

# A Brief Overview of the Hebrew Scriptures



J. D. West

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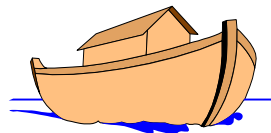
## GENESIS



The first book of the Bible lays the foundation for understanding all the rest. Genesis means “In the beginning,” when God created all things and saw that they were good. He created people as the pinnacle of his creation, and gave them responsibility to look after it. The perfection was soon ruined when Adam and Eve took from the “Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.” Their desire to be “like God” was their undoing, and led to them losing the paradise of the Garden of Eden. Not only was humankind affected, but so was the whole creation from then on.

### Growing evil. The Flood.

Things went from bad to worse. Their son Cain killed his brother Abel out of jealousy, and soon after we read of the violence of Lamech, telling his wives how he would be avenged seventy seven times over. So corrupt did the world become that there appeared to be no option but to destroy humankind. Only righteous Noah and his family would be preserved, and so it was following the catastrophic flood, that eight people emerged from the ark. The rainbow was given by God as a covenant sign that he would never destroy the earth by flood again. God commanded the people to multiply and fill the earth.



### The Tower of Babel.

After Noah's family multiplied greatly, they stopped filling the earth and settled in one place. There they started to build a tower trying to reach heaven. Because of their disobedience God confused their languages, building came to a standstill, and the people moved out in different directions.

The stories so far have covered Genesis, chapters 1 to 11. We don't know what period of time it covers, because although we have a number of family trees, we don't know whether they are complete. The chapters appear to portray a brief world history to show why it was necessary for God to hatch a plan. The plan narrows down to one man, Abram.

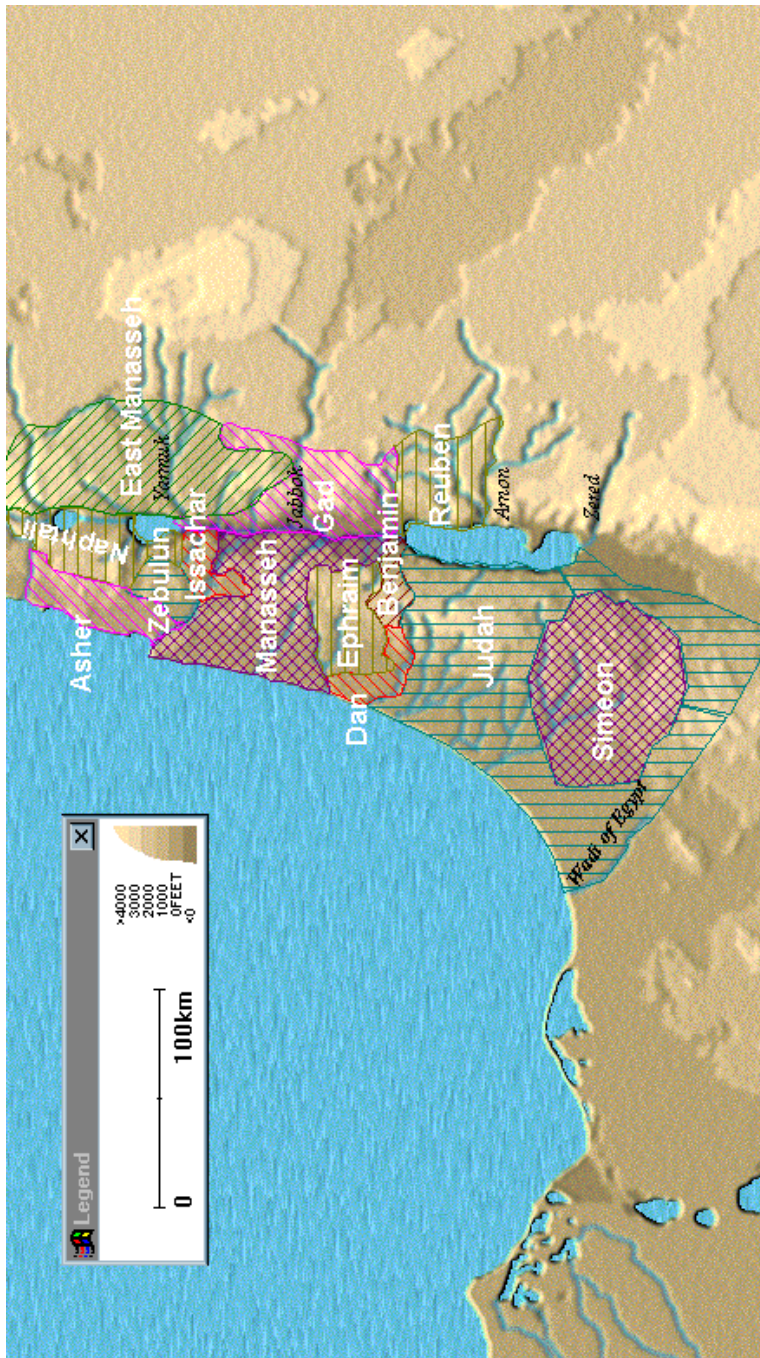
### Abram.

