

The History of Israel

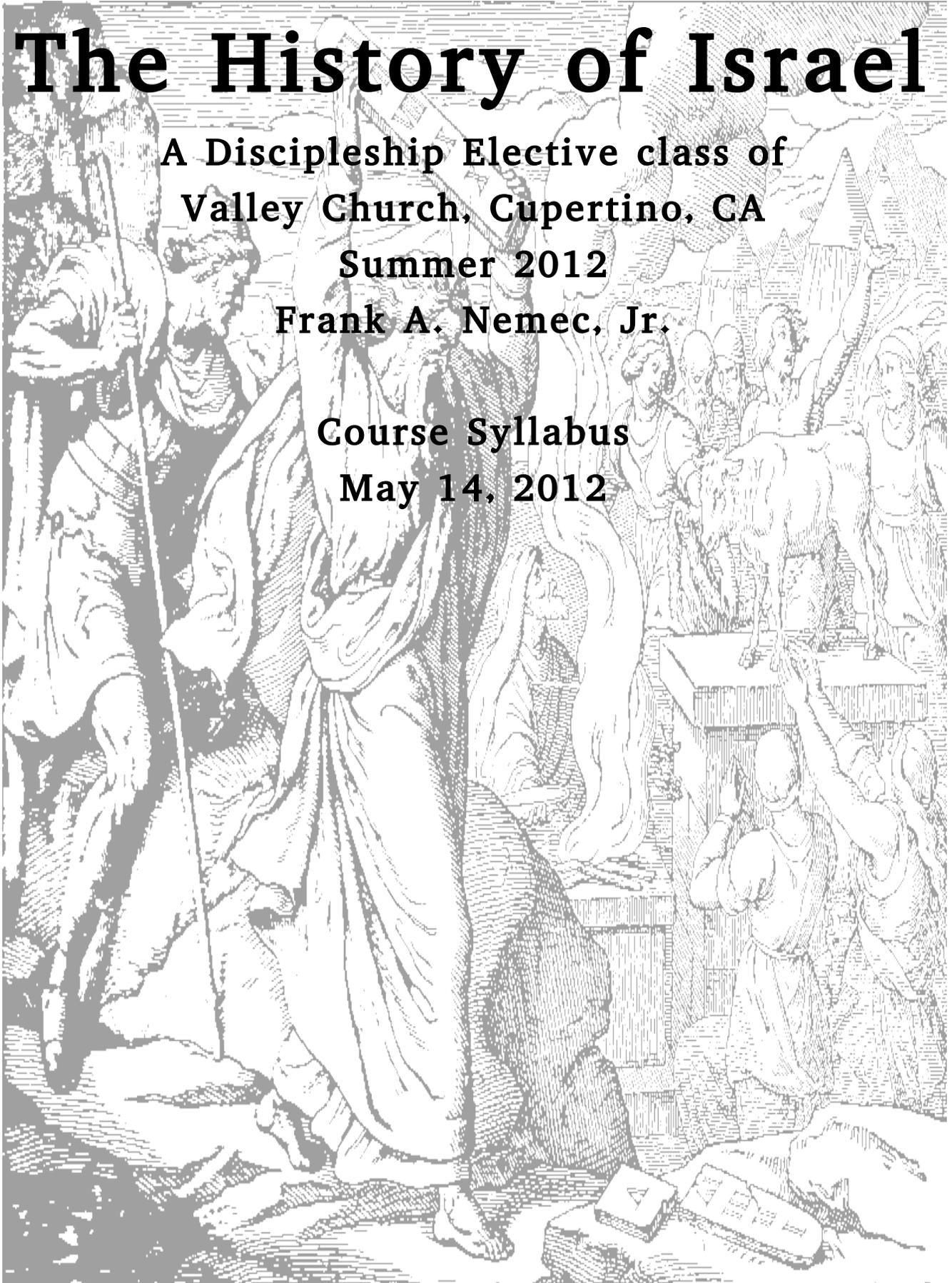
A Discipleship Elective class of
Valley Church, Cupertino, CA

