

The Bible in History
A chronological and biological guide
to the
Hebrew and Greek Testaments

Robert B. Waltz

The Bible in History

by Robert B. Waltz

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Man deþ swá hé byþ

þonne hé mót swá hé wile —

“Man does [shows] what he is

when he may do what he wills.”

πρός
Ἐλιζάβεθ καὶ Πατρίκια Ρώσενβεργ
ρόδαί ἀληθιναί ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ

καὶ

Κάτιε Ἰω Πίδελ
θυγάτηρ καρδίας μου
ἔρόωσο....

Table of Contents

Special Thanks	10
Introduction	11
If You Like This Book.....	18
The History and Rulers of the Jews.....	19
Outline of Judean History	20
The Rulers of Judah.....	23
<i>Excursus: Judging the Judges</i>	25
<i>Excursus: Jephthah's Only Daughter and Her Sisters</i>	29
<i>Excursus: Representative Democracy</i>	31
<i>Excursus: Quirinius de Bergerac?</i>	45
World History As Seen in the Bible	64
The Families of Israel	70
<i>Excursus: David and Goliath</i>	96
<i>Excursus: We Are the Root and the Branch of David</i>	105
<i>Excursus: The Gospel Genealogies of Jesus</i>	119
<i>Excursus: Who Was James the Brother of the Lord?</i>	128
<i>Excursus: Jeremiah in the MT and LXX</i>	137
<i>Excursus: Two Tales of Jeroboam I</i>	139
<i>Excursus: Was Jesus Married?</i>	143
<i>Excursus: The Eight Words of Jesus on the Cross</i>	144
<i>Excursus: When Did Jesus Die?</i>	145
<i>Excursus: Lamech's Lament</i>	160
<i>Excursus: The Birth of Mary</i>	167
<i>Excursus: Moses and Other Abandoned Children</i>	175
<i>Excursus: Noah's Flood and Everyone Else's Flood</i>	179
<i>Excursus: Solomon and Game Theory</i>	199
Priests & Prophets	210
<i>The Zadokites according to MT, LXX, and Josephus</i>	212
A History of Prophets & Prophecy	227
Chronological List of Prophets	230
Biographies of the Prophets.....	236

<i>Excursus: Two Greek Versions of Daniel</i>	240
<i>Excursus: Who Did Swallow Jonah?</i>	249
<i>Excursus: The Sources of Samuel</i>	253
<i>Excursus: All Cretans Tell Half-Truths</i>	259
The Oriental Empires	260
Egypt	261
<i>Israel and Egypt</i>	274
History of the Kingdom of Damascus	279
The Rise of the Assyrian Empire	282
<i>An Assyrian King List</i>	284
<i>Genealogy of the Emperors of Assyria</i>	286
<i>The Emperors of Assyria</i>	287
The Chaldean Emperors of Babylon	295
<i>Excursus: Nebuchadnezzar and Carchemish</i>	297
The Persian Empire	301
<i>The Persian Royal Family</i>	306
<i>Excursus: Do You, Esther, Take This King...</i>	306
The Glory That Was Greece	323
<i>Excursus: A Tantalizing View of the Trojan War</i>	334
The Diadochi	335
<i>Excursus: The Battle of Ipsus and Macedonian Tactics</i>	335
The Successor Dynasties	342
The Ptolemies	343
The Seleucids	354
The Book of Daniel and the Successors	366
The Grandeur That Was Rome	371
<i>Excursus: The Political Organization of Rome</i>	373
<i>Excursus: The Last Gasp of the Republic</i>	381
<i>The Emperors of Rome</i>	384
<i>The Emperors Summarized</i>	387
<i>The Romans in Palestine</i>	389
<i>The Roman Emperors during the Christian Era</i>	390
<i>Excursus: Chronology of the Second Punic War</i>	407
<i>Excursus: The Perusine War</i>	423
The Parthian Empire	427