About 2000 before Christ, Abram was called by God to leave his home in



*The Divided Kingdom. Israel to the North under the rebel, Jeroboam. Judah to the south under the descendants of King David.*





*The Promised Land at the end of Joshua, divided between the twelve tribes of Israel*

Haran and travel to a place that God would show him. That place was the land of Canaan, later to be known as The Promised Land, Israel, Palestine, and even Judah. God made a covenant with Abram, promising him that he would be blessed, have many descendants, and that they would inhabit the Land. Abram moved with his wife, Sarai, his nephew, Lot, and all their livestock into Canaan. Following quarrels over wells and feed for their animals, Abram and Lot went their separate ways, Abram living in the hills, while Lot went into the greener Jordan valley, and finally gravitated to the city of Sodom. Lot's life was saved when God eventually destroyed Sodom and nearby Gomorrah because of their wickedness.



Abram had some doubts about the promise of many descendants, since he and Sarai were so old, and they both agreed that he should have a child with Sarai's Egyptian maidservant, Hagar. That child was Ishmael. Sarai and Hagar didn't get on too well after that. But Sarai and Abram should have trusted God, for miraculously they did have a son as God promised. He was Isaac. Sarai became known as Sarah, and Abram as Abraham.

### Isaac

To test Abram's faith God asked him to sacrifice Isaac on a stone altar. Always trusting Abraham went to do as he was told, but God stopped him, supplying a ram to sacrifice in Isaac's place. Isaac grew and received the same promises from God that were given to his father, Abraham.



### Jacob and Esau

Isaac married Rebekah and they had twins, Esau and Jacob. They were very different and although Esau was the elder, and should have inherited all the promises, he obviously didn't value them. On one occasion he actually sold his birthright to his younger brother, Jacob, for a bowl of soup!

As half-blind Isaac was about to die, Jacob, with his mother's help, pretended to be Esau, and tricked his father into giving him the blessings that normally would have gone to his older brother. Esau was furious and Jacob decided he'd better run for his life. Alone on the road he stopped to sleep, and had a dream of a stairway going into heaven. He realised God was still with him as he continued to his Uncle Laban's. There he met Rachel, and fell in love. He worked for seven years for his uncle in order to win Rachel's hand in marriage, and then Laban double-crossed him by marrying him to Rachel's elder



sister, Leah. Laban did allow him to marry Rachel, too, but only if he would work another seven years. Jacob agreed and both he and Laban proceeded to try to cheat each other over the livestock that Jacob was looking after. In the end Jacob returned with a family and many possessions to be reunited with Esau, who had forgiven him after all that time. Though not before an unusual incident where Jacob wrestled all night with “a man” who appears to have been God or his representative, until eventually the stranger put Jacob’s hip out of joint, and blessed him.

