OLD TESTAMENT OVERVIEW

THE STRUCTURE, THEMES, AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE HEBREW BIBLE (TANAKH)

The Hebrew Bible — known in Jewish tradition as the TaNaKh — is a carefully structured, theologically rich collection that has shaped the faith and knowledge of God's people for centuries. It tells the unfolding story of His relationship with Israel and His purposes for the world, written by prophets, kings, sages, and singers over roughly a thousand years, each generation guided by His Spirit to proclaim one unified message of divine covenant and redemption. We still turn to it today to know God more fully and walk faithfully in response. As Paul writes, "whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4).

For Jesus and His earliest followers, this was the only Scripture. The early church later designated it the Old Testament, recognizing its covenantal nature. The Hebrew Bible follows a threefold division — Law, Prophets, and Writings — a structure already reflected in Jesus's own words in Luke 24:44:

"These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled."

Jesus's Jewish Bible held the same content as our Christian Old Testament, just arranged differently — twenty-four books rather than thirty-nine. His reference to the martyrdom of Abel to Zechariah (Luke 11:51; Matt 23:35) suggests He was speaking canonically, naming the first and last martyrs in His Bible's own literary order, from Genesis to Chronicles (Gen 4:8; 2 Chr 24:20–21).

Unlike our English Old Testament, which sorts books by category — Law, History, Poetry, Prophecy — the Hebrew Bible's three divisions are not merely organizational but deeply theological, tracing a progressive revelation: Torah lays the foundation of God's law and covenant, Nevi'im carries His prophetic warnings and promises, and Ketuvim closes in wisdom, worship, and anticipation of future redemption.

1. Torah (תּוֹרָה – The Law) – The foundational instruction, recounting the creation of the world, the origins of Israel, the covenant at Sinai, and the laws that set Israel apart as a holy nation.
2. Nevi'im (נְבִיאִים – The Prophets) – Historical and prophetic books that interpret Israel's journey through God's covenantal lens, highlighting His justice, faithfulness, and promises.
3. Ketuvim (כְּתוּבִים – The Writings) – A diverse collection of poetry, wisdom literature, and historical narratives that reflect on God's rule, human struggles, and the hope of restoration.

Rather than following strict chronology, the Hebrew Bible is arranged thematically. Our English Old Testament ends with Malachi's prophecy of Elijah. The Hebrew Bible, instead, closes with Chronicles — Israel's history retold from Adam to Cyrus's decree. It is an ending that looks forward to a coming work of God rather than resolving the fundamental human condition of sin and exile. In this way the Hebrew Bible leaves us longing for the fulfillment of God's promises still to come. This is why Jewish thought and tradition center so fully on covenantal faithfulness and the hope of a coming Messiah — the very shape of their Scripture points forward, still waiting to be fulfilled.

THE TORAH: THE FOUNDATION OF THE COVENANT AND KINGDOM

The Torah — meaning "Instruction" or "Law" — is the foundational, most authoritative division of the Hebrew Bible, forming the basis of God's covenant with Israel. It comes to us as five distinct books, yet reads as one continuous, unified narrative — tracing the origins of creation, humanity, and God's redemptive plan, from the problem of sin and exile toward its resolution in a people God calls His own.

The Torah is not just a book of laws; it is a kingdom narrative, revealing God's plan to establish His rule over creation. This story unfolds in two major movements. Genesis 1–11 presents the fall of humanity, beginning with Adam and Eve's rebellion, which leads to sin, exile, and divine judgment. The downward spiral continues through Cain's murder of Abel, the corruption before the flood, and the Tower of Babel, where humanity seeks to make a name for itself apart from God. These events set up the fundamental question that shapes the rest of the Bible: How will God restore His kingdom on earth?

The answer begins in Genesis 12 – Deuteronomy 34, when God calls Abraham and establishes a covenant with him, promising that his descendants will become a great nation and bring blessing to all peoples. The rest of the Torah details Israel's deliverance from Egypt, their covenant with God at Sinai, and their journey toward the Promised Land. Though God calls them to radical love and obedience (Deut. 6:4–5), the Torah also anticipates their failure, predicting exile and the need for divine restoration (Deut. 30:1–14). This section ultimately lays the foundation for Israel's role in God's kingdom, pointing forward to a future King from the line of Judah who will restore all things (Gen. 49:8–10).

