

Old Testament Overview for Latter-day Saints

These notes discussing the Old Testament contain links to a few books that have helped me understand the context and content of the scriptures. As an Amazon Affiliate, I do earn a small commission from qualifying purchases (at no extra cost to you). [Click here to see all of my favorite books on Amazon.](#)

1. Big picture
 - a. The Old Testament is Heavenly Father’s project to make a covenant people—His “peculiar treasure” (Ex 19:5)—and to bring the world to his son Jesus Christ. All the prophets knew Jesus (Jacob 4.4).
 - b. Think creation → covenant → kingdom → exile/apostasy → return/restoration; Jesus Christ threaded through it all, yet much of what we have from this period comes from a book unedited by those who disagreed with teachings about Jesus as the God who would come down to redeem us. This book is the Book of Mormon.

2. Who is “Israel”?
 - a. Name & identity: From Jacob → Israel (Gen 32.28); his 12 sons = tribes; a people gathered by covenant, land, law, and worship.
 - b. Israel (*yisrā’el* [יִשְׂרָאֵל])
 - c. Form: theophoric name = verb element + ’ēl (אֱל “God”).
 - d. Verb root: שָׂרַח (*s-r-h*), “to strive/contend/persist, prevail.”
 - e. Sense (most accepted): “He strives with God” / “God contends” (qualitative: one who contends with God).
 - f. Grounded in Gen 32:28: “for you have striven (שָׂרַח) with God and with men and have prevailed.” See also Gen 35.10; Hos 12.3–4.

3. Nuances in scholarship w/Israel’s identity
 - a. Qualitative/active: “He who strives with God” (HALOT/BDB’s usual gloss).
 - b. Subject-as-God reading: “God contends/prevails,” taking ’ēl as subject of the verb element (less common today).
 - c. Nifty wordplay happening w/Israel: “Prince with God” (from שָׂר *sar*, “prince”)—a midrashic/punny interpretation reflected in older English notes (e.g., “as a prince you have power,” Gen 32:28 KJV margin).
 - d. Israel’s Mission: Be a light to the nations (Isa 49.6); mediate God’s presence through temple and Torah.

4. The covenants that define Israel and permeate the Old Testament

- a. Abrahamic (Gen 12; 15; 17; 22): Land, seed, (and priesthood! – See Abraham 1.1—4) blessing to all nations; priestly/mission identity. This is the three P’s = property, posterity, and property of the Abrahamic Covenant.
 - b. Mosaic/Sinai (Exodus 19–24): Israel becomes a kingdom of priests with law, becoming a *segullah*, (Ex. 19.4) a “peculiar people” - sacrifices, tabernacle presence—stipulations + blessings/curses associated with this covenant (Deut 28). Many of these ideas are expressed in the temple today, the promise of becoming a new people, willing to obey, sacrifice, be chaste, and build the kingdom of God and become a holy people prepared to enter in the presence of the Lord.
 - c. The Davidic Covenant (2 Sam 7; Ps 89, Ps. 110): Promise of an anointed king whose throne endures—messianic hope culminating in Christ. This is also a promise of YOUR kingdom!
5. The Old Testament as a witness of Christ
- a. Direct types & symbols:
 - i. Joseph saves his family, reunites Israel → type of Christ who preserves and gathers (Gen 37–50).
 - ii. Manna from heaven → Christ the Bread of Life (Ex 16:4, 11–15; John 6:35). Manna is a cool pun – “what is it?” (see Ex. 16.15)
 - iii. Passover lamb → “Behold the Lamb of God” (Ex 12.3–5; John 1.29).
 - iv. Brass serpent lifted up → Son of Man lifted up (Num 21.4–10; John 3.14; 1 Ne. 17.41; 2 Ne. 25.20; Alma 33.19-22; Hel. 8.14—15). The bronze serpent made by Moses is pulled out of the temple by Hezekiah in 2 Kings 18.4. This symbol of kingship is very important to the authors of the Book of Mormon, who include it four times in their record.
 - v. Jonah three days → Jesus’ death and resurrection sign (John 1.17; Matt 12:38–41).
 - b. Offices fulfilled in Jesus: Prophet, Priest, King (Deut 18; Ps 110; 2 Sam 7).
 - i. Moses (deliverer, lawgiver, feeder, water-tamer) → Christ.
 - ii. Joshua (judge/deliverer, brings into rest/land) → Jesus (same name in Hebrew/Greek).