Jacob had twelve sons:

Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar and Zebulun by Leah.

Dan and Naphtali by Rachel’s maid, Bilhah.

Gad and Asher by Leah’s maid, Zilpah.

Joseph and Benjamin by Rachel.

Jacob became known as Israel. So of course, his children and their descendants became known as the **Children of Israel**.

## Joseph

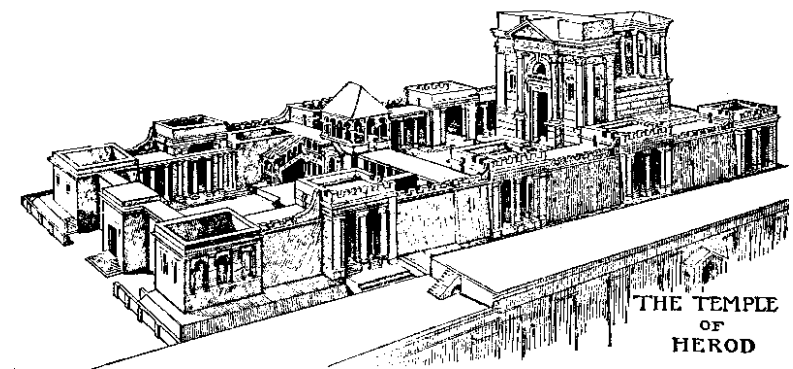
Since Rachel was Jacob’s favourite wife, he also tended to favour her children Joseph and Benjamin. Jacob gave Joseph a special coat, which only served to make his brothers jealous of him. They disliked him even more when he told them about dreams he had with the meaning that his family were going to bow down to him.

So much did they hate him that one day the brothers put him down a well and then sold him to traders going to Egypt. Joseph was then sold to an Egyptian who had him put in prison when his wife wrongly accused Joseph of trying to molest her. In prison Joseph was able, by God’s power, to interpret the dreams of two other prisoners, a cup-bearer and baker from the Pharaoh’s court. When the Pharaoh later had two dreams that he couldn’t understand the cup-bearer recommended Joseph to help. God explained the dreams to Joseph and he explained to the Pharaoh that there would be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of drought. Pharaoh put Joseph in charge of storing up grain in the good years, to carry them through the drought years.

The drought also hit Canaan, and sure enough, Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to buy grain. Joseph recognised them, but they didn’t recognise him, and they bowed down to him, just as in his early dreams. When he finally told them who he was, they were terrified, but Joseph told them that God had a good purpose in his being sold into Egypt, for now he was able to save the lives of his family from famine, and so help fulfil God’s promises made to Abraham, Isaac and their father, Jacob, that they would be a great nation.

After a while the whole family moved to Egypt and settled in the area of

Greek Empire, under Alexander the Great (334 to 331BC). Egypt and Syria were next and in 198BC Syria took Palestine from Egypt. Antiochus IV of Syria was particularly remembered because of his desecration of the new Temple in Jerusalem, followed by its purifying by the Jewish hero, Judas Maccabaeus. Finally the Romans conquered and Pompey established a Roman protectorate in Palestine. When Jesus was born Augustus had been the emperor since 27BC, at a time when the Jewish people were more than ever looking for their Messiah, the Christ.



the hands of those who didn't want to heed his warnings, and lesser prophets such as **MICAH** and **ZEPHANIAH**.

Other prophets who operated in the time of the divided kingdom were **JONAH**, **JOEL**, and **OBADIAH**.

## The Exile

The Exile to Babylon saw the destruction of the Temple built by Solomon, and the loss of the Land that God had given his people. It was a time of utter hopelessness expressed in Jeremiah's **LAMENTATIONS**. People wondered why it had happened, and others thought that perhaps their God had been defeated. Prophets during the Exile attempted to tell the exiles that this was God's judgement, that he was still in control and that he would eventually bring some of the people (a remnant) back to the Land to rebuild. During this time there arose a strong expectation of a Messiah, a deliverer from God from the line of David. Prophets of the Exile were **JEREMIAH**, **NAHUM**, **HABBAKUK**, **EZEKIEL** and **ISAIAH**.

