

Understanding the Old Testament

A Brief Survey of the Old Testament as an Aid to Bible Study

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Understanding the Old Testament

¹⁰⁵ *Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path. Psalm 119:105 NRSV*

Many Christians find it difficult to read and understand the Old Testament. With the best of intentions they resolve to read the bible, only to give the task up in the face of pages of poetry, strange imagery and historical references that are difficult to comprehend. This is especially true for the Old Testament. For the next two months or so I'm going to provide an outline of sorts that might help you put the Old Testament in context and help you better understand the story contained in the Old Testament. This is important because the Old Testament story of the People of Israel is really our story as well.

Right now I am planning this as a ten part series broken down as follows:

1. Biblical Pre-history: Creation through Noah
2. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph and the descent into Slavery
3. Moses and The Exodus
4. The Giving of the Law
5. The Wilderness and a Nation in Chaos
6. The Kings: Saul, David and Solomon
7. The Divided Kingdom and the Prophets
8. The Exile
9. The Return
10. The Writings and Wisdom Literature: Job, Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes

Obviously, I will not be able to cover so much material in depth. Covering this material usually takes up a semester or more in Seminary. Nevertheless, I hope to provide some road signs and mile markers that will help you read, understand and reclaim the Old Testament as a part of your faith journey.

Biblical Pre-history: Creation through Noah

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth...” The very first sentence in Genesis provides a foundation for all that follows. Before everything else, there was God. The bible is the story of God and God's relationship with humankind. Yes, there is a basis for preaching conservation theology and the importance of the whole of creation, but this text is not meant as a science text to tell us about far off galaxies or even to explain the science behind the beginnings of life on earth. It is not a treatise on the need for conservation or living in harmony with nature. It is, first and foremost, the story of God and God's efforts to guide humanity, often against humanity's will.

There are two creation **stories**, one in Genesis 1-2:4a and the other in genesis 2:4b-25. The first account is a grand poem that emphasizes how God brought order out of Chaos. The

second is more like a folk tale explaining God's relationship to humankind and humankind's place in the created order.

Very early, sin comes into the picture. Sin, as explained in the story of Adam, Eve and the Serpent, is a broken relationship with God. Genesis 3. This theme underlies much of the rest of scripture. God desires that we live in relationship to God and humankind acts in ways that creates barriers to that relationship. We are called to love God, our neighbor and ourselves. Rather than **thinking** of sin as a list of deeds or behaviors, think of sin as those things we do that interfere with our relationship with God, including those things that hurt us and other people. Sin becomes more manifest with the murder of Able by Cain.

As Genesis progresses, the world is portrayed as descending into sin and chaos. Murder as retribution is rampant. Genesis 4:23-24. It comes to a point that there is only one person on the face of the earth who is not evil and that is Noah. The story of Noah and the Ark is almost identical to an earlier story that is part of the legend of Gilgamesh. The primary difference between the two stories is the motive for God taking action to destroy the earth. In the Gilgamesh legend, the Gods destroy the earth as a capricious act. One person is saved, along with those he takes into the ark because one of the Gods warns him of the coming flood. In Genesis, God destroys the world because it is hopelessly mired in evil. Theologically, it is a very difficult story and I will not try to defend it. However, it is just a story. Searches for Noah's Ark are pointless.

At the close of the Noah story, God starts over again with creation, commanding Noah and all the creatures that Noah's saves to be fruitful and multiply. God also covenants with all creation that never again will God destroy the world with a flood.

Humankind is still not working out as God desires. Through their hubris, humankind attempts to build a tower to heaven itself. God confuses their language so they cannot understand one another. This provides an earlier culture with an explanation of why people speak different languages though all descended from Noah.

With the first eleven chapters of Genesis concluded, the stage is set for the beginning of the story that will dominate the rest of the Old Testament. God seeks a special relationship with a defined group of people who, God believes, can be led to demonstrate to all the rest of humankind how God wishes us to live. God calls a man named Abram.