Introduction

The Maccabean and Herodian Families	432
The Rise of the Maccabean and Herodian Families	433
<i>Excursus: The Wicked Priest</i>	435
<i>Excursus: The Battles of Judas Maccabeus</i>	451
The First Christians	456
<i>The Disciples of Jesus</i>	457
Biographies of the Disciples	461
<i>Excursus: The Truth Hidden in the Sand</i>	481
<i>Excursus: The Thorn Without a Rose</i>	484
<i>Excursus: I Never Knew My Father's Name</i>	508
The History of the Church	523
Appendix I: The Language of the New Testament	536
<i>Rare Words Used in New Testament Books</i>	537
<i>A New Church, A New Language</i>	540
<i>Tell Me Again What That Means</i>	546
Appendix II: Textual Criticism — Recovering the Text of the Hebrew and Greek Bibles	550
Manuscripts Cited	556
<i>Old Testament Manuscripts</i>	558
<i>New Testament Manuscripts</i>	560
Manuscripts To See When You Travel	567
Bibliography	573
Index	582

List of Illustrations

1. The Families of Israel	72
2. Abraham's Ancestry in the Book of Jubilees	77
3. The Zadokite High Priestly Dynasty	211
4. Time Chart of the Prophets	229
5. The Eighteenth Dynasty	265
6. The Assyrians Enter Palestine	284
7. Genealogy of the Emperors of Assyria.....	286
8. Genealogy of the Chaldean Emperors of Babylon	297
9. The Rise of Persia.....	303
10. Genealogy of the Persian Emperors	305
11. The Genealogy of Darius I.....	316
12. Darius's Invasion of Greece	317
13. Xerxes's Invasion of Greece	321
14. The Diadochi States, 316 b.c.e.	330
15. The Diadochi States, 312 b.c.e.	331
16. The Diadochi States, 301 b.c.e.	332
17. The Diadochi States, 281 b.c.e.	333
18. Alexander's Successors... ..	340
19. Ptolemaic Egypt	343
20. Roman Conquests 250-30 B.C.E.	377
21. The Triumvirs' Division of the World	382
22. The Julio-Claudian Dynasty	385
23. The Flavian Dynasty and the "Good Emperors"	386
24. The Severi	399
25. Diocletian's Division of the Empire	403
26. The Constantide Dynasty	404
27. The Second Punic War	408
28. The Scipios and the Gracchi	411
29. Battles of the Civil War	416
30. Parthia and Rome	431
31. The Maccabean and Herodian Dynasties	434
32. The Ancestry of Josephus	449

Introduction

33. The Text of P ⁵²	481
34. Hapax Legomena as a fraction of total words in the book.....	539
35. Words which occur in only 1 or 2 books as a fraction of total words	539

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There were three phases in the history of this book, spread over almost three decades. The time at Hamline was the first, and Kathy and Carol Anway and Sally Amundson were largely responsible for it. In a second phase, I took a rather rough work and added a good deal more learning. In this period, I owe the most to Barbara Edson and Mathea Erickson (now Bulander). The third phase was when I finally took the work and upgraded it again and made it publishable. It was Catie Jo Pidel who inspired this move, and Elizabeth and Patricia Rosenberg who supplied the strength to finish. To them this book is dedicated. But many others helped along the way: Martha and John Galep. Sarah Cagley. Jeff Rolfzen. Bea Flaming. Benji Flaming. Kamakshi Tandon. Wendy M. Grossman. For other reasons, I owe a great deal to my Ballad Index collaborators, David Engle, Ed Cray, Don Nichols, Ben Schwartz, and Paul Stamler, and my most recent boss, Mollie Spillman. And, of course, my parents, Dorothy and Frederick Waltz.

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May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, be upon them.

Introduction

Most Bible commentaries seem to see only half the world.

The commentaries, if they look at history at all, study only how outside history influenced the Bible. And histories, if they look at the Bible, use it only to glean a few odd facts. This is an attempt to bridge this divide.

This is not a commentary; it is a history — but a history with a difference. Its purpose is not to tell the story of a particular nation or people, but rather to describe how the ancient world affected the Bible — especially the historical books, but without neglecting the others.

The Bible, on the surface of it, is the story of the evolution of a series of theological ideals. But these ideals did not emerge in isolation; Judaism evolved as a response to the pounding applied by outside people: the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians — and, after the Old Testament was written, the Greeks and the Romans.

