

# INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORICAL BOOKS IN GENERAL

by  
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**Note:** Author's introduction in *Notes, Critical and Practical, on the Book of Joshua* (New York: Saxton & Miles, 1844). The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.

That portion of the Old Testament which contains the history of the affairs of the Jewish nation from the death of Moses to its conquest by the Chaldeans is comprised in the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. These, in the Hebrew classification, are termed the *Former Prophets*. The title *Prophets* is given them on the ground of the general belief that they were written under the prompting of a Divine impulse; and the epithet *Former* is applied in reference to the place which they occupy in the Sacred Canon, as preceding the books of the *Latter Prophets*, an appellation bestowed upon those whose character is more strictly *prophetical*, viz., Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve Minor Prophets.

The records of the nation from the time of the exile and the return thence, down to the close of the Persian empire, are contained in the books of Esther, Ezra, and Nehemiah, which the Hebrews attach to that part of the canon called the *Hagiographa*, in which are included also the books of Ruth and Chronicles. How ancient this division was we cannot positively affirm, but it was current at least as early as the time of Jerome and the later Talmudists.

As to the sources from which these records were derived, there is a very great degree of uncertainty, although it is admitted that they are a species of compilation made up for the most part from pre-existing documents in the shape of annals or chronicles, which were doubtless co-eval [equally old] with the events narrated. The evidence of such an origin discloses itself repeatedly in the texture of the records themselves, as we shall have occasion hereafter to notice, although it does not seem to have entered into the design of the writers to designate by formal reference or citation the sources from which they drew.

The mere circumstance that we have in the Sacred Canon a number of books bearing the names of certain individuals does not of itself prove that the books were originally written, or even subsequently compiled, by the persons whose names they bear. Thus, if we admit that Joshua wrote the book which has come down to us with his name, yet as he could not have written the account of his own death or of the subsequent events, it is clear that some hand besides his own is to be recognized in the composition. So neither was the book of Judges written as the joint production of those whose names it bears; nor the books of Samuel by Samuel, as a great part of the events related in them occurred after his decease; nor the book of Ruth by Ruth; nor the books of Kings and Chronicles by the kings, each furnishing the history of his own reign; nor, finally, the book of Esther by Esther herself.

In regard to Ezra and Nehemiah, the case is somewhat different as they expressly declare themselves the authors, and nothing in the contents invalidates the claim. As, then, it is as common for historical documents to bear a title derived from the personages and the subject matter treated as from the writers themselves, nothing definite can be inferred as to the authorship of any of the sacred books from the simple name by which it is distinguished. This is a question that is to be determined by a variety of considerations, in which the voice of tradition is entitled to weigh just in proportion as there is nothing in the internal evidence of the book itself, or in the statements of contemporaneous history, to countervail its testimony.

The question of the inspiration of these writings is not affected by the question of their origin. Their derivation from anterior documents, as we have remarked in regard to the book of Genesis, does not militate with their claims to the character of absolutely truthful and infallible records of the events which they relate. It is clear that the purposes of a Divine revelation *require* the character of unimpeachable truth in the communications which shall comprise it, and equally clear is it that under the superintending control of Providence an inspired man may make use of an uninspired document, handed down to him from a prior period, if that document be true in itself and adapted to the object for which it is employed.

But, in fact, nothing forbids that such preceding documents should themselves have originated in a supernatural prompting of which the authors were unconscious. The Divine Spirit, who sees the end from the beginning, may have had in view an ultimate use of the written records of his servants which governed, unknown to them, their form and structure from their very inception. And a song of triumph chanted over a slain or routed foe, the memoir of a distinguished deliverer, the narrative of a siege in some "war of the Lord," the legend of a miracle, the inscription on a pillar, or the certificate of a sale may have been as truly suggested, overruled, and preserved by the Spirit of inspiration as any precept of the decalogue or any vision of a prophet. Whatever God sees fit to *authenticate* by adopting into His word is to be considered as having virtually the stamp of inspiration.

The character and attributes of the several historical books will come separately to be considered as we enter upon the exposition of each. But we may here remark, as to the sources from which the materials are drawn, that there is a high probability that persons of a *prophetic* character existed all along the line of the Hebrew annals, whose office it was to record the leading events of their history and deposit them in the public archives of the nation. The books of Kings and Chronicles seem to be mainly made up from these sources.