THE NEVI'IM: THE PROPHETIC VOICE OF ISRAEL'S HISTORY

The Nevi'im, or "Prophets," narrate Israel's journey under the Mosaic covenant, and we can trace in them both the nation's successes and its failures. Unlike the diviners of surrounding Ancient Near Eastern cultures, whose gods held no binding covenant with their people, Israel's prophets were covenant enforcement mediators — not merely predictors of the future, but ones who called Israel to faithfulness and warned of judgment when they strayed.

The Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings) tell the history of Israel's entrance into the land, the rise of the monarchy, and the eventual collapse of the kingdom. Joshua recounts Israel's conquest of the Promised Land, but the book of Judges shows the people's rapid descent into idolatry and moral chaos. The establishment of the monarchy brings hope, particularly through David, to whom God promises an everlasting throne (2 Sam. 7:14–16). However, David's own failures and the corruption of his successors lead to division, idolatry, and national decline. The final chapters of Kings conclude with Israel and Judah in exile, showing that God's people failed to uphold His covenant, leading to judgment and exile in Babylon.

The Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve Minor Prophets) provide divine commentary on Israel's failures, explaining why exile happened and what God will do next. The prophets call for repentance but also proclaim a future restoration in which God will transform His people. They foretell a New Covenant, where God will write His law on human hearts and give His people the Spirit to enable obedience (Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 36:26–27). A coming Davidic King will establish justice and peace (Isa. 9:6–7), and a Suffering Servant will bear the sins of many (Isa. 53). While the Former Prophets emphasize Israel's past failures, the Latter Prophets emphasize God's future redemption, pointing toward a time when His kingdom will be fully restored.

Collection 1: תּוֹרָה – The Law

1. Genesis (בְּרֵאשִׁית – "In the beginning")
2. Exodus (שְׁמוֹת – "These are the names")
3. Leviticus (וַיִּקְרָא – "And He called")
4. Numbers (בְּמִדְבַּר – "In the wilderness")
5. Deuteronomy (דְּבָרִים – "These are the words")

Collection 2: נְבִיאִים - The Prophets

1. Joshua (יהושע - "God saves")
2. Judges (שופטים)
3. Samuel (שמואל – "God hears")
4. Kings (מלכים)
5. Isaiah (ישעיהו – "Salvation of God")
6. Jeremiah (ירמיהו – "God has appointed")
7. Ezekiel (יחזקאל - "God strengthens")
8. The Twelve (Minor Prophets) תרי עשר
   - Hosea (הושע – "Salvation")
   - Joel (יואל - "The Lord is God")
   - Amos (עמוס – "Burden")
   - Obadiah (עובדיה – "Worshipping God")
   - Jonah (יונה - "Dove")
   - Micah (מיכה – "Who is like God")
   - Nahum (נחום – "Comforter")
   - Habakkuk (חבקוק - "Embrace")
   - Zephaniah (צפניה - "God has hidden")
   - Haggai (חגי - "Festive")
   - Zechariah (זכריה - "God remembers")
   - Malachi (מלאכי - "My messenger")

Collection 3: כְּתוּבִים - The Writings

1. Psalms (תְּהִלִּים – "Praises")
2. Proverbs (מִשְׁלֵי)
3. Job (אִיּוֹב - "Persecuted")
4. Song of Songs (שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים)
5. Ruth (רוּת – "Friendship")
6. Lamentations (איכה – "How")
7. Ecclesiastes (קהלת - "Preacher")
8. Esther (אֶסְתֵר – "Star")
9. Daniel (דָּנִיֵּאל – "God is my judge")
10. Ezra – Nehemiah (עזרא – "Help")
11. Chronicles (דברי הימים – "The words of the days")

**A few of these name meanings are debated among scholars; what's given here reflects the most commonly held view.*

THE KETUVIM: WISDOM, WORSHIP, AND THE HOPE OF A KING

The Ketuvim ("Writings") conclude the Hebrew Bible, providing reflections on faith, suffering, and the coming kingdom. These books explore how the remnant of Israel continues to trust in God's faithfulness, even in times of exile and uncertainty.

