijah and Elisha are two of the most well-known prophets of Israel. They were non-literary prophets and, therefore, did not leave any writing. They both served in the northern kingdom of Israel. The one thing the author of Kings did add was the emphasis on how Elijah and Elisha carried on the role of Moses, the founder of the faith. Just as Moses was a great mediator between Yahweh and Israel, so were these heroes of faith. Elijah goes up to Mount Sinai and experiences God in the rocks as Moses did in Exodus 34; he parts the Jordan as Moses did in the Red Sea in Exodus 14; he goes up to heaven in a way seen by no one, as did Moses in Deuteronomy 34 and he calls down fire on those who oppose Yahweh as Moses did in Numbers 11.

Similarly, Elisha imitates Moses – he too parts the Jordan, provides water in the desert and bread for the starving, and turns water to blood. For the author or authors of Kings, these two prophets carried on the mission of Moses to defend the covenant and maintain the commandments of Yahweh among a people who constantly murmured against the Lord.

During the Church year, we hear readings from 2 Kings

In the summertime, on the 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B), we hear the story of Elisha feeding a hundred people with twenty loaves of barley bread. The people ate and there was some left over (2 Kings 4:42-44). The fidelity of the Prophet Elijah under affliction and throughout his mission sheds light on Christian discipleship. The miracles of Elijah and Elisha, and especially the multiplication of loaves, prepare for the Gospel accounts of the miracles of Jesus. What is important in this story (as in the one where Jesus fed the multitudes) is the action of God. The point is not whether these events took place exactly as described, but rather that God did, and always does, provide. Again, in the summertime, on the 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A), we have another story of food being offered. Elisha was invited by a wealthy woman to stop and eat whenever he was in her town (2 Kings 4:8-11, 14-16). In return for her welcome and her kindness, he promises that she will have a child.

How is the book structured?

- | | |
|------------|--|
| 1:1-8:29 | Elisha followed Elijah's example as a prophet |
| 9:1-10:36 | Jehu anointed as king and overthrew the house of Ahab |
| 11:1-12:21 | Athaliah, daughter of Ahab and Jezebel usurped the throne of Judah |
| 13:1-17:41 | the downfall of the Northern Kingdom (Israel) |
| 18:1-25:30 | the downfall of the Southern Kingdom (Judah) |

Summary

The books of Kings 1 and 2 present the reign of Solomon and of all subsequent kings from a religious stance. If they uphold the Torah, praise is given. If not, they are condemned, whatever their economic or political successes.

1 Chronicles

Our best knowledge of the post-exilic life of Israel comes from the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah. They show how the small community in Judah adapted itself to a new way of life.

An inspiring quote

“He answered their prayers because they trusted in him” (1 Chronicles 5:20).

The Book of 1 Chronicles

The books of Chronicles consist almost entirely of genealogies beginning with Adam and finishing with Ezra. They are almost entirely devoted to retelling the history of the monarchy from David to the final destruction of Jerusalem which is also the subject that appears in Samuel and Kings. This is told in the form of extracts from these books. Chronicles, however, carries the story further than Kings, recounting the decree of Cyrus, King of Persia in which he declared his intention to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple and gave permission to the exiled Jews to return to Judah if they so wished.

Because of the changed world of Israel after the exile, the priestly leaders felt the need for an updated version of Israel’s history from their own perspective. They did this to explain the proper role of the kings over Israel in the past now that they were gone for good. Another was to emphasize the temple for religious worship. This is why the history as recounted in Chronicles varies considerably from that of Kings, both adding a great deal to it and omitting much.

Who wrote this book?

Jewish tradition says that the ancient Jewish priest Ezra wrote all of 1 and 2 Chronicles. His aim was to write a history from Adam to Ezra. He was a learned man and quotes his sources: about twenty books of which some like Samuel and Kings are known to us; but others are not. The two parts of his work have been divided into four books: 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah.

What kind of book is it?

This book is a history book, which falls into the category of what you might call theological history – history with a purpose. In other words, it is written not only so you can see what happened but that you can understand why they happened.

What happened?