The stories of **DANIEL** also cover this period to show that the Babylonian conquerors were still subject to the Kingdom and power of God. Such stories include Daniel's interpretations of the king's dreams, Daniel preserved in the lion's den after he prayed to God instead of the king, his three friends saved in the furnace when they refused to bow to the statue of the king, King Nebuchadnezzar's madness, and the writing on the wall for King Belshazzar who dared to use the vessels taken from Jerusalem's Temple for his own banquet. That writing announced the end of the Babylonian kingdom, and that night the Medo-Persians became the masters.

Under Persia we read of the brave queen, **ESTHER**, a Jewess, who saved her people from extermination. Although God is not mentioned, the "coincidences" show that God was still looking after his people even in exile.

## The Return

After seventy years of exile, the Persian king, Cyrus, allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem, rebuild the walls and re-establish the Temple. **NEHEMIAH** and **EZRA** cover this period, while **MALACHI** wrote to encourage the priests and people to be diligent in their worship and service to God.



## The gap before Jesus came

Between the end of the Hebrew Scriptures and the beginning of the New Testament there was a period of about four hundred years. During that time the first dominant power after Persia was the



Goshen. They multiplied over a period of more than four hundred years, bringing us to the book of...

## EXODUS

The Pharaoh of the day was worried that the numerous Hebrews, the Children of Israel, might stage an uprising. To control them he turned them into slaves and tried to enforce birth control by having the baby boys killed. Enter Moses.

Moses' mother put him in a tar covered basket and told his sister Miriam to float it in the bulrushes at the edge of the River Nile and keep watch. The Pharaoh's daughter came down to the river, discovered the baby, but wanted to keep him alive, even though she knew he was a Hebrew. Miriam seized her opportunity, ran up and offered to find the Princess a nurse for her brother. No prizes for guessing who she asked. Moses mother was paid by the palace to look after her own child, and the boy received a Hebrew and Egyptian education.



Years later Moses killed an Egyptian who was beating one of his Hebrew countrymen, and had to flee for his life into the desert. There he found a wife and settled down to looking after sheep. One day, however, he saw a bush burning without being consumed. He approached and a voice told him to remove his sandals, as he was on holy ground. God, who introduced himself as Yahweh (meaning something like "I am who I am") told Moses to go to the Pharaoh and tell him to let the Hebrews go into the desert. Despite all his excuses God insisted, and armed with some miraculous signs and his brother, Aaron, as spokesperson they fronted the Egyptian ruler. Pharaoh was not impressed, so God, through Moses, demonstrated that he was more powerful than all the gods of Egypt and should not be ignored. Ten plagues came upon Egypt: The Nile turned to blood, frogs covered the land, followed by gnats and flies. The Egyptians' (but not the Hebrews') livestock died, the Egyptians became covered in boils, hail and fire poured down from heaven, locusts cleaned up what was left of the crops, and then for three days darkness covered the land, except for Goshen, where the Hebrews lived. Each time the Pharaoh almost gave in, and then hardened his heart, until the tenth plague.



The Children of Israel were to kill a lamb and put the blood around the door of their houses. While they were inside they would be safe. God



would **pass over** those houses. Elsewhere in Egypt the firstborn male of animals and humans would die that night. The Hebrews also ate the lamb with unleavened bread and bitter herbs, ready to go. The meal was known as The **Passover** and has been celebrated every year to the present day as a reminder of God's deliverance.



