

includes the 'historical' books of Samuel and Kings) based on this theology. This was also a period of a wide re-appraisal of traditional beliefs, some of the chief ones being summarised below.



## Development of Theological Themes

1. Central to O.T. theology is the concept of Covenant - from that of God with Abraham, God with all the Hebrews at Sinai, and God with David.
2. The post-exilic reflection on the destruction of Judah led the Jews to hope for a reversal of their fortunes and this led to the development of **Messianic theology**. This was grounded in the Davidic Covenant of eternal kingship, one that was so relevant for their (incorrect) interpretation of the ministry of Jesus Christ. But, opposing this triumphalist view also appeared the much less appealing concept of the **Suffering Servant**, which is contained in the four 'songs' in the second part of Isaiah and which formed the real prophecy for Jesus' messianic mission.
3. Much of O.T. theology was based on a notion of **group responsibility**, that reflected the importance of family, clan and tribe for security. When an evil was committed then this was considered punishable by the whole family either in the present generation or subsequent ones. Even God is shown as subscribing to this principle in the texts on the giving of the Commandments "For I am a jealous God, and I will **punish the parent's faults in the children**, grandchildren and great grand children" (Ex.20, 34 and Deut.4) and "The parents have eaten unripe grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge". But this principle is eventually superseded by acceptance of **individual responsibility** (Jer.31, Ezek.18 while Deut. 24 makes it explicit "parents must not be put to death for their children nor children for parents, but **each must be put to death for their own crime**"
4. Because much of the O.T. had **no concept of a meaningful afterlife**, only a nebulous, shadowy place called Sheol (Jb.17, Isa.14), it was assumed the wicked would be punished in their own lifetime. However, the realisation that this did not always appear to happen and, indeed, that the good also seemed to suffer was the basis of the reflection contained in the book of Job. But it was not until the two centuries BC that belief in an afterlife came to be expressed, with Daniel 12 teaching punishment for the wicked and bliss for the righteous, and 2 Maccabees<sup>7</sup> representing the view that the righteous (only) will be resurrected from the dead.
5. The O.T. precept "**an eye for an eye**" (Ex.21) has often been seen as an excuse to pursue a vendetta against someone. In fact, it was itself a development in law to avoid **excessive** reprisals for perceived wrongs once people had changed from a nomadic lifestyle and had begun to settle in farming communities. Jesus would, in turn, undermine this teaching (Mtt.5). Similarly, Jesus would expand the O.T. command to "**love your neighbour as yourself**" (Lv.19), which in that context only applied to fellow Hebrews, to encompass everyone (Mtt.5 and Lk.10, Jn.15).

## Our Catholic Faith

### 7. A Brief Outline of Old Testament History and Theology

*- Putting O.T. Books in Perspective*



#### Questions for Reflection

1. During the Babylonian exile, which do you think was the most important Covenant for the Jews, that of Abraham or David?
2. How did the Jews come to terms with the apparent collapse of their status as the 'chosen people' after the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile?
3. Can you think of any reason why it took the Jews so long to develop a coherent theology of the afterlife?

## An Essential Overview

It is often not sufficiently stressed that the Old Testament begins by showing God's relationship with all of mankind not just the Hebrews/ Israelites/ Jews. Of course, God is shown as creator of everything including Man with the story of Adam and Eve, but then we have **two stories** before God's relationship with the Hebrews and Abraham begins. **First** there is the story of Man up to Noah and the flood. **Second**, there is the story of the repopulation of the land with the descendants of Noah's sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth, a story that shows (we may fail to appreciate) the Jews realised that **all** of humanity has a bond to God.



Jewish history really begins with Abraham and it may be useful to divide it into 7 essential periods. The main biblical historical books covering these periods are named next to each period although it is important **not** to think these books were actually written at that time. Most of the books were probably only finally completed in their present form **after** the exile (after 538BC).