Chronicles inevitably followed Kings in recording how, following the glorious times of David and Solomon, the people of Judah as a consequence of their sinful behaviour and their abandonment of the true religion of Yahweh, were eventually expelled from their land. This fate is summed up succinctly in 1 Chronicles 9:1: “And Judah was taken into exile in Babylon because of their unfaithfulness”.

Chronicles omits the statements of 2 Kings 24:14 and 25:12 that some people – at least the very poor – remained behind. For the Chronicler, there was no such remnant: the entire population of Judah was taken into exile in Babylon.

Liturgical notes

The Books of Chronicles gain only one Sunday reading, in Lent of Year B. The first reading on the Vigil of the Assumption, from 1 Chronicles 15-16, applies to Mary the image of the ark of the covenant. Solomon's dedication of the Temple is used as a reading on the feast of the dedication of churches.

The imagery of ministerial priesthood in the Church and of sacrifice derives from our Israelite heritage, shown at its fullest development in 1 and 2 Chronicles. The division of orders in the Church into bishop, priest and deacon to some extent reflects the division of the Temple staff into priests, Levites and ministers of the Temple. The prayers for the ordination of bishop, priest and deacon contain clear reference to this imagery and theology.

How is the book structured?

| | |
|--------|--------------------------------------|
| 1:1-10 | Genealogies |
| 11-29 | David, founder of the Temple Liturgy |

St Jerome named these books

St. Jerome gave us the title for these books when he said that they were a "chronicle of the whole of divine history". Chronicles is intended as a series of lessons in the divine plan for history.

2 Chronicles

1 and 2 Chronicles again look at Israel's history from the perspective of a priestly writer, and its account was carried forward to the end of the fifth century BCE.

An inspiring quote

“For the Lord your God is gracious and compassionate. He will not turn his face from you if you return to him” (2 Chronicles 30:9b).

The Book of 2 Chronicles

2 Chronicles picks up the story from the end of 1 Chronicles. Chapters 1-9 complete the telling of the stories of David and Solomon and, in particular, the telling of the story of building the temple. The next chapters (10-28) describe what happened when the two nations, North (Israel) and South (Judah), split apart and became independent from each other. In contrast to 1 and 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles focuses almost entirely on Judah, only mentioning Israel when its events intersect directly with Judah.

The final chapters of the book tell of the reign of the kings from Hezekiah onwards, after the destruction of Israel, the northern kingdom and until the exile of Judah to Babylon. The book ends with the proclamation of Cyrus, King of Persia, which ended the exile and allowed the people to return home.

Who wrote this book?

Jewish tradition says that the ancient Jewish priest Ezra wrote the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles. Ezra was a scribe and a priest and is credited with bringing the Torah back to Judah after the exile. Some people have even pointed to Ezra as being influential in bringing the five books of the Torah together in the form they now have.

What kind of book is it?

This book is a history book, which falls into the category of what you might call theological history – history with a purpose. In other words, it is written not only so you can see what happened but that you can understand why they happened.

The theme of the book

The theme of sin, loss, coming back to God and restoration runs throughout the book of 2 Chronicles. This is to convey that God is a God of love and forgiveness, always welcoming his repentant children back to him.

During the Church year, we hear readings from 2 Chronicles

On the 4th Sunday of Lent (Year B), we hear how the wrath and mercy of God are revealed in the exile and in the release of his people (2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23). This tells the story of the last days of the kingdom in Judea, the Babylonian exile and the return of the faithful. The author blamed both the priests and the people for

infidelity and abuse, in spite of the prophets sent to preach repentance. In the end, a new hero emerged: Cyrus the conquering Persian. He proclaimed a royal edict for the people of Judea. Israelites should return and rebuild the Temple.

How is the book structured?

| | |
|-------|---|
| 1:1-9 | Solomon and the building up of the Temple |
| 10-27 | First Reforms of the Monarchical Period |
| 28-36 | Great Reforms under Hezekiah and Josiah |

Something for today

2 Chronicles serves as a reminder that idolatry still exists, though in more subtle forms. Its message is still relevant: Put God first in your life and allow nothing to come between yourself and your relationship with him.