The Romans also were decisive in shaping Christianity, although this process is not especially evident in the New Testament. It was the *pax Romana* — the Roman Peace that controlled the entire Mediterranean world — that allowed Christianity to spread to all of Europe and parts of Asia and Africa. Paul travelled half way around the known world of his day, but he may never have left Roman territory. He also worked in a world accustomed to philosophical discussions and accustomed to seeking religious truth — ideals which had been spread by the Greeks.

Nor is the Bible itself a monolithic entity. English readers tend to assume that there is a “Bible.” If they are fairly knowledgeable, they may realize that the Old Testament was written in Hebrew (plus a few chapters in Aramaic) and the New in Greek. But even those who know this seem to think that it was all written on tablets of stone that still exist somewhere today — as if Moses carried the whole thing, including the New Testament, down from the mountain, instead of just the Ten Commandments.

This is anything but true. In fact, the three branches of Christianity have historically used three different Bibles: the Protestant churches use the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New (generally in translation), but the Catholic church, until very recently, used the Latin Bible (and added the “Apocryphal” books to the Old Testament), while the Orthodox churches used an all-Greek Bible (again including the Apocrypha in the Old Testament).¹

And none of these Bibles weathered the vicissitudes of time very well. For more on this, see the appendix on [Textual Criticism](#).

1. The churches didn't even entirely agree on the components of the Apocrypha. All included Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, Baruch, Letter of Jeremiah, and 1 and 2 Maccabees, as well as the Greek versions of Daniel and Esther. The Orthodox churches, however, add 1 Esdras, the Prayer of Manasseh, and 3 Maccabees, with 4 Maccabees and Psalm 151 as appendices. The Catholics put 1 & 2 Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh in the appendix.

In addition, few today know the Bible in the original languages; they know it through translations. And translations, no matter how carefully prepared, bear the stamp of their translators. For one who is looking for such things, for instance, it is easy to tell that the *New International Version* is preferred by more conservative Christians and the *New Revised Standard Version*, although it is perhaps the most scholarly and authoritative English translation ever made, is much more popular with the more liberal and less literal branches of Christianity. If most of the words come from the original languages, still the *feeling* comes from the translators.

My own feelings show in a different way. I began this work from the perspective of the sort of messy not-really-a-theology typical of American Methodists. As I came to realize that not everyone agreed with this, I attempted, more and more, to eliminate theology and replace it with factual data — although even this factual data is disputed. I've tried to point this up in a special way. Sprinkled throughout this work are a series of *excursi*. These are of various types. Some are just tables of comparison between various books of the Bible. Others summarize the history of a particular character. But many are intended to enliven or clarify the Bible. One, for instance, shows Solomon as history's first known practitioner of game theory. Another shows how two accounts of David — one history, one folktale — were combined to produce the version we see in most Bibles today. Another is a look at the vexed question of the day on which Jesus died. These are, to me, among the most interesting parts of the book.

This book is not definitive on any topic. If you want to study, e.g. the procurators who so misruled Judea, a good modern annotated edition of Josephus (say that of the Loeb Classical Library) will give you more information. For the textual problems of 1 and 2 Samuel, P. Kyle McCarter's volumes in the Anchor Bible remain the best. Histories of Egypt and Assyria and Babylonia and Persia and Greece and Rome supply far more detail than I do. My only claim to value lies in the *combination* of these elements in ways that I have not seen elsewhere, and with an emphasis on trying to bring Bible and history together.

In terms of length, the book breaks down into two roughly equal parts. The first is a history of Israel — pursued first chronologically, by listing the rulers of the Jews, and then biographically. Associated with this are information on priests and prophets. This is not intended to replace either individual biographies or standard works such as Bright's *History of Israel*, which is more a history of early Jewish thought than a history of events. The book you are now holding is the only serious attempt I have ever seen to put Israel in its historical perspective. The first portion of the work serves to relate Israel to the world around it, and to provide a framework for its internal history during the monarchical period — as well as tracing its development in the centuries leading up to Jesus.

This is followed by the truly historical portion of the work: references on Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the empires of Persia, Macedonia, and Rome. Each of these sections is prefaced by a brief outline of the nations' history (as well as some hints as to how they affected the Jews), and then by the usual biographical outlines.

Unfortunately, there are a lot of holes in all of these accounts. It's hard for a modern to realize how poor our sources are for ancient history. In an age where information is broadcast, then printed, then archived on microfilm, magnetic tape, and compact disc, the age of purely *non-mechanical* reproduction is hard to imagine.

