

Old Testament Storyline Books

When reading some books of the Bible, it can be hard to understand the setting – what is going on in the larger world around the characters. This chart is intended to help readers situate each book of the Old Testament within the larger storyline. The twelve “backbone” books consist mostly of storyline and constitute the main historical thread of the Old Testament. The rest are “rib” books, consisting of prophecies, smaller stories, and other writings that are set during the larger events of the backbone books. People could read the twelve backbone books straight through to familiarize themselves with the main plot of the Old Testament.

Backbone	Events	Ribs	Period
Genesis	Creation and first four dispensations	Job ¹ <i>Abraham</i> <i>Moses</i>	
Exodus	Freed from Egypt	Leviticus	Founding of Israel
Numbers	Wandering in the wilderness	Deuteronomy	
Joshua	Conquest of the promised land		
Judges	No central government	Ruth	
1 Samuel 2 Samuel	United monarchy <i>(Saul, David, Solomon²)</i>	1 Chronicles Psalms ³	Monarchy
1 Kings 2 Kings	Divided monarchy <i>(Israel in the north; Judah in the south)</i>	Proverbs ⁴ Song of Solomon 2 Chronicles Ecclesiastes ⁵ <i>To Judah</i> To Israel ⁶ Joel Amos Micah Hosea Isaiah <i>To Gentiles</i> Zephaniah Jonah Habakkuk Nahum Jeremiah Obadiah Lamentations	
Daniel	Captured by Babylon; released by Persia	Ezekiel Esther ⁷	Captivity
Ezra Nehemiah	Rebuilding Israel, no longer independent	Haggai Zechariah Malachi	Post-captivity

Notes

1. The time period of Job is uncertain. He “probably lived in the second millennium BC (2000–1000). Like the Hebrew patriarchs, Job lived more than 100 years (42:16). Like them, his wealth was measured in livestock and servants (1:3), and like them he acted as priest for his family (1:5). The raiding of Sabeans (1:15) and Chaldeans (1:17) tribes fits the second millennium, as does the mention of the *késitah*, ‘a piece of silver,’ in 42:11 (see Gen. 33:19; Josh. 24:32)” (*NIV Study Bible*, “Job”).
2. Solomon’s reign is actually covered in 1 Kings 1–11; the book of 2 Samuel ends with David’s reign. However, Solomon’s reign was included in this column to illustrate the difference between the united and divided monarchy time periods. The divided monarchy actually begins in 1 Kings 12.
3. Several psalms are attributed to David, but several others may have been written by later authors.
4. Several proverbs are attributed to Solomon, but several others may have been written by later authors.
5. The time period of Ecclesiastes is uncertain: “No time period or writer’s name is mentioned in the book, but several passages suggest that King Solomon may be the author (1:1,12,16; 2:4–9; 7:26–29; 12:9; cf. 1 Kgs. 2:9; 3:12; 4:29–34; 5:12; 10:1–8). On the other hand, the writer’s title (“Teacher,” Hebrew *qohleleth*), his unique style of Hebrew, and his attitude toward rulers (suggesting that of a subject rather than a monarch – see, e.g., 4:1–2; 5:8–9; 8:2–4; 10:20) may point to another person and a later period” (*NIV Study Bible*, “Ecclesiastes”).
6. These subheadings indicate the prophet’s audience, not where he came from. For example, Amos was from the southern kingdom of Judah, but he was sent to the northern kingdom of Israel.
7. The book of Esther occurred in Persia, but during the post-captivity period. That is, it takes place among exiled Jews, but after Ezra had already left for Jerusalem with a smaller group of Jews.