6. Jesus Christ IS JEHOVAH

- a. Name & identity claims: The God who spoke to Moses (Ex 3.13–15; 6.3–5).
- b. Jesus’ self-identification: “Before Abraham was, I AM” (John 8.58–59) → claims the divine Name; LDS teaching: Jehovah of the OT = the premortal Christ.

7. Direct self-identification within the Book of Mormon text

- a. 3 Nephi 9.15 — “I am Jesus Christ... the God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth.”
- b. 3 Nephi 11.10–14 — The risen Jesus declares himself and invites them to feel his wounds; context frames him as the God of Israel who was slain.

- c. Ether 3.14–16 — The premortal Christ tells the brother of Jared: “I am Jesus Christ... I created the heavens and the earth,” i.e., Jehovah.
- d. 3 Nephi 15.5 — “Behold, I am he that gave the law, and I am he who covenanted with my people Israel.”

8. Prophetic identifications (Jehovah titles applied to Jesus) within the Book of Mormon

- a. 1 Nephi 19:10 — “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob yieldeth himself... to be crucified.”
- b. Mosiah 3.5–8 — The Lord Omnipotent (Jehovah) will come down, take flesh, and be called Jesus Christ.
- c. Mosiah 15.1–4; 16.15 — Abinadi: God himself will redeem; Christ is the very Eternal Father of heaven and earth (creator = Jehovah).
- d. Alma 11.38–39 — The Son is “the very Eternal Father of heaven and earth,” identifying Christ with the Creator.
- e. Helaman 14.12 — Christ is “the Son of God, the Father of heaven and of earth, the Creator of all.”
- f. 2 Nephi 9.5 — The Holy One of Israel (a Jehovah title) will show himself in the flesh and die for all.
- g. 2 Nephi 25.19 — The Messiah to come “shall be called Jesus Christ”; in context Nephi has been speaking of the Holy One of Israel, a title of Jesus that Isaiah loves.

9. “Plain and precious things” & Deuteronomistic editing/tampering of the text

- a. Latter-day Saint view: the Old Testament once bore an even fuller witness of Christ before later losses/redactions (1 Ne 13.21–29, 38–42).
- b. The Deuteronomistic History (Deut–2 Kings) shaped Israel’s past to teach covenant faithfulness; LDS readers note where royal/temple traditions and prophetic Christ-types may have been minimized or reframed—hence the need for restoration scripture.
- c. Scripture was re-written, edited, and in many ways changed so that Israel’s view of God shifted toward a monotheistic view of God and removed teachings of Jesus Christ, the God who would come and take flesh, die and rise again from the dead (1 Nephi 19.10).¹
- d. From my analysis of the scholarship regarding the Deuteronomistic Reforms, as well as Lehi’s reaction to the Jews of Jerusalem in 600 BC, and from Nephi’s visionary experience in [1 Nephi 13](#), I have come to the conclusion that the altering of the Biblical texts that Nephi refers to really began in the middle of the 7th Century BC, and not just in the time prior to the formation of the New Testament canon in the 4th Century AD with the rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire. **I believe these changes occurred both before and after Nephi left Jerusalem in 600 BC.** In other words, I believe that there is evidence that there were Deuteronomistic textual changes were made *both before and after the exile in 586 BC.*²

¹ Richard Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* HarperOne, 1997, 101–121.

² Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, Cambridge: Harvard, 1973, p. 274-289. Cross identified the idea of a pre- and post-exilic redaction of the text as the Jews sought to contextualize the destruction of the temple and answer the question regarding the collapse of Jerusalem and the temple. Other scholars had differing

10. Restoration helps

- a. Joseph Smith Translation & Pearl of Great Price restore/doctrinally clarify:
 - i. Book of Moses (e.g., Enoch’s Zion; Adamic gospel).
 - ii. Book of Abraham (premortal council, Abrahamic promises and priesthood).
- b. These texts realign the Old Testament back to its Christ-centered arc which it originally held (Jacob 4.4).

11. How the 39-book KJV OT canon emerged (super brief)

- a. Ancient Israel’s scriptures = Torah, Prophets, Writings (Tanakh).
- b. Post-exilic/Second Temple usage → texts recognized in synagogue/Temple life.
- c. Early Christians used the Septuagint (LXX); later Jewish canon practice emphasized the Hebrew corpus.
- d. Reformation era: Protestant Bibles fixed the 39 Hebrew-based books, placing Greek “Apocrypha/Deuterocanon” separately.

12. Jewish canon — key milestones in the formation of the Hebrew Bible

- a. 5th–4th c. BC (Persian period): Torah (Pentateuch) widely becomes authoritative; many scholars place its “fixing” by this time.
- b. 3rd–2nd c. BC: Greek Septuagint translation under way; shows a broad scriptural corpus in use. (Many Christians will use and quote the Septuagint/LXX)
- c. 132 BC: Prologue to [Sirach](#) mentions “the Law, the Prophets, and the other writings”—evidence of a threefold collection, though still fluid. This was written by Jesus ben Sira around 200—175 BC.
- c. 2nd–1st c. BC (Qumran): [Dead Sea Scrolls](#) show multiple textual forms of biblical books and high regard for some works later left outside the Jewish canon (e.g., Enoch, Jubilees). Canon boundaries not yet uniform.
- d. c. 90–100 AD: Josephus lists 22 books (Law, Prophets, “hymns/precepts”), implying a closed set tied to prophecy ending in the Persian period—strong evidence of a near-final Jewish canon list in his circles. (Josephus, [Against Apion 1.37-42](#).)
- e. Late 1st–2nd c. AD (Yavneh/rabbinic): Rabbis debate canonicity of Song and Ecclesiastes (“defile the hands” criterion) but ultimately affirm them; no formal “council” that fixed the entire canon. (See [Mishnah Yadayim 3:5](#))
- f. There is much discussion about the “Council of Jamnia” (Yavneh) as a late-first-century meeting that supposedly closed the Hebrew Bible in reaction to Christianity. That idea became popular after a 19th-century historian proposed it and many repeated it through the mid-1900s. Since the 1960s, however, most scholars have said there was no single council that finalized the canon. Instead, the Hebrew Scriptures seem to have taken shape earlier, with boundaries firming up over time. Even so, Yavneh likely mattered: rabbis

views. For example, Martin Noth took the position that the Deuteronomistic history was a single work that was composed after the exile. See: Richard D. Nelson, [The Double Redaction of the Deuteronomistic History](#), 1982, 13—14. Nelson works to demonstrate that Noth’s theory needs to be revised: that there is evidence for editing of these histories taking place both before and after the exile. See chapter 5: Towards a Theology of the Two Deuteronomists, 119—128.

standardized texts, debated which books were authoritative, and shaped how Scripture was interpreted, strengthening Jewish identity after the Temple's destruction—more consolidation than “official canon-closing.”

- g. 7th–10th c. AD: Masoretic textual stabilization/standardization (Tiberian Masoretes) — text, not which books, becomes fixed.

13. How to approach reading the Old Testament

- a. Learn covenants first—the everlasting covenant with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob (and their posterity) frames everything, and the Book of Mormon continually refers to this covenant.
- b. Look for patterns, types, and temple themes; read with the New Testament and Restoration scripture open, seeing how they explain each other. The Book of Mormon unlocks the Hebrew Bible! The temple, the Bible, and the Book of Mormon taken together unlock so many of the mysteries.
- c. Ask: How does this passage prepare or point to Jesus Christ and to my covenant with him?