Ezra

Israel's history continues from the perspective of a priestly writer in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

An inspiring quote

“Arise, for it is your task, and we are with you. Be strong and do it” (Ezra 10:4) .

The Book of Ezra

The book of Ezra begins as the exile in Babylon ends and where the book of 2 Chronicles ends. Having defeated the Babylonians, King Cyrus of Persia issued a decree releasing all exiles and allowing them to return home.

Chapters 1-6 describe the initial return under Zerubbabel and the reconstruction of the temple. Despite their efforts to rebuild the temple and the city when they got home, there was an atmosphere of tension and uncertainty among the returning exiles. They rejoiced at the laying of the foundations of the new temple shortly after the first return (Ezra 3:10-13) and again later after its completion (Ezra 6:16-22); but the builders and their leaders, especially their governor Zerubbabel, were harassed by opponents who declared that they had no right to build (Ezra 4-5) and who caused a long delay lasting many years until the reign of Darius (Ezra 4:24).

The scene shifts in the next three chapters (Ezra 7-10) when Ezra is sent to restore the practice of Israelite faith according to the instructions in the “law of God” (see Ezra 7-10, 14, 25-26). Ezra faces two major problems. Many Israelites had married Gentiles and this prevented them from keeping the law. As a chosen people, they needed to be holy and to live apart as a community to give witness to other nations. The second problem was to re-establish the whole range of practices that most characterised Israel’s special way of life. Ezra called two assemblies. At each, he read the law of God; they celebrated a penance service and a renewal of the promise to obey the covenant on everything. Accordingly, they sent away their foreign wives and children according to the counsel of the lord, hearing the words, “Take action, for it is your duty and we are with you; be strong and do it” (Ezra 10:3-4).

Ezra was able to restore the spirit of the people and set the underpinnings for the ideals of holiness. Most important of all, the authentic traditions of the past were written down in the Pentateuch as a normative guide book for the future; and, this showed a concrete way to put these traditions into daily practice for ordinary believers.

Who wrote this book?

Jewish tradition has long attributed authorship of this historical book to the scribe and scholar Ezra, who led the second group of Jews returning from Babylon to Jerusalem includes a first-person reference, implying the author’s participation in the events (Ezra 7:11–26).

Questions arising

The challenges of the return from exile made identity a key question in this period; and it seems that Ezra was able to restore the identity of those Israelites who had married foreigners. The wives were not just dismissed; they probably would have been given a formal “bill of divorcement” so that they would be restored to the condition of unmarried women who were free to marry another husband (see Deuteronomy 24:1-2).

What kind of book is it?

This book is a history book, which falls into the category of what you might call theological history – history with a purpose. In other words, it is written not only so you can see what happened but that you can understand why it happened.

The theme of the book

The theme of Ezra is faithfulness to the Lord, both in keeping the Mosaic law (Ezra 7:6) and in worship. Because of his concern about worship, Ezra stresses the importance of rebuilding the temple.

Liturgical note

Just before Christmas, we hear Ezra’s account the formation of the assembly in chapter 7:7-10. It is foundational for a Catholic understanding of the Church, for it shows that when the people of God assemble in faith, in our day as Church, God is known to be truly present. The gathering of the assembly, the local Church, is where the word of God is to be proclaimed and the sacraments celebrated. The Book of Ezra is rarely used in the liturgy. It appears in the Weekday Mass only from Monday-Wednesday in September in Week 25 (Year 1) when we hear about the building of the Temple (Ezra 1:1-6) and the celebration of Passover (Ezra 6:7-8, 12, 13-20) and how God has not forgotten the of people in their slavery (Ezra 9:5-9).

How is the book structured?

| | |
|------|--|
| 1-6 | the return from Exile and the Rebuilding of the Temple |
| 7-10 | the organisation of the community |

Something for today

God moved the hearts of secular rulers to allow and even encourage and help the Jewish people to return home. He used these unlikely allies to fulfil his promises of restoration for his chosen people and he continues to fulfil those promises today.