It is perhaps worth noting that the same need for hand reproduction that leaves us with so few historical sources is also responsible for the damaged state of our Old and New Testament texts. Manuscripts survive largely by chance, which means that many of the best ancient histories are probably forgotten, and the earliest and purest Bible manuscripts are gone to dust.

Ancient records take one of four forms: literary records (that is, history books), inscriptions, official records, and archaeological findings such as coins. All of these supplement each other. Literary records usually reflect the biases of the author, and are often inaccurate revisions of the work of earlier historians. And yet they are the only source that give us a connected story. Inscriptions usually record only a single event, and are often even more biased than chronicles (a king will want those who read the inscription to hear *his* side of the story!). Official records are hard to come by, rarely form a complete sequence, and yet again are biased. And archaeological findings offer little help to annalists (a minor exception is coinage: if a monarch is minting coins in the year *X*, it generally follows that he remains on the throne in that year. Again, potsherds occasionally records interesting events). Unless they produce written documents, the results of excavation serve only to provide backgrounds — but often that background is vital to our understanding.

Literary relics of ancient civilizations are exceedingly rare. Until the rise of the Greeks, there was no real science of history. An isolated genius among the Jews wrote the brilliant history of the reign of David found in 2 Samuel, but this unknown author left no real followers. The only known historian of Egypt was Manetho — who lived under a Greek dynasty, and was further removed from some of the events he described than we are removed from him. And even if his work had been accurate — which it wasn't — it survives only in extracts badly preserved in other authors. As a result, Egyptian history is in horrible shape — as will come out repeatedly in the pages below.

Contemporary historians of Assyria, Babylon, and Persia were equally lacking. Fortunately, we have certain official records of these kings. The last great Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal, was also a great patron of the arts — and we have his library. Moreover, the Assyrians (despite having to work in the difficult cuneiform script) were dedicated record-takers. As a result, we have complete and accurate lists of a thousand years of Assyrian kings. And astronomical calculations allow us to determine events of Assyrian history with absolute accuracy — a feat often impossible even for events of Roman times.

Unfortunately, since all these records were written under official patronage, they are uniformly biased in favour of the monarch. Even Assyrian defeats become decisive victories in the chronicles.

The documentary situation is even worse for the Chaldean Empire of Babylon and its contemporary states, the Median and Lydian Empires. Here at last we have the beginnings of a literary source — Herodotus’s *Histories*. But Herodotus was inventing a new *genre* (the very word “history” comes from the title of his researches), and like all pioneers, he made mistakes. Moreover, his chief interest was not in Babylonian history, but in Persian and Greek. So our primary source for Babylon is the *Babylonian Chronicle*, supplemented by other accounts such as the *Nabonidas Chronicle* and inscriptions. All of these suffer from the usual biases, plus they are incomplete.

For Persia the situation is slightly better. For the early part of the Persia era we have Herodotus — and if his accuracy is not all that might be desired, he at least gets the names and the dates of the Persian kings right.¹ And as Herodotus gets closer to his own time (about half a century after the events he narrates), his accuracy increases.

After Herodotus Greek historians briefly became plentiful. Herodotus’s immediate successor was Thucydides, who (apart from the speeches he places in his characters’ mouths) was scrupulously accurate. Regrettably, the events he was narrating were of no great significance beyond Greece, and few of his successors were as careful as he.²

Things again went downhill after the conquests of Alexander the Great. Alexander himself had many biographers, and several of their accounts survive. But historical accounts of his successors are all but lost (our only significant literary account of the period is that of Diodorus, who had no firsthand sources and did not fully understand the secondhand sources that he did use). To make matters worse, the Old Testament record ended during early Persian times, so our only account of Judaism during this period is that of Josephus — which is demonstrably inaccurate at several points.

The age of the Diadochi (the successors of Alexander) did produce one outstanding historian: Polybius of Megalopolis, probably the most accurate and thorough researcher of ancient times. He was also a direct participant in many of the events he describes. Unfortunately,

1. Although it must be said that Herodotus perhaps followed the Official Party Line more than is desirable. For example, he accepts the account of Darius I that that monarch took the throne because it had been usurped by a pseudo-Smerdis (that this is official propaganda is shown by the Darius inscription — the largest Persian inscription known — which tells the same story). Many moderns, however, think Darius’s account was a self-serving fiction.

