

# STUDIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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## How to Read and Study the Old Testament, Part 5

### RECAP:

Standing in the middle of our road are five gaps that must be bridged so that we may reach a proper interpretation of an Old Testament text. These gaps are:

1. The Language Gap
2. The Geography Gap
3. The Cultural Gap
4. The Historical Gap
5. The Literary Gap

### GAP # 4: The HISTORICAL Gap

As with our discussions of the geography and cultural gaps, the historical gap stems from the simple but key principle that Old Testament events happened *in an historical context* and that the Old Testament text was written *in an historical context*. In other words, Old Testament history did not occur in an historical vacuum.

So what questions should be driving us as we try to bridge the historical gap? Here are a couple questions to keep in the forefront of our minds as we read and study the Old Testament:

1. What events happened that affected or influenced the events we read about in the Old Testament? In other words, what are the historical factors that led to the events we read?
2. What events or factors do we need to know about that are not directly discussed in the text but still had a significant impact on what we read?

The answers to these two questions are the impetus to bring us into a study of the historical context of an Old Testament passage.

### Historical Context Provided by the Old Testament

Sometimes the meaning and significance of a passage is found when we take a closer look at the text that surrounds it. The Old Testament can and does provide its own historical context to events.

**2 Kings 4: Elisha and the Widow's Oil** In this passage, we read about a widow of one of the sons of the prophets who was destitute. Creditors were coming to take her two children into slavery as payment, but all she has is a small jar of oil. She pleads with Elisha for help. He instructs her to borrow as many large vessels as she can find, shut the door behind her so that she is alone, and begin pouring her oil into these larger vessels until they are all full. She does as Elisha instructs, even asking for another large vessel. When all of them were full, the oil stopped flowing and she took the oil and sold it to pay the creditors.

We read this story and are puzzled by purpose of it. Why was it included? What is it trying to communicate to its original readers? And what was the significance of the event itself? Was it simply showing that God was merciful and compassionate to those were faithful in Israel? That is certainly part of the intent, since it contrasts so much with all of the “big” events that were occurring. While God was fighting major battles like Mt. Carmel, He was also providing for the poor and the destitute. He was the God of big things and little things.

But there is more to this story, and the events that occurred earlier on Mt. Carmel give us the overall historical context. The fight on that mountain was ultimately a fight between God and Baal. It was a fight for who was truly sovereign over the earth. Baal worship had its historical roots in the Canaanite people that Israel was supposed to exterminate from the land. This counterfeit religion constantly tempted Israel, and especially the northern kingdom. Elijah and Elisha were prophets of Yahweh who were calling Israel to repent and return to Yahweh and stop serving Baal.

Mt. Carmel was an epic victory over Baal. But could Yahweh really do what Baal could do? Baal was the fertility god, and people worshipped him in hopes that he would provide fertility to the land, to flocks and herds, and to families. Yahweh had proven His superiority by sending down fire from heaven, but could He provide the way Baal could? The short account of the widow and the oil demonstrates that Yahweh—not Baal—is the provider of fertility.

It also demonstrates another truth that the writer of kings wants to communicate: Israel's leaders—like Ahab—had broken the covenant with Yahweh, not only by following after Baal, but also by not providing justice for the poor and destitute in the land. The reason this woman was destitute was because of the choices of Israel's leaders. Yahweh showed compassion for the faithful who was affected by the choices of the faithless.

**Saul, Esther, and Those Pesky Amalekites** Another example of this type of contextual history can be found in the narratives concerning the Amalekites. First Samuel 15 chronicles the disobedience of Saul that ultimately leads to his removal from the throne and the succession of David. In this passage, Saul is tasked by God with exterminating the entire population of the Amalekites. Now, to many unbelievers and even some Christians, this poses a rather terrible ethical problem. Why would God sanction the killing (i.e., murder, to an unbeliever) of an entire nation?