	Date BC approx.	Biblical Book
1. <b>Abraham</b> to the Hebrews in Egypt	(1900 -1700)	Genesis
2. <b>Moses</b> , the Exodus, the Law, the Desert Wanderings	(1250 -1200)	Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy
3. <b>Joshua</b> and the entry into Canaan, Rule under Tribal Leaders	(1200 - 1150) (1150 -1050)	Joshua Judges
4. Samuel, Saul, <b>David and Solomon</b>	(1050 - 930)	1&2 Samuel 1 Kings
5. (a) The Divided Kingdom to the <b>Fall of Israel</b>	(930 - 721)	1&2 Kings
(b) To the <b>Fall of Judah</b>	(721 - 587)	2 Kings
6. (a) The Babylonian <b>Exile</b>	(587 - 538)	
(b) The <b>Return</b> under Persian Rule	(538 - 323)	Ezra-Nehemiah
7. The Greek Period to the Romans	(323 - 63)	1&2 Maccabees

More information about the above periods is given in several of the books of the **Prophets** : Amos, Hosea, Isaiah (several early chapters) and Micah **5(a) above**. Much of Isaiah ch.1-39, Zephaniah, Jeremiah, Nahum, Habbakuk, and Ezekiel **5(b) above**. Ezekiel also includes **6(a)** and extends into the immediate very early post-exilic period **6(b)**. The second part of Isaiah (ch.40-55) is from the exilic period **6(a)**, offering hope to the captives. The books of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi are in the post-exilic period **6(b)** as is the third part of Isaiah (ch.56f). The book of Daniel has stories and prophecies reflecting the Exilic **6(a)** and post Exilic **6(b)** periods.

## Key Aspects of History and Theology

- God's initial call to Abraham to leave Haran and go to Canaan (Gn.12) God's **Covenant** (agreement) with Abraham to give him land and descendants (related twice, from different traditions, in Gn.15 and 17)
- Joseph, his father Jacob and his brothers **in Egypt** (Gn.39-50)
- Moses' call from God (Ex.3) to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt (Exodus 12) The **Covenant** at Sinai with **all** the people, and the giving of the **Law** (Ex.20 and 34, Deut. 5) The ritual rules for sacrifices, priests, cleanliness and morality (Leviticus)
- Joshua leads the Hebrews into Canaan (Book of Joshua)
- The creation of an earthly **Kingship** for Israel (1 Sam.8) and God's **Covenant** with David of eternal kingship (2 Sam.7).
- Solomon builds a central **Temple** at Jerusalem (1 Kings 5-8)
- The **Kingdom splits** on the death of Solomon into a northern Kingdom of Israel with 10 tribes, and a much smaller southern Kingdom of Judah. This is not just a political split but one leading to rival shrines being set up (at Bethel and Dan) in the northern Kingdom (2 Kings 12)
- The prophets Amos and Hosea criticise the northern Kingdom for its lack of justice, and idolatry. It is destroyed by the Assyrians in 721 BC (the so-called 10 'Lost Tribes').
- The prophets Micah, Zephaniah and Jeremiah warn the Jews to repent of their greed and idolatry. God promises a **new covenant of the heart** (Jer.31) The failure to repent leads to the **destruction of Jerusalem and the Exile**.



The exile and immediate post exilic periods proved a crucial point in Jewish history. The Jews now began a critical process to determine **why** God had apparently abandoned them. This led to what is known as a **theodicy** of God, or a defence of God from charges that he had failed to keep the Covenant promises he had made with Abraham, Moses, and David. The conclusion was that God had **not** abandoned his Covenants but that it was **the Jewish people and the King who had abandoned God** by failing to keep their part of the covenant promises. They had pursued material interests, failed to follow the spirit of the Law, worshipped false Gods, acted unjustly to one another, and committed numerous crimes against God's goodness. This they had done despite God sending them prophets to reproach them, to show them the correct way to win back God's favour, and to warn them of the consequences if they did not change.

This reflection of the Jews on the reasons for the disaster that had befallen their nation led to the finalisation of the Torah and Prophetic books (the Nebiim, which