2. Thucydides did have his influence. One of Josephus’s assistants has been called a “Thucydidean hack.” And the speeches Thucydides placed in his characters’ mouths were widely imitated. Since his characters’ actual words were forgotten, his method was “to make the speakers say what, in my opinion, was called for on each occasion” (*History of the Peloponnesian War*, I.22). Although authors as early as Polybius felt that this was unacceptably casual, it soon became the method of ancient history — and was seemingly adopted by, among others, Luke in writing the speeches in Acts. John the Apostle may not have known as much Greek history as Luke, but he too clearly felt it proper to put “appropriate” speeches in characters’ mouths in his gospel.

he was a lousy writer, and much of his work has been lost. Moreover, he only chronicles a portion of this period.

As Greece was sinking into this dark age, Rome was coming into the limelight. The immense history of Livy (about a quarter of which survives) gives an annalistic panorama of Roman affairs — often including so much detail that the general outlines are lost. Unfortunately, Livy's sources (apart from Polybius) are rather questionable. For instance, much of early Roman history was derived from tombstones — which (as Livy himself pointed out) were often fraudulent. Other accounts of pre-Christian Rome, such as the writings of Sallust and the memoirs of Julius Caesar, are also biased and/or incomplete.

And once we reach the crucial era of early Christianity, our records once again become incomplete. There are no Christian historical documents for the half century after the close of Acts (c. 61 C.E.). And the histories of writers like Eusebius show that even they had no good histories available. Josephus's history cuts off with the Jewish War of 66 C.E. Which forces us to turn to Roman historians.

Regrettably, the government of first century Rome was often bad without being memorable. Only three literary accounts of the period survive, and all have defects. The magnificent accounts of Tacitus cover only the period 14–70 C.E. (and have many *lacunae* even during that era), as well as suffering from the author's anti-imperial bias. The biographies of Suetonius are nearly complete — but are sort of the first century equivalent of *People* magazine: the author is more interested in scandal than is truth. And the much later account of Dio Cassius, while voluminous, also suffers lacunae, often uses unreliable sources, and is “pedestrian.”

Does this tale of literary woe mean that we should not try to examine the Bible in the light of history? By no means! Much of what we read is incomprehensible without knowing the historical background. It's just that we often face lapses in our understanding. But the only way to overcome those lapses is to make the best use possible of what we already know.

It is for this reason that I have not confined this document's historical survey to events which directly affected Judaism or Christianity. To give an example, it is impossible to understand the rise of Christianity without understanding the state of Judaism at the time of Jesus. But the state of Judaism can only be understood in the light of Roman government. Judah, for some reason, suffered from unusually bad Roman administrators (which meant, of course, that the Jews were always trying to get the Romans off their backs). But while it was unfortunate that Judah had to be the place that suffered in this way, the Roman system all but guaranteed that there would be *somewhere* that suffered this bollixed administration. Even Italy had suffered unjust government until the beginning of the first century B.C.E. Prior to the time of Augustus, it happened almost everywhere, as the corrupt Roman aristocracy treated a governorship as purely an opportunity for self-enrichment. Augustus tried to put a stop to that, but the Empire was so huge and the rapacity of the aristocrats so entrenched that nothing could stop the oppression entirely. And the way by which the Romans developed their governmental system can only be understood by examining how they rose from a small city-state which required only a few minor officials to a

world-encircling Empire.¹ In large part the Roman system was still derived from the administration of the city of Rome, in which wealth, not skill, determined one's official duties. That worked fine for one city — but encouraged rapacity among provincial governors, and also meant that these governors had no understanding of local customs.

And, when the Republic became the Empire, you also had the problem of Emperors who did not know all the men they appointed — or who appointed friends, relatives, friends of friends, relatives of friends of friends, slaves of relatives of friends of friends....

Pontius Pilate, for instance, was appointed governor of Judea because of his friendship with Sejanus, prefect of the Prætorian Guard during the early years of the Emperor Tiberius (there was no “civil service” in ancient Rome; certain offices were available to peoples of certain social ranks. Pilate, as a knight, was eligible for provincial administration). And Pilate, like Sejanus — and Tiberius himself — was a brutal man with little concern for his subjects. His violence contributed significantly to the Jewish sense of grievance that led to the Jewish revolt.