Nehemiah

Israel's history continues from the perspective of a priestly writer in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

An inspiring quote

“. . . Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:10)

The Book of Nehemiah

The Book of Nehemiah picks up the stories of Ezra and takes them further. The people had returned to the land following the decree of King Cyrus of Persia in 538 BCE that all captives should return home. Chapters 1-7 tell of the rebuilding of the walls under Nehemiah despite opposition from the people of the land. The middle of the book (Nehemiah 7:73b-10:39) recounts a ceremony which renewed the covenant between God and his people and celebrated the law. The final part of the book tells of Nehemiah's return to Judah as governor for a second time, including some of the reforms he undertook.

We know only a little bit about the main character of this book – Nehemiah. He was outwardly a steward of the Persian Empire, yet inwardly he was a servant of God who was passionate for his people (Nehemiah 1:3–4), faithful in prayer (Nehemiah 1:5–7), and knowledgeable in God's Word (Nehemiah 1:8–11). His name is the long version of the name Nahum and means God comforts. He had risen to a position of influence in Persia as a civil servant and he used these skills to help rebuild his beloved Jerusalem. He appeared before the queen (Nehemiah 2:6); and, since only eunuchs were allowed in the presence of the queen, some wonder whether he was also a eunuch.

Who wrote this book?

This book was probably composed at the beginning of the Greek period. The author is unknown; but he is usually called the Chronicler. His plan was an ambitious one, to write a history from Adam to Ezra. He was a learned man and quotes his sources: about 20 books, of which some (like Samuel and Kings) are known to us, others not. The two parts of his work have been divided into four books: 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah.

Jewish tradition says that Ezra wrote the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah. More recent explorations of the books, however, have concluded that it is more complex than that; and that all four books seem to have been collected together from a wide variety of sources.

What kind of book is it?

This book offers a theology of history. In order to show what the life of his contemporaries should be like, he idealises a period of past history, that of David and Solomon. He moves very quickly from Adam to David (largely by means of genealogies). He is chiefly interested in the history of the Temple and its worship. He

knows how to show that when kings and the people are faithful, they are fortunate; and when they are unfaithful, they are unfortunate.

The key to understanding the Book of Nehemiah

The Book of Nehemiah is about the restoration of the physical and spiritual life of the nation of Judah in Jerusalem. Although it seems like the rebuilding Jerusalem's wall is the theme of the Book of Nehemiah, we must understand that the wall symbolically represents the community of God's people. The wall creates their identity because by it they are protected and interlinked. The key to understanding the Book of Nehemiah is that it is the place prayer took in the steps of restoration. Prayer is honest talk with God depicting the prophet's dependence upon God.

Liturgy notes

Nehemiah illustrates why and how Catholics worship as assembly or church. Chapters 8-10 describe the first liturgical proclamation of the word of God, the Torah, in Jerusalem after the exile. The section 7:72-8:12 builds on the Book of Ezra's teaching on the assembly to describe the original liturgy of the word. The people assemble, the leaders preside and the word of God is proclaimed to the assembly. This has continued to be the pattern of the first part of Catholic liturgical celebrations.

Nehemiah is only used once at Sunday Mass. In January, on the 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C), the periscope mentioned above is proclaimed publicly and the people understand what was read (Nehemiah 8:2-6, 8-10). At weekday Mass, Nehemiah is read in September on Wednesday and Thursday, Week 26 (Year 1), following Ezra the previous week. They tell the story of the king bringing wine to the temple (Nehemiah 2:1-8) the story of Ezra opening the Book of the Law and reading from it. Nehemiah 8:1-10 is used as the first reading for the Dedication of a Church.

How is the book structured?

- 1-13 continuing the organisation of the community
- 8-10 the first liturgical proclamation of the word of God

Something for today

There is a great need today for lay people who know God's Word, pray before acting, and take calculated risks for the sake of God's kingdom. As in the time of Nehemiah, lay people today have a unique role to play in changing the course of history.

Tobit

Tobit describes a faithful Israelite from among the people exiled in 722 BCE to Assyria.

An inspiring quote

“God in heaven has arranged this marriage, so take her as your wife. From now on, you belong to each other” (Tobit 7:11).