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Course Syllabus

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Table of Contents

General Material.....	3
Disclaimer.....	3
Guiding Questions.....	3
Documentary Hypothesis.....	5
History vs. Doctrine.....	6
Names of God.....	6
Schedule.....	7
Session 1 – Genesis and Exodus.....	7
Session 2 – Sinaitic Covenant.....	8
Session 3 – Numbers.....	8
Session 4 – Joshua.....	8
Session 5 – Judges.....	8
Session 5 – 1 Samuel.....	8
Session 5-9 – Harmony of Samuel-Kings-Chronicles.....	8
Session 10-11 – Second Temple Judaism.....	8
Session 12 – James.....	9
Next Logical Class.....	9

General Material

These notes provide the framework for a class on the history of Israel as recorded in the Bible, and in the context of its peers, and as matched with history. The class meets Sunday evenings 6:30-8pm in room 3191 at Valley Church, Cupertino, California. The class proceeds at a whirlwind pace. We lose the value of an overview if we take too long at it. The reading itself is to be done by each student, outside of class, preferably in advance of the discussion. It's not primarily a doctrine class.

Experiencing the overview requires a disciplined style of reading. It's tempting to read footnotes and follow cross references. Don't procrastinate on the reading, especially in the beginning. The discipline to just read the Bible is difficult. I'll provide a schedule with reading assignments. Page counts are of the paper ESV Bible. They include the introductions, illustrations, and footnotes. The total is about 600 pages. If the class runs 10 weeks, a good disciplined reader can read that in an average of an hour a week. The schedule I propose here has a large reading load for the first session. Attendees will have a few weeks to read that before the class starts. I don't expect much discussion of that part, since it is in a sense 'pre-historic'. That is, before the timeframe of the focus of the class. Each session after the first will generally cover 60 pages or less. That brings the class to a total of about

I encourage taking notes to bring to class. Thoughts and answers should be based on the texts up to that point. That is, don't rewrite the texts to incorporate later ideas. Input from extra-biblical sources is very welcome, and very much helps understand biblical texts.

I will be away May 20 and 27, and will be participating in [Cupertino Chorus Magnus](#) at the time of the June 3 class. This class is expected to begin June 10, 2012.

The latest version of these notes is always available on the web page for this class:

<http://www.valleychurch.org/growing/history.html>

Disclaimer

I accepted the role of leader or facilitator of this class by request of the people attending this Sunday evening Bible study. I intend to encourage attention to certain questions and issues, as can be seen by the rest of this syllabus. I intend to offer some of my ideas on these and related subjects. I do not speak as a teacher or other official of Valley Church. The ideas are mine, not those of Valley Church, its elders, pastors, or staff.

The first item in the [doctrinal statement of Valley Church](#) reads, "We believe in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as being inspired by God and completely inerrant in the original writings and of supreme and final authority in faith and life." This encapsulates a Fundamentalist position. Mine is Conservative, but not Fundamentalist. I discuss this in my [notes on the gospels](#). I neither insist nor expect that people agree with me on this or any other opinion I have or express.

Guiding Questions

1. What kind of relationship do the people have with God? How does it change? In most Bibles, LORD is used for Yahweh, and God for Elohim. What do they call their God and the neighboring gods?

2. What do God and the people expect from each other? What covenants are in play?
3. How do the people govern themselves? What can you see about political and religious leadership? How were leaders selected?
4. How do the people relate to their neighbors?
5. Where do ideas appear? How are they different from later ideas, including ideas of Christianity? How do the ideas differ from those of their neighbors?

Documentary Hypothesis

In 1883, Julius Wellhausen published *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels* (*Prolegomena to the History of Israel*). This was the foundation work of a school of thought regarding the authorship of Torah. It is best known as the Documentary Hypothesis, or JEPD. Later scholarship rejected some of his ideas, but the general ideas are now widely accepted. I will present these ideas in their most general form, but still use the recognized term Documentary Hypothesis. The idea of Wellhausen most commonly rejected is the idea that each source was a complete, consistent written text on its own. I will stick with the term 'source' (rather than text or source text), especially since the Elohist source was very likely oral.

I suggest understanding this division of the texts to improve our understanding of the texts themselves. The ideas were assembled and edited into what eventually became Tanakh, the Jewish canon, and most specifically, that part of the canon called Torah (literally, law). The ideas came from different sets of people, at different times, and were written in different styles, often with different philosophical and historical contexts. Understanding the ideas of a text is more likely to be correct when each is understood and interpreted in its own context, rather than trying to force it into some other context.