Understanding the Old Testament Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph and the Descent into Slavery

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² 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. Gen 12:1-2 NRSV

"I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."
Exodus 3:6 NRSV

The story of the people of Israel begins in Genesis 12. God calls the man Abram to go to a distant land and promises to make of Abram a great nation. That is, God promises that this man who currently has no descendants will be the patriarch of a nation of people. **This is** an extraordinary promise to make to a man who is already seventy-five years old and whose wife, Sari, has moved beyond child bearing age. Yet, by the end of Genesis, the promise has begun to be fulfilled. This nation is to be a blessing to the world.

God makes two additional promises or covenants with Abram whom he renames Abraham; literally ancestor of a multitude. God covenants to give the land that came to be known as Canaan to Abraham and his descendants. More significantly, God covenants to be their God. Genesis 17:1-8. Throughout the rest of the Old Testament when the Covenant with Abraham is referred to, the text is usually referring to the covenant to be the God of the people of Israel. Even references to the Covenant of Circumcision is a reference to the Covenant to be the God of Israel since circumcision marked the people of Israel as a people claimed by God.

Abraham had two sons, Ismael and Isaac. Ismael was born to the slave of Sarah and was eventually **cast** out of the people. But God promised Abraham that God would bless Ismael and make of him a great nation. Muslims claim to be the descendants of Ismael. Isaac was born to Sarah.

A confusing story in Genesis is God's order to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Although abhorrent to us, the sacrifice of the first born son to the god a tribe worshipped was a common practice in the Middle East. Abraham's obedience to that command of God must be evaluated in light of that custom. Although this is a disturbing story, it is best seen as a story that explains why the people of Israel do not practice child sacrifice. When the law is given to the people by God, child sacrifice is forbidden, although it is a practice that the people of Israel took up from time to time. In later centuries, engaging in child sacrifice was seen by the prophets as a rejection of God's law and an example of Israel's apostasy.

Like Abraham, Isaac ultimately had two sons as well, Esau and Jacob. God chose Jacob as the son who would carry on the Covenant, even though Jacob is portrayed as a schemer and conman of sorts. Ultimately God reaffirms God's Covenant with Jacob and gives him a new name. God names Jacob Israel, "the one who strives with God." Genesis 32:22-32. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are usually referred to as the patriarchs of Israel. At several places in scripture, God identifies God's self as "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Jacob had twelve sons: Reuben (Jacob's firstborn), Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, Benjamin, Dan, Naphtali, Gad and Asher. Each of these sons would be the patriarch of one of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Joseph was not popular with his older brothers. Rather than kill him, they conspired to sell him into slavery in Egypt. But God continued to bless Joseph and Joseph became a counselor to the Pharaoh of Egypt. Because of his position in the Egyptian court, Joseph was able to help his people when a great famine struck the region. During the famine, the people of Israel resettled in Egypt and prospered and multiplied. However, later **Pharaohs** became fearful

of these people within their borders and enslaved them. The people of Israel remained slaves in Egypt for 400 years.

Understanding the Old Testament Moses and the Exodus

⁷ Then the LORD said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings,⁸ and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians... Exodus 3:7-8

If asked to describe the overriding theme for the Bible many people would probably emphasize the theme that God loves the world and its people. Without a doubt, many texts in scripture support that interpretation. Yet God’s love as portrayed in scripture is complex. It is not an abstract idea but a concept given substance in action and driven by a powerful sense of justice. That sense of justice was alluded to in the stories of Noah and Sodom and Gomorrah **but for me, in** a very unsatisfactory way. Here in Exodus we see the nature of God’s love blended with God’s sense of Justice. God has **heard the cries** of the people of Israel because of their **oppression** by the Egyptians and has **come down** to deliver the people from slavery. From this point forward the reader of the Old Testament will find references to the Exodus phrased in this manner: “Once we were slaves, but God heard our cries and freed us.” Indeed, the Apostle Paul offers much the same formula: “Once we were slaves to sin, but God heard our cries and freed us through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.” See, e.g. Romans 6:17-18. From this point forward there are also repeated reminders that God hears the cries of those we oppress. The people of Israel translated their experience of God freeing them from slavery to a theology predicated on the concept that God is a God of Justice and will act to stop the oppression of others, even if the oppression takes place by those who worship God. From this point forward the people of Israel see the world through the lens of the Exodus and the proclamation, “Once we were slaves but God heard our cries and delivered us.”