Well, the text indicates that this was based on Amalek's previous dealings with Israel when they came out of Egypt. This is our first clue that there is **history** to this command. When we

look back in the Torah, we discover the details that give clarity to the Lord's instructions. After the exodus, Amalek attacked Israel, preying especially on the weaker stragglers (Exod 17:8; Deut 25:17-18). Yahweh promised to meet this merciless treachery with strict judgment: He would completely wipe out the Amalekites (Exod 17:16; Num 24:20; Deut 25:19).

Saul was given the responsibility to exact the Lord's judgment on Amalek. No one was to survive, and no livestock was to be taken. It was all under divine curse. Saul, however, shirked his responsibility and spared the best of the sheep and cattle, as well as Agag, the Amalekite king. When Samuel learned of Saul's disobedience, he pronounced judgment on Saul for his disobedience and took it upon himself to kill Agag, doing what Saul should have done from the start.

All of this historical background plays a part in the events that occurred some 500 years later in Babylon. The book of Esther finds Israel in the land of Babylon, a situation they faced because of their centuries of infidelity to Yahweh. Among the many ironies of the story is that the mortal enemy of Israel in Esther's time is none other than "Haman, the son of Hammedatha **the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews**" (Esth 3:10; cf. 3:1). This man was a descendant of the king of the ancient Amalekite people, who should have been destroyed by Saul centuries earlier. Haman's very existence reminds us of the reason for Israel's current predicament in the book of Esther. Just as their first king failed to obey Yahweh wholeheartedly, so Israel finds themselves facing possible extermination in exile because of their own hard hearts.

### Historical Context Provided Outside the Old Testament

Sometimes the events we read about in the Old Testament are the results of events that the biblical author, for whatever reason, didn't record. We could argue that their exclusion from the Scriptures makes them somewhat insignificant. However, we also must remember that the original readers would have been much more familiar with Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern history than we are. They would be able to connect dots between events with much greater ease and without the aid of a biblical writer. Thus, we are at a disadvantage.

For this reason, it is at times helpful to get a broader perspective of what else was going on in the Ancient Near East that is *not* mentioned in the Old Testament but that might help us understand why certain events took place.

***Israel's Oppression in Egypt*** When Jacob and his family entered Egypt, they were met with special favor by Pharaoh because of his associations with Joseph. But at some point in Israel's 430 years in Egypt, their amiable relationship with the nation's leadership ended. The text indicates that this occurred when "a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph" (Exod 1:8). At that point, persecution and bondage followed for the Israelites, and the only motivation given from the text is that of the king's concern that the Israelites were "more and mightier than we" (Exod 1:9) and thus might join with the people's enemies (1:10).

In all honesty, this isn't much to go on, and inquisitive minds will immediately start pondering why there was such a sudden animosity toward the Israelites. The text gives no other reasons, nor does it explain the historical context, but there is more to the story that sheds light on why the events in Egypt unfolded as they did.

In the centuries leading up to Israel's bondage, a group of Semitic people of Canaanite and Amorite lineage began trickling into Egypt. The influence of these people, called the "Hyksos,"

slowly grew as they captured key positions in Egyptian government until they finally took over lower Egypt in 1720 B.C. Though not very many in number, they were able to maintain political and military control over the region until Amose I drove them out and crushed them politically in 1570 B.C.

This background offers us a much better understanding of why the events in Exodus happened as they did. This “new king” (notice he is not called Pharaoh), “arose over Egypt,” a phrase that in the Old Testament often means “to rise against” (Deut 19:11; 28:7; Judg 9:18; 20:5; 2 Sam 18:31; 2 Kgs 16:7). This would seem to indicate that a foreign power had arisen against Egypt and changed national policy. The Hyksos, after all, were never powerful numerically. Their power lied in their political holdings. Thus, the king’s statement in Exodus 1:9-10 makes sense:

Behold, the people of the sons of Israel are more and mightier than we. Come, let us deal wisely with them, or else they will multiply and in the event of war, they will also join themselves to those who hate us, and fight against us and depart from the land.

Since the Israelites and Egyptians were on friendly terms, it only made sense that the vulnerable Hyksos would seek a way to neutralize the power of both the Israelites and the Egyptians.