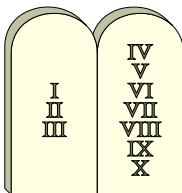
About a million Hebrews were hurried off Egyptian soil taking with them gold jewellery given to them by the Egyptians. God led them with a cloud by day and fire by night. Even then the Pharaoh changed his mind, for the last time. Leading an army of charioteers he trapped the Children of Israel at the Red (or Reed) Sea. God put a cloud between the two groups and told Moses to hold out his staff over the water. The waters parted and the Israelites went over on dry land. The pursuing Egyptian army became bogged as they entered the sea bed, and Moses again holding out his staff, watched as God closed the waters in over their enemies.

### The Journey Through The Wilderness.

The wilderness journey which followed was marked by complaints from this newly formed nation on the move. There was water shortage, food shortage, and lack of variety of food. Each time God supplied the need in a miraculous way, by giving them water from a rock, a white crispy wafer called Manna (meaning "What is it?"), which appeared on the ground, and quails.



Early in the journey Moses took the people to where he had first met God at the burning bush. God made a covenant with the Israelites telling them that, since he had delivered them, he would be their God and they would be his special people. The area where this happened was Mt Sinai, and on the mountain God gave Moses the **Ten Commandments**, and a lot more laws besides. Some of those related to the erection of the **Tabernacle**, a sort of Temple tent which was to be placed at the centre of their camp when they stopped. It was to remind them that God was with them. Within the most holy place in the Tabernacle the **Ark of the Covenant** was placed. This was a chest which contained Moses' staff, some manna and the Ten Commandments. It was the most holy thing of all and was carried in procession as the Hebrews moved from place to place. Other laws related to the formation of a priesthood from the tribe of the Levites, who were mediators between God and the people. There were laws that covered animal sacrifices made for the sins of the people, thanksgiving sacrifices, ways of purifying things, and those laws which told them how they were to behave



as Judah (or Judea). Jeroboam led Israel astray into idol worship, and a succession of eighteen kings followed with a number of coups and murders. Almost all evil kings, one of the most notable was **Ahab** with his wife **Jezebel** who encouraged the evil worship of Baal, establishing a priesthood and persecuting the prophets of God.

### Elijah & Elisha

At this time Elijah came on the scene. As a prophet of God he constantly challenged King Ahab. He prayed for drought to teach Israel a lesson, and set up a contest on Mt Carmel between himself and the prophets of Baal. An altar was built with an animal sacrifice. The prophets of Baal were to try to pray down fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice. They failed, but God answered Elijah's prayer and the sacrifice, altar and dust from the ground were burned up. The spectators acknowledged God and put the prophets of Baal to death. Rain came, but an angry Jezebel threatened Elijah's life, and he fled. However, God spoke to him, reassuring him that he was not alone, but that seven thousand had not bowed the knee to Baal. At God's instruction Elijah returned anointing the next king. God was still in control, and Elijah was succeeded by Elisha who continued to lead a school of prophets.

Later the prophets, **AMOS** and **HOSEA** would also speak God's messages to Israel. Amos is mostly a message of impending doom, while Hosea also spoke of God's love for the people. God was like a husband whose wife (Israel) had been unfaithful.



The warnings were to no avail. Israel continued her idolatry and unjust and evil practices until God eventually allowed her to be overrun by Assyria, and her people were taken into captivity in 722BC.

### Judah in the South

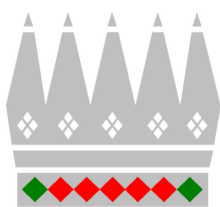
Judah fared somewhat better. Her kings followed in succession from King David and although many were evil, there were bright spots and times of reform. In the days of King Josiah, the Temple was renovated and the book of the law (probably Deuteronomy) was rediscovered. They realised how far they had moved away from God, but despite sweeping changes it was somewhat too late, and the following evil kings led Judah to **Exile** at the hands of the Babylonian conquerors, first in 597BC, and again in 586BC.