The Poetic and Wisdom Books (Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job) focus on devotion, wisdom, and the search for meaning in a fallen world. The book of Psalms, which sits at the heart of the Writings, is filled with songs of lament, praise, and royal expectation, portraying the suffering and victory of God's anointed King (Ps. 2, 22, 110). Proverbs and Ecclesiastes explore the nature of wisdom and the fear of the Lord, while Job wrestles with the problem of suffering, emphasizing God's sovereignty over all things.

The historical books within the Writings, including Ruth, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles, reinforce the hope of restoration. These books tell the story of Israel's return from exile, or retell their history with the meaning of the exile in view. Chronicles retells Israel's history through genealogies that affirm they remain God's covenant people, and through a renewed focus on David and the temple. It closes with Cyrus's decree to return to the land, pointing toward a future Priest-King who will bring full restoration (Isa. 44:28–45:1). Also included in the Writings, Daniel similarly unveils visions of the Son of Man, a divine figure who will receive an everlasting kingdom (Dan. 7:13–14).

MAJOR THEMES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

One of the central themes of the Old Testament is God's Covenant and Kingdom. Throughout Scripture, God's covenants trace one continuous, narrowing line toward His kingdom. With Adam, He establishes humanity to rule and fill the earth; with Noah, He preserves that creation; with Abraham, He calls one family to bless all nations; with Moses, He shapes that family into a holy nation at Sinai; and with David, He establishes an everlasting throne within it. Each covenant builds on the last, progressively revealing God's redemptive purposes until they converge in the ultimate promise of a New Covenant, in which God's people will be transformed and His kingdom fully established through the Messiah. At every step, this pattern reveals something essential about God Himself: He does not work alone, but invites those made in His image to share in His work in the world. The Old Testament anticipates that day, when God's people will live fully under His rule, in righteousness, peace, and joy.

Another major theme is God's Presence Among His People. From the Garden of Eden to the tabernacle and temple, God's desire has always been to dwell with humanity. However, human sin leads to separation from God's presence, as seen in Israel's exile. The prophets foretell a time when God's Spirit will reside within His people (Ezek. 36:26–27), pointing forward to a greater fulfillment we now share in, where God's presence is no longer confined to a building but experienced by all who are part of His kingdom (1 Cor. 6:19).

The theme of Exile and Restoration runs throughout the Old Testament. Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden sets the pattern for Israel's later exile from the Promised Land. Yet exile is never the end of the story. The prophets proclaim that God will bring about a New Exodus (Isa. 43:16–21), gathering His people from all nations and restoring them under a

new King. This expectation of restoration fuels Israel's hope and lays the groundwork for the coming of Christ.

Finally, the Old Testament is shaped by Messianic Expectation — a thread we can trace from the very beginning of this whole story. From the promise of the woman's offspring in Genesis 3:15, to the King promised through Judah's line and David's throne, to Isaiah's Suffering Servant and Daniel's Son of Man, Scripture points with increasing clarity to one coming figure: a King, a Redeemer, a New Covenant Mediator, who will not only shepherd Israel but bring salvation to the ends of the earth. It is with this expectation, undimmed and unfulfilled, that the Hebrew Bible closes.

A BRIDGE TO THE NEW TESTAMENT

The final book in the Jewish ordering, Chronicles, closes with a call to return and rebuild under King Cyrus. The prophets had foretold a coming King from David's line, a Suffering Servant, a New Covenant, and a future restoration — and it was into this unfinished story that Jesus stepped.

When Jesus began His ministry, He explicitly claimed to fulfill the Hebrew Bible. After His resurrection, He told His disciples: “Everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” (Luke 24:44)

Luke 24:27 records that Jesus “interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself”—showing that the entire TaNaKh points forward to Him. The apostles understood this as well:

- Jesus is the Davidic King anticipated in the Prophets (Isa. 9:6–7, Matt. 1:1).
- Jesus inaugurates the New Covenant promised in Jeremiah 31 (Luke 22:20).
- Jesus is the Suffering Servant who bears the sins of many (Isa. 53, Acts 8:32–35).
- Jesus fulfills the Law and the Temple, being the true dwelling place of God (John 1:14, Matt. 5:17).

The Old Testament’s unfinished story finds its fulfillment in Him—the Messiah, the Son of Man, the true King.