When the Egyptians finally regained political control under Amose I, they found it advantageous to continue and even intensify the oppression against Israel. First, Israel was now more numerous than ever, having multiplied during their oppression by the Hyksos. Second, there was no longer a legacy of friendship between Israel and Egypt, since that had long since been disrupted by the Hyksos. Third, the Egyptians might have very easily associated the Hebrews with the hated Hyksos because both peoples were Asiatic in origin and Semitic in ethnicity.

### **Fitting Old Testament History into World History**

All that we have just discussed begs one particularly massive question: how do we fit all these Old Testament events into the larger events of world history? In other words, how do we put a date to the stories we read? How can we say with confidence that the date of the exodus was 1446 B.C., or that the Babylonian exile occurred in 586 B.C.?

Obviously, when we read through the Old Testament, it becomes apparent quite early that there are plenty of numbers and time-indicators throughout the text. We can, for instance, look at Genesis 5, observe the specific ages given for each person in this genealogy and calculate the number of years from the creation of Adam on Day 6 of creation week to the birth of Noah to be 1,076 years.<sup>1</sup> But this is as far as the text allows us to go. We can only get a sense of *time-span*. We cannot put a date to those numbers and place that genealogy on an historical time-table.

In order to date an event, we need some kind of anchor point—an event in history with a known date that we can use to then calculate the dates of events before and after it. Thanks to the providence of God, we have an anchor point!

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<sup>1</sup> This number is based on the assumption that the genealogy in Genesis 5 is exhaustive, a position that is not demanded by the text or by Ancient Near Eastern genealogical practices. If there are generations not listed, the number could be significantly higher.

***The Historians of Assyria and Babylon*** The Israelites were not the only ones interested in recording a history of their nation. The Babylonians kept historical records of their kingdom and its happenings, as is evidenced in the mention of the “book of records” in Esther 6:1 (cf. 2:23; 10:2). Similarly, the Assyrians kept historical records that date from between 1,300 B.C. to 600 B.C. They were records of the annual military campaigns of Assyria. Each year would chronicle the major battles fought, and the year was named after a particular individual in the king’s administration. When a new king accessed the throne, the list would recycle. These records, called “eponym lists,” might read as follows:

<i>Year 1:</i>	The Year of [king’s name] . . .	fought against [enemy name]
<i>Year 2:</i>	The Year of [prime minister’s name] . . .	fought against [enemy name]
<i>Year 3:</i>	The Year of [outstanding general’s name] . . .	fought against [enemy name]

What gets interesting is that as scholars began studying these Assyrian eponym lists, they came across an entry in the year of “Bur-sagale” (apparently a Babylonian official who “made the list”) there occurred a total eclipse of the sun at Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. Modern astronomers can calculate with fair accuracy when and where total eclipses have and will occur, and this particular eclipse is dated to have occurred on June 15, 763 B.C. There we have an anchor point—an event in history with a known date.

Since these eponym lists are dated annually, we can move up and down the list and date preceding and subsequent years based on this anchor point. However, we are still missing an important piece of the puzzle. This does not help us date biblical events. Only when we can find an overlap between Assyrian and Israelite history can we begin to place biblical events onto a world calendar.

Once again, the providence of God has afforded us an overlap. Ninety years before this eclipse, the same Assyrian eponym list records that in the sixth year of the reign of Shalmaneser III, he participated in a battle against several kings of the west, one of whom being Ahab, the king of Israel. This battle, called the Battle of Qarqar, occurred in 853 B.C., but it is not recorded in the text of Scripture. Therefore, we cannot yet place it within the 22-year reign of Ahab (1 Kgs 16:29). However, we learn from this eponym list that 12 years later (841 B.C.) Shalmaneser III launched another campaign against the western nations and conquered several kings, including Jehu king of Israel. According to the monument called the Black Obelisk (see Figures 1), this event occurred during Jehu’s first year as king. Based on the numbers provided in the book of Kings, we can calculate that the last year of Ahab’s reign must have been 853 B.C., the same year as the battle of Qarqar.



**Figure 1: The Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III**



**Figure 2:** Close up of the top portion of the Black Obelisk, where Jehu is pictured bowing down in subjection to Shalmaneser III.