Jahwist source

This is the only source to use the personal name Yahweh (Jahweh in Wellhausen's German) earlier than Exodus 3. The consensus estimate is c. 950 BC (during the reign of Solomon), not long before the split of the United Kingdom of Israel into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah in 922 BC. Newer research suggests a date in the 7th century BC. It is represented by much of Genesis, beginning at 2:4b, portions of Exodus and Numbers, and a few short texts in Deuteronomy. It is associated with the southern tribes of Judah.

Elohist source

This source refers to God as Elohim, the plural form of El. I think this most likely refers to El, head of the Caananite pantheon. Some think it is using the same name as a generic name for gods. Both usages were common in the Ancient Near East (ANE). Scholars suggest c. 850 BC for this source. Genesis 15 seems to be the earliest. It is associated with the northern tribes.

Deuteronomist source

This source was likely composed during the Babylonian Captivity (587-539 BC), or before (c. 650-621 BC). This may have been during the time of Josiah (2 Kings 22). Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, and Kings are considered books from this source.

Priestly source

This source was likely composed c. 600-400 BC, during or shortly after the Babylonian Captivity, and is represented by about a fifth of Genesis (including 1:1-4a), much of Exodus and Numbers, and essentially all of Leviticus.

Various factors, including comparing language features to peer literature, suggests that the redaction of these sources into the texts in the form we have now was complete around 450 BC.

Genesis 14 seems to be from a completely different source. It contains alternative names for several places, suggesting perhaps that an older account was reworded and inserted here. As noted under Names of God, Melchizedek (mentioned only here) is a Jebusite name, and Zedek the name of a Jebusite god.

You can learn more about this at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Documentary_hypothesis and other sources. I think we can best understand the texts of the Bible when we know something about who wrote them, when they were written, and why they were written.

History vs. Doctrine

True historians are not biased by religious doctrine, either positively or negatively. If you wish to use history in support of doctrine, you would not want them to be. No one confident in their doctrine should fear introspection by historians. With this in mind, I aim to present objectively the consensus of historians on any particular subject. Every thinking person must evaluate any perceived conflicts between religious doctrine and the consensus of historians, and honestly understand and, if necessary, explain any discrepancies.

A common and most plausible explanation for many such differences is the prevalent misunderstanding of, and neglect of, the literary genre of a piece of religious literature. Anyone with a rudimentary education in literature understands the different genres of writing across the history of human writing. They learn to distinguish among myth, legend, poetry, bios/biography, polemic, history, philosophy, prophecy, apocalypse, and many other literary genres. They craft their interpretations of any text according to the genre in which it was written.

Names of God

Jebus (Ex 3:17 Judges 1:21) was the name of Jerusalem before its conquest by King David around 869BC (1003BC by some popular Bible chronologies). The Canaanite tribe inhabiting it were called Jebusites. Some modern scholars think they were an Amorite tribe. They worshiped Zedek (Sydyk, Sydek, Sedek). People of the Ancient Near East (ANE) often incorporated the name of their god into their own names. The Bible is full of examples of this. The most notable is Israel (literally, the people of El). The most familiar Biblical Jebusite names are Melchizedek and Adonizedek. I have a note suggesting that both David and Solomon had sons named after Jebusite gods, but I'm trying to confirm that.

The first king of the united kingdom of Israel was Saul, a Gibeonite, a tribe with roots in Edom. A conqueror, or a builder of empire, often imposes his own gods upon the conquered peoples. Edom seems to be the home of Yahweh. We can only try to piece together how the ideas of gods developed in the ANE. No clear records survive. The area of scholarship around the earliest worship of Yahweh in southern Canaan is summarized by the Kenite Hypothesis, and is currently the standard view among modern scholars.

The northern tribes were nomadic herdsman from the regions north of Judah. Typical of this region was worship of El, a god of the mountains, head of the Canaanite pantheon. The name El was also sometimes used as a generic name for gods. Nomadic tribes seldom had a reason to develop writing. Perhaps this is why we don't seem to have any wisdom literature from the E-tradition.

As builders of empire, Saul and David had reason to unify the people by unifying their religions. The view that seems best represented in Biblical text is the view expressed as a major theme in Deuteronomy. The term most prominent there (appearing 240 times) is Yahweh our Elohim, the LORD our God. It could be viewed as saying that Yahweh has conquered and become our god. I could also be saying that Yahweh, the god of the south, the god of Edom, the god of Saul, is actually the same as El (pluralized to Elohim), the God of Israel, the mountain god of the northern nomadic tribes. So far, I haven't found a good explanation for the use of the plural Elohim. Any suggestion that it refers to more than one god flies in the face of the most fundamental, protected, and cherished tenet of Judaism: Yahweh our Elohim is one.