The astute reader will probably sense a certain tension here, between history and faith. Indeed, there is a double tension. One is what one *wishes* to believe, even if the historical data does not support it. The other tension is between the theological view of the Biblical writers and the information supplied by history. The Bible, for instance, condemns Ahab of Israel for his defective faith and praises Hezekiah of Judah for his sound faith. Yet Ahab made Israel stronger than it had ever been before, and Hezekiah brought Judah to the brink of ruin. Was Ahab truly “bad” and Hezekiah truly “good”? I have generally tried to offer both sides to such questions, but when in doubt, I have gone with the history. After all, the Biblical account is readily accessible. The other side generally is not. So I would ask that you not read anything into my faith based on what I say here.

I began this work when I was young and foolish and did not know the value of proper documentation. The large number of books I have used in this project precludes going back to prepare a standard bibliography. But I hope the above description gives some hint of the value of the ancient sources I have used.

Several abbreviations should be noted. The abbreviations for biblical books are routine. But three other ancient authors make frequent appearances on these pages.

1. 1 When the Republic was founded, it had only two significant officials, the *consuls*, who took over the functions of the kings they had expelled. At first the consuls' power to oppress was limited: Rome was small, there were two consuls, and in any case they served for one year only. But as Rome grew, more officials were needed, which meant that former consuls were able to retain power as *proconsuls*. Consuls also started to operate far afield, meaning that their colleagues were no longer in position to check them. (In time, there came to be terminology for this, a *proconsul with imperium*, meaning a governor who had consular powers — in effect, total control — in his province.) In addition, a new office, that of *praetor*, or justice, was created, which meant that there were more elections, which inevitably reduced the scrutiny to which the candidates were subjected. This, plus the increase in revenue, led to an increase in electoral bribery and trickery (financed by the fruits of foreign conquest). The result was a greater number of corrupt officials, more widely scattered, serving longer terms, and with greater authority.

The first of these, by date of writing, is Herodotus. His *Histories* is cited under the abbreviation *Hist.*, and sections are cited by book and section number.

Next in time comes Josephus, the Jewish historian of the first Christian century. As our only non-Biblical source for Jewish events, he is very often cited. His greatest, most ambitious, and most-frequently-cited work is the *Antiquities of the Jews*. This is cited under the abbreviation *Ant.* A shorter but much more personal work of Josephus's is *The Jewish War*, cited as *Bj* (for *Bellum Judaicæ*).

Both of Josephus's works are cited by book, chapter, and section, as in the well-known (though not very accurate) Whiston edition.

Josephus's short work *Against Apion* is cited under that name or as *Apion*. His tendentious autobiography, on those rare occasions when it is cited, is the *Life*.

Finally, from the fourth century comes Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*, our only real history of the early centuries of the Christian church. It goes under the abbreviation *Ecc. Hist.*

Symbols in the Charts

- † denotes a violent death
- = denotes a marriage

How to Interpret an Entry

Most entries in this work follow the same general format: Person's Name, translation, comments, References.

That is, the entry will begin with the person's name as found in the Bible (if it is found in the Bible), e.g. Jacob, Moses, Jesus.

This is followed by a translation. Many of these are approximate, but can indicate something about the person's environment or history.

This is followed by a description — compiled from both Biblical and secular sources — of the person's significance and history.

Finally comes a list of the places in scripture where the person is mentioned. Most of these entries are comprehensive (at least for the Old and New Testaments; in the Apocrypha, where names are a bit more hazy, I may have missed a few); these entries end with the symbol ♠. (An exception: in certain entries, such as those on the Chaldeans and the Greeks, the references are moved to the beginning.)

Many entries also have footnotes; these may refer to apocryphal works, describe textual problems, or simply tell things about the person of lesser importance or which do not directly affect the Biblical record. Entries can usually be read without the footnotes, but the complete story is found only in the notes.

Certain entries have additional features. The "Families of Israel" section adds two features: the way in which names were transliterated in the Septuagint (LXX), which also helps explain how the New Testament names evolved, and how the names appear in Josephus.

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