

In the beginning, God created everything, including a person which God shaped from the earth. God blew into the person, and they became alive. We know them as ADAM, which means “person of the earth.” Years later a great flood covered the face of the Earth God helped rescue a man named NOAH and his family, along with lots of animals. All of this happened before recorded history so we have no ideal how long the stories were passed down from one generation to the next.

The story of God’s people gets woven into the geography and history of the world as we know it through a covenant with ABRAHAM and SARAH. They promised to be faithful and trust God, and in exchange, God promised to be with them and provide generations of descendants. In their old age, Abraham and Sarah got nervous about God’s ability to follow through and decided Abraham should have a child with her maid, HAGAR. The child born was named ISHMAEL, and Sarah was incredibly jealous. Eventually, she had a child of her own, even at an old age. While the Jewish and Christian communities follow Sarah’s son, ISAAC, and his family’s story, God also promised Hagar that Ishmael’s descendants would be blessed.

Isaac has twin sons, ESAU and JACOB. Technically, Esau was the first born and got the benefits of being the oldest. This created lots of tension and the conflict between them and their attempts to reconcile make these brothers easily relatable characters. Along the way, Jacob stole the blessing that was promised to Esau, and so the story follows his family.

Jacob has twelve sons with two different women. He wanted to marry LEAH, but her father said RACHEL had to be married first, so Jacob ends up married to both. JOSEPH is the son we know best, having been sold by his brothers into slavery. He ends up in Egypt as an advisor to Pharaoh because of his ability to interpret dream. Eventually, Joseph’s brothers come to Egypt in search of food during a drought. There is a reconciliation and Jacob and the full family come to Egypt to make their home with Joseph.

Along the way, God’s people grow and prosper in Egypt but as time passes, the importance of Joseph’s role and their people is forgotten. A new Pharaoh sees this large group of non-Egyptians as an internal danger and has them all enslaved. This is their reality for many years, until a girl named MIRIAM tricks a Pharaoh’s daughter into adopting her little brother, MOSES. He grows up and eventually leads God’s people out of EGYPT and to a promised land of their own.

MOSES does not make it into the promised land, but hands off leadership to JOSHUA. At this point, things shift from a dozen family clans with common ancestry to the building of a nation-state. The people living there are run off or killed in a series of battles as all the refugees who came out of Egypt claim the land and make a new home. The land is divided by tribes, named for the sons of Jacob.

For many years, Judges help lead the people by settling disputes and listening for guidance from God. DEBORAH is one of the first and serves for many years. GIDEON and then SAMPSON display different gifts but are also considered Judges in this time period.

The transition is complete when SAMUEL, a priest and prophet, is led by God to anoint SAUL as King over all of Israel. A young shepherd boy who becomes a soldier is part of Saul’s court and young DAVID’s music and charisma are both a soothing presence and source of paranoia for the King. After Saul’s death, DAVID becomes King, and the Kingdom of Israel is passed down to his son SOLOMON. Under Solomon, the riches of the Kingdom grow and the economy booms.

As Israel becomes as much a nation as a people, the story becomes more political with Kings holding great power. Prophets rise up to speak to the Kings, offering guidance but also calling them to be accountable. ELIJAH is one of the early prophets and he is faced with a queen who seeks to have everyone worship her family's gods and a King who is content to let her do what she will, with no regard for Israel's Covenant with God. Elijah is a complicated character, demonstrating the challenges of speaking truth to power. Eventually, the Kingdom becomes divided into a Northern Kingdom (with Samaria as its capital) and a Southern Kingdom (with Jerusalem as its capital) but both still understood themselves as connected to God through the covenant with Abraham.

Other prophets follow. AMOS and other prophets warn kings about the threat of war coming to Israel if they don't stop abusing the poor and using God's Law to prophet from each other. Eventually, the Northern Kingdom falls, and many citizens were taken into exile. Some prophets, such as EZEKIEL, moved from fire and brimstone warnings to speaking words of comfort to those whose lives had been changed forever. Eventually, the same thing happens to the Southern Kingdom, where JEREMIAH and others had played a similar role. Many years later, after the Persian Empire conquered Babylon, the Israelites are invited to return home and leaders such as EZRA and Nehemiah helped the community reunite and rebuild.

Five hundred years later, Rome has taken over this same area of the world and set up local governors over the various provinces. Some (such as Harrod) were allowed to call themselves "King," just as long as they pledged their loyalty to Caesar. It is into this political reality that MARY gives birth to JESUS. Jesus builds upon the stories of God's people and demonstrating profound ways to live out our covenantal relationship with God. Disciples passed on his teachings and his story, sharing it broadly. PAUL steps forward as an unlikely leader after Jesus' time on earth. Paul had stood against Jesus' followers but has a change of heart and becomes one of the primary voices for organizing the first Church communities. Many of the letters we find in the Bible were written by Paul, or those who learned from him, to early Churches and leaders.