The History of Israel from the Patriarchs to the Postexilic Era.

For the purposes of analysis and interpretation, it is convenient to distinguish between six major periods or stages in the history of ancient Israel: (1) the age of the patriarchs (c. 2000-1700 B.C.); (2) the era of Moses and the exodus of Israel from Egypt (c. 1290-1250 B.C.); (3) the conquest of Canaan by Israel (c. 1250-1200 B.C.); (4) the period of the twelve-tribe confederacy (c. 1200-1025 B.C.); (5) the rise and fall of the Hebrew empire (1025-538 B.C.); and (6) the period from the Babylonian exile of the Jews to the Roman conquest of Palestine (538-37 B.C.), often referred to as the "restoration period."

The Age of the Patriarchs (c. 2000-1700 B.C.).

The story of the patriarchs (or fathers) of Israel is told in the book of Genesis, chapters 12 through 50. The central theme of these chapters is God's covenant with Abraham and the renewal of that covenant with Abraham's descendants, the people of Israel. (The Latin term testamentum, from which the Old and New Testaments are named, means "covenant"). In Abraham, the nation of Israel was elected as the people of God and was promised "everlasting possession" of the land of Canaan (or Palestine). Through faith in and obedience to God, Israel was to enjoy liberty, peace and happiness in the "promised land"

The development of the covenant relationship between God and Abraham is recorded in Genesis 11:10-25:18. God called Abraham to be the father of the chosen people, promising him that. "... I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves" (Gn 12:2-3). The Bible also tells us that Abraham was chosen by God to be the patriarch, not only of the nation of ancient Israel, but of "a multitude of nations" (17:4-6). In Genesis 17:7-8, God tells Abraham that "... I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. And I will give to you, and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God." According to Genesis 17:9-14, the fulfilment of God's covenant promises is contingent upon the faith of Abraham and his descendants, and the rite of circumcision was instituted as a sign of the covenant between God and his people. From the standpoint of Orthodox Christianity, it was through Christ and his Church that Abraham became the father of many nations, and it is those who live in faithful union with Christ who are the descendants of Abraham. In Christ, the rite of circumcision has been transcended by the sacrament of baptism; and those who are
baptized into Christ will inherit the true promised land, the kingdom of heaven, of which the biblical land of Canaan (or Palestine) was a physical symbol.

Genesis 25:19-36:43 describes God's renewal and continuation of the Abrahamic covenant with Abraham's son "Isaac and with Isaac's son Jacob. The Bible testifies to the strength of Abraham's faith in God and to Isaac's spiritual steadfastness and innocence. But Jacob was a sinful man whose faith in God was weak and impure. The Bible depicts his early life as a long and roundabout journey toward righteousness and fellowship with God. Jacob is pictured as one who has "striven with God and with men"; and God renames him "Israel," which means "he who strives with God" (Gn 32:28). This change of name is made in recognition of Jacob's victorious spiritual struggle to conquer his own sinful nature and to achieve reconciliation with God and his fellow man.

Jacob, or "Israel," fathered twelve sons: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph and Benjamin. The "sons of Israel" are also the fathers of the twelve tribes of Hebrews which constituted the ancient nation of Israel. Thus, "Israel" is a name for the descendants of Abraham as well as the name of an individual (Jacob).

The history of the sons of Israel is recounted in Genesis 37-50. Joseph, the second youngest son of Jacob, is the major figure in this history. His elder brothers, resentful because Jacob "loved Joseph more than any other of his children," cast him into a pit.

Joseph was rescued by traveling merchants, who took him to Egypt and sold him as a slave- There he found favor with his master, Potiphar, until he was falsely accused by Potiphar's wife of trying to seduce her, and as a result of this charge, Joseph was thrown into prison. Then Pharoah (the king of Egypt) had a troubling dream which no one could explain to him. Hearing that Joseph possessed a special gift of interpretation, Pharoah sent for the young prisoner. Joseph interpreted Pharoah's dream, predicting that seven years of plenty would be followed by seven years of famine, and he advised that large amounts of food be carefully stored away as a reserve. Pharoah then put Joseph in charge of the storage project, which was successfully carried out. And as a result of his success, Joseph became a prominent and powerful man in the land of Egypt.

When the predicted famine arrived, Joseph's brothers were among those foreigners who came to Egypt to purchase food. Joseph forgave them for their sin against him and sent for his father, Jacob (Israel). Thus, Israel and his people went to dwell in the land of Egypt. And the nation of Israel continued its sojourn in Egypt from the time of Jacob and Joseph until the time of Moses.