The Book of Tobit

The Book of Tobit is a romance about how God bestowed merciful care upon two of his faithful adherents. One is Tobit; the other is Sarah, the daughter of his relative Raguel. Both of them are examples of complete trust in Yahweh and fidelity to his law. The book is full of irony, farce and other humour, expressing the reward for fidelity and observance of the Law. It is the story of loyalty, prayer and piety, presented with a wry, self-critical humour, which gently mocks overzealous people for the pickles they can get themselves into.

The Book of Tobit, named after its principal character, combines Jewish piety and morality with folklore in a fascinating story that has enjoyed wide popularity in both Jewish and Christian circles. It is not part of the canonical Scripture of the Jews. Nor is it part of the Protestant Canon of Scriptures; but it is accepted by the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions. The touching picture of the young bride and bridegroom at prayer on their wedding night is much valued.

Who wrote this book?

Prayers, psalms, and words of wisdom, as well as the skilfully constructed story itself, provide valuable insights into the faith and the religious milieu of its unknown author. The book was probably written early in the second century B.C.; it is not known where.

What kind of book is it?

This story is a splendid testimony to marriage and human love. Tobit's friend Raguel's daughter has had seven bridegrooms killed by an evil spirit on her wedding nights. Tobit's son, guided by the angel Raphael, falls in love with Sarah and marries her. As they prepare to go to bed, Raguel, fearing the worst, is already digging a grave for Tobit but he survives and he and Sarah become the ideal Jewish couple, full of love, devotion and thanks to God all the days of their long and blessed lives.

What is the theme of the book?

The Book of Tobit contains numerous maxims (do's and don'ts) like those found in the wisdom books (cf. 4:3–19, 21; 12:6–10; 14:7, 9) as well as standard wisdom themes: fidelity to the law, intercessory function of angels, piety toward parents, purity of marriage, reverence for the dead, and the value of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting.

Liturgical Notes

The Book of Tobit is read at Mass in early June for Week 9 (Year 1) underlining the lesson that God is at work in people's lives even though they are unaware of his guidance. On the Monday, we hear about how Tobit feared God more than he feared the king (Tobit 1:3-2:1-8). Tuesday - Friday the readings continue and include much of the book of Tobit (from 2:9-14).

How is the book structured?

| | |
|------------|---|
| 1:3-3:6 | Tobit's ordeals in exile |
| 3:7-17 | Sarah's plight |
| 4:1-6:1 | Preparation for the journey |
| 6:2-18 | Tobiah's journey to Media |
| 7:1-9:6 | Marriage and healing of Sarah |
| 10:1-11:18 | Tobiah's return journey to Nineveh and the healing of Tobit |
| 12:1-22 | Raphael reveals his identity |
| 13:1-18 | Tobit's song of praise |
| 14:1-15 | Epilogue |

The message of the book

The book of Tobit tells a dramatic tale of God's presence in our human lives.

Judith

Judith relates how a heroine at the time of exile saved her people.

An inspiring quote

“May you be blessed by the Lord Almighty in all the days to come” (Judith 15:10).

The Book of Judith

The Book of Judith is a story of contrasts. In the first seven chapters, the masculine military force, led by Nebuchadnezzar and his general Holofernes, attempts unsuccessfully to dominate the Israelites. Chapter eight then introduces Judith and her plans to save Israel. A widow once married to a man named Manasses; she leaves the village with her maid to befriend this enemy leader Holofernes. Judith promises to provide him information regarding the Israelites. However, after he becomes drunk in his tent and passes out, Judith beheads him. She returns to her village with his head and is celebrated by the Jewish people and the enemies flee in defeat.

The name of the heroine, Judith, simply means “Jewess” – the symbol of Jewish steadfast fidelity and courage. The story tells the triumph of fidelity to the Law, supported at every step by prayer. There is no overt divine or miraculous intervention, though prayer is prominent and effective; rather, God’s designs are fulfilled by human efforts and initiatives. The whole book is permeated with irony, especially that of sexual role-reversal: the Jewish men cower, terrified and helpless, behind the walls of their city, while the Jewish heroine sweetly sallies forth, confident and powerful, to return with the head of the persecutor.

Who wrote this book?