The southern kingdom also had its notable prophets. **ISAIAH** who predicted both doom, and a return and restoration. **JEREMIAH** who suffered at

## 1 & 2 KINGS (1 & 2 CHRONICLES) King Solomon

Although the child died, David had another by Bathsheba. His name was Solomon and he succeeded David. As he took over the throne God asked him what he wished for, and was pleased to see that Solomon requested wisdom to lead God's people. God also gave him fame and great riches for good measure. His wisdom was demonstrated when two prostitutes came before him, each claiming that the baby they brought belonged to her. Solomon commanded the baby be cut in half and shared between them. At once the real mother pleaded that the child be given to the other woman, rather than killed.

Solomon built a palace and the first **Temple**, specified by God, and similar in design to the Tabernacle. He also had stables, many wives and inherited a large kingdom at peace with his neighbours. This was Israel's golden age.



### Wisdom literature

It is quite likely that much of the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Testament of the Bible was gathered in this period. The **PSALMS** used in worship, the books of **PROVERBS** and **ECCLESIASTES** with their observations on life, **SONG OF SONGS** about human love, and **JOB**, a lesson in faith in the middle of unexplainable suffering.

The golden age of Israel's monarchy did not last long. The extensive building program came at a cost. The labour brought discontent amongst the people (as Samuel had predicted) and sowed the seeds of civil war. Solomon secured peace alliances by marrying foreign wives, who brought their idols with them. Solomon who started so well, found himself straying from God by the end of his reign.

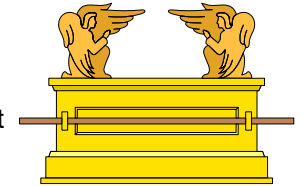
### King Rehoboam

Solomon's son, Rehoboam, took advice from younger men instead of those who were older and wiser, and made life even harder for the Israelites. As a result Jeroboam, once a servant of Solomon who rebelled, made himself king of the ten northern tribes, set up two golden calves for them to worship and began civil war with the tribes of Judah and Benjamin under Rehoboam.

### The Divided Kingdom Israel in the North

The northern tribes became known as Israel while the south was known

and relate to God when they reached the land. The third book in the Bible, **LEVITICUS** is very much to do with laws concerning holiness. When Moses came down the mountain, he had been gone so long that the people had put pressure on Aaron to cast a golden calf for them to worship, in the apparent absence of God. Moses in his anger, broke the stones on which the Ten Commandments were etched, ground down the calf and made the people drink it with water!



The journey which was heading for the Promised Land of Canaan, was set back forty years when the Hebrews came to the borders and sent spies in. Although impressed by the quality of the Land, only Joshua and Caleb were convinced that they could take it by God's power. The rest were ready to return to Egypt or die in the desert rather than die at the hands of the residents of Canaan. God granted their wish and only Joshua and Caleb of the older generation finally set foot in the Land. Much of the story of the journey is told in the book of **NUMBERS**, including a notable time when the people complained yet again and were bitten by poisonous snakes. When they cried out to God, he told Moses to put a bronze snake on a pole. Those who looked at the bronze snake recovered.

Eventually the next generation reached Mt Nebo, overlooking Canaan. There, Moses recounted what God had done for them, and the laws he had given them, in the book called **DEUTERONOMY** (meaning "The Second Law"). He died there, and Joshua took over leadership.

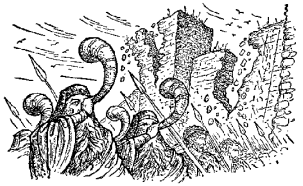
### THESE WERE THE BOOKS OF MOSES – THE PENTATEUCH

The above first five books of the Bible are supposed to be have been written by Moses (with some editing), and are known as The Pentateuch.

### JOSHUA

The conquest of the land of Canaan began with the crossing of the Jordan on dry land, similar to the way the Hebrews had crossed the Reed Sea. The destruction of Jericho followed as the people marched around the city once each day until the seventh. On that day they marched around seven times, sounded the trumpets and shouted. The walls fell and only Rahab, the prostitute, who had sheltered two Hebrew spies, was spared with those in her house. (It's interesting that Rahab was an ancestor of Jesus).