Several ancient writings show varying accounts of varying views of the Yahweh of a particular locality, from around the 14th century BC. It has been suggested that E was the primary driver of unifying these various views into a single, unified view of a single, unified Yahweh. Control of the worship of Yahweh was thus centralized to Jerusalem. The very name of Isaiah means “my god is Yahu”.

Schedule

Session 1 – Genesis and Exodus

174 pages Genesis and Exodus. This session sticks to the history overview. The next revisits the Sinaitic Covenant in detail. Please note all of the covenants in context, but reserve detailed study for the next session. The history begins (at the earliest) in chapter 12. Note the covenants with Abraham in chapters 12, 15, and 17, with Isaac in 26, and with Jacob (Israel) in 35. In Exodus, note the “special baby” theme for Moses and compare it with Jesus in Luke. Chapter 3 introduces the Yahweh name. Note the Passover details in chapter 12. Take the detours to Leviticus 23:4-8 and Numbers 28:16-25. Note which days are a holy assembly or a holy convocation. Note the consecration of the firstborn in chapter 13. In chapter 19, note carefully the Sinaitic Covenant that the people agreed to. Take the detour to Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 for a good overview of the nature of the covenant. Note the minimal requirement of Exodus 19:3, that Yahweh your Elohim must be the head of your pantheon. In Exodus 21, note that slavery is routine, and that only slaves from among your own people have these protections. In chapter 24, note the confirmation of the covenant. In chapter 25, note the tabernacle. Is this the first time there was a place for God? It was a tent, indicating that the tribes of Israel were still nomadic. In chapter 34, note another covenant or a covenant renewal. How's that for treatment of your neighbors?



Session 2 – Sinaitic Covenant

All of these texts were written when Israel was under the Sinaitic Covenant. The earlier covenants and renewals are historical references. This covenant is so fundamental to Jewish thought that it deserves to be properly understood. What exactly does each covenant require of the people of Israel? How is 'faith' described, and what part does it play? What are the benefits and penalties? What are the prescribed remedies for breaking each? How does every OT text relate to each covenant? When is Israel shown as keeping vs. breaking each covenant? How do the people (as shown by the authors) respond when it appears God is not keeping his end of the bargain? How, when, and where does that change?

Session 3 – Numbers

68 pages Numbers. Note any differences in ideas or writing style. The terminology of camp and tent show a nomadic lifestyle. How would you explain a relatively unified collection of nomadic tribes numbering 603,550? Chapter 4 has specific duties for the Kohathites.

Session 4 – Joshua

44 pages Joshua.

Session 5 – Judges

42 pages Judges.

Session 5 – 1 Samuel

56 pages 1 Samuel.

Session 5-9 – Harmony of Samuel-Kings-Chronicles

258 pages 2 Samuel through 2 Chronicles.

Session 10-11 – Second Temple Judaism

This is the demographic and school of thought which is most important to me. It's the one where Jesus lived and taught. Scholars today have quite a bit of literature from this time and region. Most of this body of writing was discovered during my lifetime. The thought and practices represented by this writing are those of the peers of Jesus. The teachings of Jesus would assume an understanding and familiarity with those ideas and the words and phrases commonly used to express them. For example, Jesus used the 'bind and loose' concept without explaining it because everyone already knew what it meant. If we want to understand what Jesus meant when he referred to that concept, we need to look elsewhere to understand the concept. Scholars now have the peer literature to make that possible.

Session 12 – James

The ideas in James are much more closely related to the ideas of Second Temple Judaism, and the direct teachings of Jesus as we see them in the synoptic gospels, than they are to the ideas of Paul and later authors. I think it likely represents thought from the very earliest Jesus Movement. This session will examine those ideas, and try to understand where they fit.

Next Logical Class

The next logical class after this would be the thoughts of Paul. The Sunday evening class completed a very long pass through a harmony of the Gospels with Ken Gilbert. It would explore the ideas of Paul, with special attention to how and why they differed from ancient Judaism, Second Temple Judaism, and other religious thought of the region and time.