However, we know that Ahab did not die at that battle, because the biblical text tells us that Ahab died in battle at Ramoth-Gilead (1 Kgs 22:29-40). Therefore, the battle of Qarqar must have occurred just a few months before Ahab's death. From this, biblical historians can begin to piece together the events that led up to Ahab's death. Before the Battle of Qarqar, Israel and Syria (i.e., Aram) had fought twice over who controlled Ramoth-Gilead, a town on the eastern edge of the Transjordan region. Apparently Assyria posed a serious enough threat to both nations that

they ended hostilities long enough to fight against Shalmaneser III.<sup>2</sup> When the battle was concluded, Israel and Syria resumed their hostilities, fighting a third battle for control of Ramoth-Gilead in 853 B.C., where Ahab was killed by a random arrow that struck him at a joint in his armor (2 Kgs 22:34).

**Using Old Testament Numbers** Since we know that Ahab died in 853 B.C., we can calculate from the numbers in Kings that he began his reign in 874 B.C. Working back from there, we can determine that the division of the monarchy took place in 931 B.C., and since Solomon reigned 40 years, his reign must have begun in 971 B.C. At this point, one particular text becomes very significant for dating Old Testament events. In 1 Kings 6:1, we learn that in the 4<sup>th</sup> year of Solomon's reign (966 B.C.), the construction of the temple began. More significantly, it also informs us that this construction began 480 years after Israel's exodus from Egypt. Therefore, the exodus must have occurred in the year 1446 B.C. From there, we can follow other significant numbers given that take us all the way back to the patriarchal era:

Event	Year	Reference
Temple Construction	<b>966 B.C.</b>	
	+480 yrs (from exodus to temple construction)	1 Kings 6:1
The Exodus	<b>1446 B.C.</b>	
	+430 yrs (Israel's years in Egypt)	Exodus 12:40-41
Jacob enters Egypt	<b>1876 B.C.</b>	
	+130 yrs (Jacob's age when he stood before Pharaoh)	Genesis 47:9
Jacob's Birth	<b>2006 B.C.</b>	
	+60 yrs (Isaac's age when Jacob was born)	Genesis 25:26
Isaac's Birth	<b>2066 B.C.</b>	
	+100 yrs (Abraham's age when Isaac was born)	Genesis 21:5
Abraham's Birth	<b>2166 B.C.</b>	
	-75 yrs (Abraham's age when he entered Canaan)	Genesis 12:4
Abraham entered Canaan	<b>2091 B.C.</b>	

<sup>2</sup> It appears that Shalmaneser was narrowly defeated at the Battle of Qarqar. The eponym list does not admit this (no Assyrian king would admit to defeat!), but neither does it indicate a decisive victory, leading to the conclusion that Shalmaneser was pushed back, allowing the western kings to return home without immediate Assyrian threat.

### Summary

What lessons can we draw from this? Well, several in fact. First, we learn that the events in Israel's history were not isolated. Often what we read about in the text was the result of numerous other events and actions, many of which are not discussed in the biblical text. But they make more sense and are brought from black and white into color when we can see these events in their full historical context.

Second, we learn that the biblical text is historically reliable. Despite the arguments of "minimalist" scholars and archaeologists that the Old Testament is mostly fiction, myth, and fable, with very few instances of true history, we find that the events we read about in the Scriptures really did take place, and the Old Testament depictions are verified by extra-biblical sources. Now, we don't *need* those sources to have confidence in Scripture. However, God has seen fit to allow these archaeological discoveries which not only shed light on the biblical text but also verify its accuracy. This *reinforces* our confidence in the text.

Third, we learn that we must approach the text with humility, knowing that we know far less than we think we do about the history of the Ancient Near East. Even now, there remains much to be discovered. Yet even so, we have a text which is breathed out by God and so is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and for training in righteousness so that the man of God may be adequately equipped for every good work.

### Suggested Resources

Merrill, Eugene H. *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008.

Kaiser, Walter C., Jr. *A History of Israel: From the Bronze Age through the Jewish Wars*. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1998.