The battle for Ai, however, met with defeat. It turned out that Achan had, in disobedience to God's instructions, held on to some booty. Once his sin was dealt with victory followed.



The Israelites waged war in a series of campaigns against the kings, who reigned over local cities in Canaan. The instructions usually included complete destruction so that God's people would not be seduced by the idolatry of the inhabitants of the Land.

By the end of Joshua the Hebrews (Israelites) possessed most of the Land, but those areas they had failed to secure would be a thorn in their side. As the twelve tribes settled in their allotted territories West and East of the River Jordan, Joshua issued a challenge to put away idolatry and serve God alone. Obedience to God would bring blessings, while disobedience would bring the curses (mentioned in Deuteronomy) against them.

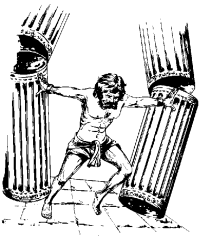
## JUDGES

Settlement ushered in a period of time when there was no overall leader. The twelve tribes existed side by side as a loose confederacy under God. The Levites (priests) had no land of their own, but were spread around ministering to the various tribes. The Tabernacle was set up and the Ark of the Covenant stayed there.

It was not long before the people of the next generations fell into the Canaanite ways of idol worship. As they did so God allowed neighbouring tribes to afflict the Israelite tribes until they cried out to God for help. God heard them and raised up a charismatic leader who was able to unite the Israelites and defeat the enemy by God's power. Such leaders were known as Judges and included such notable names as the prophetess Deborah, Gideon and Samson. These and other stories show how violent those times were.

## RUTH

The story of the Moabitess, Ruth, falls into this period. Her faithfulness to her mother-in-law, Naomi is a touching account, which led to Ruth also becoming part of Jesus' family tree. Ruth came to live at Bethlehem. They had a child Obed. He had a son, Jesse, and Jesse became the father of David, who eventually became king.



## 1 & 2 SAMUEL

Samuel was really the last of the judges. As a boy he was assistant to Eli, the priest, in the Tabernacle. One night he heard God call his name. God told him that Eli and his sons would die, and consequently Samuel became priest and leader of Israel. At that time the Philis-

tines, an old enemy of Israel's were causing a great deal of trouble with their iron weapons and chariots. The Israelites felt that they needed a king to unite them, despite the fact that God had always raised up a leader to unite them and defeat their enemies. Samuel tried to warn them of the hardships that a king would bring to their way of life, and that God should have been their king, all to no avail. God, and Samuel relented, choosing a tall, handsome man named Saul to become the first king of Israel.

## Kings Saul and David

Saul started well but disobeyed God's instructions through Samuel. God told Samuel to anoint another king, the young lad, David. Although anointed it would be many years until he was able to rule. He first came to Saul's notice when a Philistine Giant, Goliath, challenged any Israelite who would dare to fight him. Young David, outraged by the giant's comments mocking God, volunteered to fight. "I come in the name of the Lord!" he told Goliath, and felled him with a single stone from his sling. David the shepherd boy became David the warrior, leading troops against the Philistine menace. So successful was he that Saul became jealous, and after attempting to pin David to the wall with a javelin on a couple of occasions, David decided it was time to get away.



So began his adventures as an outlaw, and gathering others to his band they evaded Saul on a number of occasions. David could have taken Saul's life but chose rather to remain faithful to the king even though he did not trust him. Eventually Saul and his family were killed in battle, and David, because of his loyalty, was able to unite even those who had been Saul's followers under his kingship. David, from Bethlehem, of the tribe of Judah was the greatest king in Israel's history and an ancestor of Jesus. He was seen as a deliverer and under him the kingdom of Israel expanded its borders to their maximum.



David played the harp and wrote many of the **Psalms**, including one which asked for God's cleansing from his sins of committing adultery with Bathsheba and trying to cover up her resulting pregnancy by having her husband put into the forefront of battle where, unsupported, he died. The Bible portrays David as a flawed human being as well as a hero.