The author of the Book of Judith is unknown. In *Commentariorum in Aggeum*, Chapter I, verse 6, Saint Jerome seems to believe that Judith wrote it herself but he provides no convincing proof of his assertion.

What kind of book is it?

The Book of Judith relates the story of God’s deliverance of the Jewish people. This was accomplished “by the hand of a female”— a constant motif (cf. 8:33; 9:9, 10; 12:4; 13:4, 14, 15; 15:10; 16:5) meant to recall the “hand” of God in the Exodus narrative (cf. Ex 15:6).

The Book of Judith is a deuterocanonical book, included in the Septuagint and the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christian Old Testament of the Bible, but excluded from the Hebrew canon and assigned by Protestants to the Apocrypha.

What is the theme of the book?

The Book of Judith includes many positive aspects regarding biblical principles. The theme of trusting God in times of hopelessness is a noble one repeated in many

biblical accounts, ranging from Moses and the Exodus to Joshua at the Battle of Jericho, Gideon's army, David and Goliath, and Esther and Haman's plot.

Liturgical Notes

The Book of Judith is not read liturgically. Her final song of triumph is, however, the Canticle for Wednesday (Week 1) in the Liturgy of the Hours.

How is the book structured?

1:1-3:10 the campaign of Holofernes
4:1-7:32 the siege of Bethulia
8:1-10:10 Judith, instrument of the Lord
10:11-13:20 Judith goes out to war
14:1-16:25 Victory and thanksgiving

The message of the book

The story of Judith conveys the message that we should trust God in times of hopelessness.

Esther

Esther tells of a faithful Jewish queen in the Persian court of the 5th century.

An inspiring quote

“If I have found favour with you, O king, and if it pleases your majesty, grant me my life - this is my petition, and the life of my people - this is my request” (Esther 7:3).

The Book of Esther

Set after the Exile, but while a large number of Jews had not yet returned to Judah, the Book of Esther tells the story of the deliverance of the Jewish people. We are shown a Persian emperor, Ahasuerus, who makes momentous decisions for trivial reasons, and his wicked minister, Haman, who takes advantage of the king's compliance to pursue a personal vendetta against the Jews by having a royal decree issued ordering their destruction. The threat is averted by two Jews, Esther and her uncle Mordecai, whose influence and intervention allowed the Jews to turn the tables on their enemies. The Persian king had banished his wife, Vashti, for refusing to come into his presence when he summoned her. He subsequently chose Esther as a new wife. In Chapter 4, she is encouraged by Mordecai to confront the king about the Haman's decree in an effort to save her people.

One striking feature of the Hebrew version of the Book of Esther is that no divine names or titles are employed here; God is not mentioned at all although there are indirect references to divine activity (for example, in 4:14). This would not be unusual in a book whose subject matter or outlook was more secular, but Esther is a book in which the religious element is prominent: the Jews fast in order to be delivered from imminent peril and experience deliverance at the eleventh hour

This deliverance is commemorated by the inauguration of the Jewish festival of Purim from mid-February through mid-March.

Who wrote this book?

The Book of Esther does not specifically name its author. The most popular traditions are Mordecai (a major character in the Book of Esther), Ezra and Nehemiah (who would have been familiar with Persian customs).

What kind of book is it?

The Book of Esther is one of the hardest books to assign a genre to in the whole of the Bible. It tells a story from history; but it isn't quite history. There are a range of suggestions from “narrative history” (i.e., a historical story) through to “satiric melodrama”.

What is the theme of the book?

There are five themes that run through the Book of Esther. The first one is the theme of power – the power of the king and the power Esther used to save her people.

Secondly, there is the theme of feasting and role reversal – with the downfall of one queen and the rise of Esther as her successor. The third theme is of conflicting loyalties; the Jews were committed to their king but they owed their allegiance to their God as well. Fasting is seen as a fourth theme. Between the two banquets of the king (Esther 1:4-8), fasting and feasting took place in the company of others and it showed the solidarity of the Jews facing the threat of annihilation. By tearing their clothes, wearing sackcloth and ashes and wailing bitterly and loudly, Mordecai and all the Jews made sure that their protests were seen and heard. And, finally, the providence of God is seen as a theme running throughout the book through what might appear to be coincidences.