The call of Moses also sets a pattern followed throughout the rest of scripture. Moses is not some demigod capable of battling armies with his bare fists. Moses is revealed to us as flawed and insecure, possibly one who cannot speak without stuttering. He is also a fugitive murderer. Like Abraham and Jacob before him, he seems an unlikely pick for an agent, or **prophet of God**. But, as we will see time and again throughout scripture, God chooses the most unlikely persons as prophets. I encourage you to take a few moments this week and re-read Chapter 3 of Exodus and enjoy the unintentionally humorous exchange between Moses and God as God patiently works to overcome each of Moses’ objections.

The story of Exodus is too long and dramatic to cover in a newsletter article, and I encourage you to reread it. But one event of the story deserves mention because it is often referenced throughout the rest of the Old Testament. The last of the Ten Plagues of Egypt was the death of the firstborn of every family. Although the killing of the firstborn is often attributed to the “Angel of Death,” scripture reflects that it was God who executed the firstborn. See e.g. Exodus 12:27. But, the homes of the People of Israel were “passed over” because they were marked with the sign of God. It is in Exodus that the Passover Feast is first described and it is

the celebration of the Passover that has marked the unity of the Jewish people for over four thousand years.

Finally, it is important to note that, although Moses was the human leader of the Exodus, the theological understanding of the People of Israel is that God led the people from Egypt. God was present as a Pillar of Cloud by Day and a Pillar of Fire by night. Exodus 13:21. The visible presence of God was with the people from the moment they began the Exodus to the time that they entered the Promised Land.

Understanding the Old Testament The Giving of the Law

... *“Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!”*⁷ *For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call to him?*⁸ *And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?*
Deut 4:6-8

Christians have a very distorted view of the Law of Moses. Too often Christians view the law as a terrible burden; an unforgiving set of rules that constricted the life of the people of Israel. In actuality, the people of Israel viewed following the law in a very positive manner. For instance, consider Ps 1:1-3:

¹ *Happy are those
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;*
² *but their delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law they meditate day and night.*
³ *They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.*

Following the law meant living in the way God desires. Moreover, as indicated in the passage quoted from Deuteronomy, living according to the law was meant to be a guide to the world. This view of living is in accordance with the promise of God to Abraham when he was first called. Through the children of Abraham, God intended to bless the world:

³ *I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” Gen 12:3*

God intended the example of the people of Israel to be a light to all the nations of the Earth. Isaiah 49:6. By living according to the statutes of God, the people of Israel would be a light to all the world.

The general pattern of the Law is set in the Decalogue, the ten commandments: Exodus 20:1-17; Deut 5:1-22. At the center of the Law, and of the life of Israel, is God:

² *I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;*
³ *you shall have no other gods before me. Exodus 20:2*

The people are prohibited from worshipping other Gods or making substitutes/symbols for the presence of God (idols). One day a each week is consecrated to God as a time when work stops and people recall that it was God who created them and all that they can know.

Next is a commandment aimed at the basic unit of society: the family; you shall honor your Mother and father. Although people often think of this commandment in terms of young children doing what they are told, it is probably better conceived as a command to adult children to love and care for their aging parents, and to do only those things with their lives that bring honor on the family.

The remaining commandments deal with the proper ordering of society and the areas that most often bring discord to the community. The command not to kill should not be limited to the act of murder, but any act that takes the life of another (although most scholars would exclude the taking of life in war as part of the intended meaning of the text.) Crime is first committed in the heart when we covet what is owned by another, hence the prohibitions against coveting. The legal system falls apart if the testimony of witnesses cannot be trusted. And, throughout all history, great discord has followed the practice of adultery.

Much of the rest of the law is based upon ordering of society around the Decalogue. If you have never taken time to read these before, you would do well to do so at least once. Don't get bogged down in descriptions of liturgies and priestly functions, but focus instead on those laws that deal with how the people are to live together. Among other things, you will find that, embedded in the law is multiple places, is the commandment to take care of the poor and the helpless. Also, watch for two concepts that are repeated throughout the text:

1. The reminder that God freed the people of Israel from oppression in Egypt because God heard their cries and that God will hear the cries of those the people of Israel oppress; and
2. Justice must be given not only to the people of Israel without regard to wealth or station, but also to the alien in their midst.

