MAJOR EVENTS IN OLD TESTAMENT HISTORY

(Dates are BCE unless specified otherwise.)

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**4004 — creation**

The Old Testament (OT) does not give a date for creation, but in ad 1650 Archbishop James Ussher determined that, according to OT chron­ological referen­ces, it must have occurred in 4004 CE (October 22 around 8 pm, in fact!). We now know that the universe actually began about 13.8 billion years ago, but the 4004 date does help us see that, to the ancient Jews, creation was not so far in the past as we now think. The first 11 chapters of Genesis (called the “primitive his­tory”) relate events from creation up to Abraham; these events include the creation of the world, the fall in the Garden of Eden, Cain and Abel, Noah, and the tower of Babel.

**1850 — Abraham**

Abraham (Gen 12-25) probably lived c. 1850 BCE (“c.” stands for “*circa*,” Latin for “around”). In Gen 12, God made a covenant (agree­ment or treaty) with Abraham in which God promised that (1) Abra­ham’s descendants will be numerous, (2) they will dwell in the “Holy Land” (Israel), and (3) all nations of the earth will be blessed through Abra­ham. Abra­ham’s sons were Ishmael and Isaac (Gen 21-26); Isaac’s sons were Esau and Jacob (Gen 25-36); and Jacob’s 12 sons were the forefathers of the 12 tribes of Israel: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, and Benjamin. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the 12 are called the “patriarchs.” One of these forefathers, Joseph, became the right-hand man of the Pharaoh in Egypt; when a famine struck the Middle East, Joseph’s relatives, the Israelites, moved to Egypt, where Joseph fed them.

**1250 — exodus**

The Israelites grew in number in Egypt; they were seen as a threat and enslaved. But c. 1250 God used Moses to send ten plagues on the Egyptians, so the pharaoh allowed them to leave (the exodus, Exod 1-14). Moses led the Israelites through the wilderness (the first half of the “wilderness wanderings,” Exod 15-19) to Mount Sinai, where he received 613 laws, many of which he immediately told to the Israelites (Exod 20-Num 10). Afterward Moses led the Israelites through the wilderness (the second half of the “wilderness wanderings,” Num 11-36) to the east bank of the Jordan river; there he delivered the remainder of the 613 laws to the Israelites (Deut 1-33), just before he died (Deut 34).

**1220 — conquest**

Joshua then became leader. He and the Israelites conquered the Canaanites (Josh 1-11) and divided up the land—formerly “Canaan,” now “Israel”—into twelve plots, one for each tribe (Josh 12-24). (Since members of the Levi tribe were priests and lived throughout the tribes, they received no land; but the Joseph tribe split into Manasseh and Eph­raim, so there still remained twelve tribes).

**1220-1020 — judges**

The conquest ushered in the period of the “judges” (Judg 1-21, 1 Sam 1-7). These leaders did settle legal disputes, so they were called “judges”; but they primarily functioned as charismatic military leaders. Whenever one of the six surround­ing nations (Phoeni­cia, Aram, Ammon, Moab, Edom, or Philistia) would attack one of the tribes, the other tribes sent young men to that tribe to form an ad hoc army; then the army would accept someone charismatic as their general. After the Israelite army fended off the attacking nation, the leader would continue as judge of all the tribes until his death. The book of Judges records the deeds of twelve judges; 1 Sam 1-7 records the deeds of Samuel, a prophet and transitional figure between the judges and the first king.

**1020 — Saul**

The tribes decided to form a centralized government so that they would be less suscepti­ble to attack. The first king was Saul (1 Sam 8-21); he consolidated the tribes into a federation, a single nation.

**1000 — David**

The second king, the most glorious Israel ever had, was David (2 Sam 1-1 Kgs 2). He conquered the six surrounding nations; he established a capital at Jerusalem (until then, a Canaanite village in the mountains of Judah); he built a palace; and he intended to build a temple, but God instructed him to let his successor build it.

**960 — first temple**

Solomon, David’s son (1 Kgs 3-11), built the first temple; it was dedicated in 960 BCE. He was a wise and good king; under him Israel experienced a cultural flowering.

**922 — division of the kingdoms**

But Solomon’s son, Rehoboam, was a bad king who failed to take care of tribes other than his own (Judah). So the northern ten tribes rebelled against the central government (Simeon, the eleventh tribe, was adjacent to Judah and unable to rebel). The northern ten tribes quickly won the civil war (1 Kgs 12-16). Consequently, there were now two kingdoms: Israel in the north, and Judah in the south (Simeon became part of Judah).

**721 — Assyrian exile**

During the 800s and 700s, Assyria waxed powerful; it soon conquered Babylonia (Assyria and Babylonia form present-day Iraq, northeast of Israel), Asia Minor (present-day Turkey, northwest of Israel), and Phoenicia (present-day Lebanon, north of Israel). In 721, Assyria conquered the northern kingdom, the kingdom of Israel (2 Kgs 15-19). Most of the population was de­ported else­where and thus became “the lost ten tribes of Israel”; those that remained became the Samari­tans, whose religion was considered deviant by the “Jews” (from “Judah”) of the southern king­dom.

**587 — Babylonian exile**

During the 600s, Assyria waned as Babylonia waxed in power; and in 612, Babylonia conquered the Assyrian capital, Nineveh. In 587, the Babylonians defeated the southern kingdom, Judah, and carried off its nobility and scribes to the Babylonian capital, Babylon (2 Kgs 23-25). The last Davidic king, Jehoiachin, was led away in chains and presumably died in Babylon c. 550.

**539 — restoration**

In 539, however, the Persians conquered Babylonia. When King Cyrus of Persia discovered the Jewish exiles living in Babylon, he put forth an edict granting them permission to return to Jerusa­lem (Ezra 1), initiating a period called “the restoration.”

**518 — second temple**

The first thing that the Jews did after their return was to rebuild the temple (Ezra 3-6); it was rededicated c. 518. Though little more than a “log cabin” to begin with, it was renovated over the centuries until, by the time Jesus “cleansed” it in 30 CE, it was more magnificent than Sol­o­mon’s had been. (The Romans destroyed the second temple in 70 CE, and no third temple has ever been erected; pres­ently there stands on its site an Islamic holy site, “the Dome of the Rock.”)

**332 — Greek domination**

The Jews lived peaceably under the Persians for almost two hundred years. But in 332 Alexander the Great, on his way to take over most of the then-known world, conquered Judah (1 Macc 1). Judah lived under Greek domina­tion for about a century and a half.

**165 — Maccabean kingdom**

The Jews lived peaceably under the Greeks until in 170 there arose a ruler, Antiochus IV Epi­phanes, who believed he was Zeus (he was perhaps insane). He demanded that all of his subjects wor­ship the Greek gods and goddesses, including himself. In 167 the Jews rebelled and formed a guerrilla army under the leader Judas Maccabeus (“Maccabeus” means “the hammer”). Surprisingly, the guerrillas expelled the much larger Greek army. In 165 (for the first time since 587), Israel became independent, with Judas Maccabeus as king. That same year he rededicated the temple (which the Greeks had deliberately profaned), proclaiming that thereafter all Jews were to celebrate the rededication every year; and that annual celebration is the Jewish feast of Hanukkah (1-2 Maccabees).

**63 — Roman domination**

The Jews lived independently for about a hundred years. But in 63 BCE the Roman general Pompey conquered the kingdom and made it the Roman province of Judea (Latin for “Judah”). That is why, in the gospels, the background of Jesus’ public ministry (c. 27-30 CE) is the Roman Empire: Caesar Augustus, Pontius Pilate, etc.