Liturgical Notes

The Book of Esther is included in the Christian Canon of Scripture as a witness to the importance of the divine preservation of Judaism, despite all attempts to destroy it. The prayer of Esther (Esther 4:17k-t) is read at Mass on Thursday of the first week of Lent. Esther was seeking refuge with God as she found herself overtaken by mortal peril.

How is the book structured?

| | |
|-----------|----------------------|
| 1 | Ahasuerus and Vashti |
| 2:1-3:6 | Mordecai and Esther |
| 3:7-5:14 | the Jews in Peril |
| 6:1-9:19 | the Jews' revenge |
| 9:20-10:3 | the Feast of Purim |

What message is God conveying in this book?

The book confronts the reader with important themes, the evils of genocide and racism. It also reminds the reader of how the providence of God can be seen as a theme running through our lives.

1 Maccabees

The two Books of Maccabees contain independent accounts of events (in part identical) that accompanied the attempted suppression of Judaism in Palestine in the second century B.C.

An inspiring quote

“Children: be courageous and strong in keeping the law, for by it you shall be glorified” (1 Maccabees 2:64).

The Book of 1 Maccabees

The struggle of the Judean state for religious freedom and finally for political independence is related in two important sources, neither of them in the Hebrew canon of the Bible. One is in the Jewish historian Josephus, who wrote his *Antiquities of the Jews* about 100 CE. The other is the two Books of Maccabees, which make up part of the deuterocanonical books of the Catholic Bible. They tell the story of the fight for freedom. The two books are quite different in style.

1 Maccabees recounts the events of the entire period in good historical fashion, and since it was written down about the year 100 BCE or so, is a much better source than Josephus. The title of the two Books of Maccabees is derived from the name Maccabeus, given to a certain Judas, the central character of the story, a name passed on to his brothers who also distinguish themselves in upholding the rights of their people against enemies. The first book deals with the fate of those Jews who resist the inroads of foreign influences (in this case, Hellenism) on their way of life. Under the heroic leadership of the Maccabees, the Jews resisted the cultural and military domination in of Antiochus Epiphanes and fought for freedom.

The people of Israel have been specially chosen by the one true God as covenant-partner, and they alone are privileged to know and worship God, their eternal benefactor and unending source of help. The people, in turn, must worship the Lord alone and observe exactly the precepts of the law given to them. When they defeated their enemies, Judas and his brothers went to purify the Temple in Jerusalem and rededicated it (1 Maccabees 4:36). They made it a law that the days of the dedication of the altar should be celebrated yearly at the proper season, for eight days (1 Maccabees 4:59) and this is the origin of the Jewish feast of Hanukkah.

Who wrote this book?

The author is unknown; but he was probably a Palestinian Jew (possibly the Hasmonean court historian). We do know that the book was probably written within a hundred years before the birth of Jesus. The events recorded take place following the accession of the cruel Antiochus Epiphanes (175 BCE) down to the death of Simon Maccabee (134 BCE). The purpose in writing it was to record the deliverance of Israel that God worked through the family of Mattathias (1 Maccabees 5:62).

The theme of the book

The work's main religious theme is that the martyr's sufferings vicariously expiated the sins of the entire Jewish people. The Maccabees books were preserved only by the Christian church. Augustine wrote in *The City of God* that they were preserved for their accounts of the martyrs.

Liturgical Notes

The two books of Maccabees are read at Mass in November during Week 33 (Year 1). On Monday, we hear about Antiochus Epiphanes, a sinful offshoot and son of King Antiochus, who issued a proclamation that everyone was to accept his religion, sacrificing to idols and profaning the Sabbath. Many stood firm, though, with heroic resistance and found the courage to choose death rather than compromising under persecution (1 Maccabees 1:10-15, 41-43, 54-57, 62-64). On Tuesday, we hear how Eleazar, a teacher of the Law, offered his death as an example for the young and for the great majority of the nation (1 Maccabees 6:18-31).

