

THE HISTORICAL BOOKS

INTRODUCTION

Joshua, Judges, Ruth, First and Second Samuel, First and Second Kings, First and Second Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther are called the *historical books*. They contain the history of Israel from the conquest of Canaan under Joshua to the time of Ezra. The period in history is from about 1200 to 400 B.C. Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, and Kings are set in the preexilic period. The others portray events in the postexilic period.

THE BOOKS AND THE HISTORY

The Book of Joshua takes up the story of the people of Israel after the death of Moses and before the period of the judges. The book tells of the conquest of the Promised Land and its division among the tribes of Israel. Judges describes the period between Joshua and the establishment of kingship. The period of the judges extended from about 1200 to 1040 B.C.

Samuel was the last of the judges. He was also the high priest, and in his days Saul became the first king. First Samuel provides a history of those days and an introduction to David.

David's rise to the monarchy and his accomplishments and problems are recorded in Second Samuel. Originally First and Second Samuel were a single work that was divided when the Greek translation, the Septuagint, was made in the third century B.C. This is true of First and Second Kings also. The first section of First Kings recounts the death of David and the reign of Solomon. The division of David and Solomon's kingdom into the kingdoms of Judah and Israel is recorded in First Kings, but the history of the two kingdoms continues into Second Kings. The end of the Northern Kingdom, Israel,

and the exile of the Southern Kingdom, Judah, brings the sad history to a close about 586 B.C. The Jews are in exile in Babylon.

Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings are understood as a historical work of four parts that was completed during the Exile, although much of the material in them is earlier. Ruth is inserted in the historical works because the story is connected with the period of the judges.

We do not know who the writers of these books were. Jewish tradition holds that Joshua wrote his own book and the books of Judges and Ruth, and that Jeremiah wrote the books of Kings.

Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther were written in the postexilic era. Chronicles is a sweeping survey of biblical history from Adam to the return from the Exile following the edict of Cyrus (538 B.C.).

More than half the information in Chronicles appears also in Genesis, Samuel, and Kings. But the books of Chronicles do not include information about the kings of Israel, the Northern Kingdom, unless a particular king has a direct connection with the history of Judah. The writer of Chronicles wanted to show that God had preserved the true covenant people in Judah. They had been ruled by the legitimate kings of the dynasty of David. The Chronicler also treats David gently. His sin with Bathsheba is not even mentioned in the history.

No one knows who the writer of First and Second Chronicles was. Jewish tradition holds that Ezra wrote Chronicles.

Ezra and Nehemiah were at one time a single book and probably a part of Chronicles. The Hebrew Bible gives verse counts for Ezra-Nehemiah as if they were

one book. These works were written in the late 400's B.C. The history is of the restoration of the people from exile in Babylonia and the problems they faced in reestablishing the true worship of God in Jerusalem. Ezra contains several passages written in Aramaic, a language that was becoming increasingly important in that period.

Esther is a story set in the period of the Persian Empire, before 400 B.C. Nowhere does it contain the name of God. So pious additions were made to the book in the period between the testaments. These additions are found in the Apocrypha.

The rabbis argued the merits of including Esther in the Hebrew Bible. It won a place because of the connection of the story with the establishment of the popular Jewish feast of Purim. Also, though God is not mentioned by name, God's activity is understood to be going on behind the scenes. The Dead Sea Scroll

community did not have a copy of Esther in its library, as far as we know.

IMPORTANT IDEAS IN THE HISTORICAL BOOKS

The preexilic books validate the establishment of the monarchy. The promise of God to David that one of his descendants would sit on the throne of Israel became an important idea connected with the Messiah. Another feature of these books is the word of the Lord, the revelation of God through spokesmen, the prophets. The preexilic writers were also interested in the Temple and in worship.

The postexilic writers were more interested in the Temple and its rituals. The Chronicler was fascinated with the priests and Levites, the Temple singers, and other functionaries. Many fine examples of prayers are included in the Chronicler's work.