How is the book structured?

| | |
|------------|--|
| 1 | Introduction |
| 2 | Mattathias unleashes the Holy War |
| 3:1-9:22 | Judas Maccabaeus, leader of the Jews |
| 9:23-12:53 | Jonathan, leader of the Jews and High Priest |
| 13-16 | Simon, High Priest and Ethnarch of the Jews |

Something for today

Christians today can be inspired by the accounts of the Maccabean martyrs. In a statement released in March 2019, Pope Francis told us that, “although it may be hard to believe, there are more martyrs today than in the first centuries”.

2 Maccabees

The two Books of Maccabees contain independent accounts of events (in part identical) that accompanied the attempted suppression of Judaism in Palestine in the second century B.C.

An inspiring quote

“You have power over human beings, mortal as you are, and can act as you please. But do not think that our race has been deserted by God” (2 Maccabees 7:16).

The Book of 2 Maccabees

The second book deals with some of the events of the first book although it does not continue the history; but gives an independent collection of heroic stories from the early period of persecution and struggle in battle. It is written more for edification than for historical record-keeping. Both 1 and 2 Maccabees are written from the viewpoint of very orthodox Jewish believers.

The second book can be divided into three parts. The first part (2 Maccabees 1:1-2:18) contains two letters to the Jews in Egypt giving directions about the celebration of the feasts of Booths and Hanukkah. The second part (2 Maccabees 2:19-10:9) summarises the account by Jason up to the dedication of the temple by Judas in 164. The third part (2 Maccabees 10:10-15:39) follows the remainder of Judas' life up to his great victory over the Syrian general Nicanor in 160. It does not mention his death which took place shortly afterward.

Perhaps the best-known story recorded in 2 Maccabees recounts the tale of a mother who witnessed the martyrdom of her seven sons before Antiochus IV Epiphanes, following their refusal to violate the law by eating pork or that they bow down to idols. Each of the brothers undergoes terrible tortures and are ultimately killed. The mother in this story is depicted as so pious and noble that she encourages her own sons to stay fast to their ancestral traditions even if it means guaranteeing their own deaths (2 Maccabees 7:1).

Who wrote this book?

The author is unknown; but we do know that the book was probably written within a hundred years before the birth of Jesus. The events recorded take place following the accession of the cruel Antiochus Epiphanes (175 BCE) down to the death of Simon Maccabee (134 BCE).

The first and second Books of Maccabees, though regarded by Jews and Protestants as apocryphal, i.e., not inspired Scripture, because not contained in the Jewish list of books drawn up at the end of the first century A.D., have always been accepted by the Catholic Church as inspired and are called “deuterocanonical” to indicate that they are canonical even though disputed by some.

The theme of the book

The work's main religious theme is that the martyr's sufferings vicariously expiated the sins of the entire Jewish people. The Maccabees books were preserved only by the Christian church. Augustine wrote in *The City of God* that they were preserved for their accounts of the martyrs.

Liturgical Notes

The two books of Maccabees are read at Mass in November during Week 33 (Year 1). On Wednesday, we hear how seven brothers were arrested with their mother; and the king tried to force them to eat pork, which the Law forbids, by torturing them with whips and scourges; but they resisted (2 Maccabees 7:1, 20-31). On Thursday, we hear how the Jews remained faithful; they refused to swerve from their religion and the covenant of their ancestors (2 Maccabees 2:15-29).

How is the book structured?

| | |
|------------|---|
| 1-2:18 | Letters to the Jews of Egypt |
| 2:19-32 | Compilers' Preface |
| 3 | the story of Heliodorus |
| 4-7 | Hellenistic propaganda and persecution under Antiochus IV |
| 8:1-10:8 | the victory of Judaism |
| 10:9-13:26 | Judas' struggle against the neighbouring peoples and Lysias |
| 14-15 | the conflict with Nicanor |

An important message in this book

The mother declares that God created the world and the human race out of nothing, as the Torah itself says and she tells her youngest son not to fear, to accept death "so that in God's mercy I may get you back again along with your brothers" (in 2 Maccabees 7:27-29). Her assurances that she will see her sons again after their deaths is a bold statement of her belief in resurrection.