By keeping the law of God, the People of Israel would show the world how God intended us to live. They would be a light unto the nations. In later centuries when the prophets of God condemned the people it was because they had stopped living lives of justice and right relationship with God (righteousness).

Understanding the Old Testament The Wilderness and a Nation in Chaos

¹⁶ Then the LORD raised up judges, who delivered them out of the power of those who plundered them. ¹⁷ Yet they did not listen even to their judges; for they lusted after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their ancestors had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the LORD; they did not follow their example. ¹⁸ Whenever the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge, and he delivered them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the LORD would be moved to pity by their groaning because of those who persecuted and oppressed them. ¹⁹ But whenever the judge died, they would relapse and behave worse than their ancestors, following other gods, worshiping them and bowing down to them. They would not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. Judges 2:16-19

Moses led a group of former slaves out of Egypt. But these people angered God and God resolved that they would not see the Promised Land. Instead they would spend forty years wandering in the wilderness of Sinai until a new generation had replaced the old; a new generation who would understand their relationship with God.

Some Christians look at a map and marvel that the people could wander 40 years in such a small area. Why couldn't they find the Promised Land for themselves? The answer is that they knew where the Promised Land was, but that God had determined that they would not enter the land. The wilderness period in the lives of the People of Israel was a time when they were totally dependent upon the grace of God. God fed them daily with manna, a substance that met their **nutritional** needs but that could not be stored. Each day they would receive their "daily bread," with an additional ration on the Sabbath so that they could eat on the Sabbath without doing the "work" of gathering food. And, as when the people left Egypt, they were led by the very presence of God; a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night:

³⁶ Whenever the cloud was taken up from the tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on each stage of their journey; ³⁷ but if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out until the day that it was taken up. ³⁸ For the cloud of the LORD was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, before the eyes of all the house of Israel at each stage of their journey. Exodus 40:36-38.

Throughout the rest of the Old Testament you will find references to the Wilderness Journey. As you encounter these references, remember that the writer is referring to a period when the people were totally dependent upon God **and knew** they were totally dependent upon God.

The wilderness period ended when the people crossed the Jordan and began the conquest of the Promised Land. The manna also stopped on that day. From then on the people were dependent upon the land to provide for their needs. Although they were still dependent upon God, who had brought them to this land, they forgot that they were dependent upon God.

The People of Israel were able to subjugate part of the land, but the Canaanite people still occupied part of the land as well. The land was split up among the twelve tribes and the twelve tribes existed in a sort of uneasy Tribal Confederacy for the next two hundred years. There was periodic fighting between the Tribes of Israel and between the Tribes and the Canaanites and the Tribes and the peoples surrounding Canaan.

This period was dominated by a continuing problem summarized in the following verse:

⁷ *The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, forgetting the LORD their God, and worshipping the Baals and the Asherahs.* Judges 3:7.

Despite the discipline instilled in the Wilderness, the Israelites forgot what they had been taught about the nature of God. They began doing what was good in their own sight and worshipping the Gods the Canaanites worshipped. For two hundred years the people would follow the pattern described in the verses cited at the beginning of this article. They would follow the practices of the Canaanites, get themselves into trouble, and then God would act to save them through the leadership of one of the Judges. For a period the people would remain faithful, but then, usually after the death of the Judge, they would fall into their old ways until God once again appointed a Judge to lead them out of chaos.

If you have never taken the time to read through the Book of Judges, you should take a walk through its pages. Some of the richest, but most outrageous, stories in the bible are found in these pages. There is the story of Deborah who saved her people but shamed a great General. There is the story of Gideon, the least member, of the least family, of the least clan, of the least Tribe of Israel who, nevertheless, became one of Israel's greatest Generals. And there is the story of Samson, the rebellious fool who, nevertheless, brought down one of Israel's greatest enemies. But, be warned, there are passages of Judges that are very graphic. One can only assume that the Book of Judges was not "banned in Boston" because no one from Boston took the time to read it.

The period of Judges ends when the people of Israel demand that a King be appointed over them.

Understanding the Old Testament The Kings: Saul, David and Solomon

⁴ *Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, ⁵ and said to him, "You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations." 1 Sam 8:4-5 NRSV*

Samuel was the last Judge, i.e. leader, of the confederated tribes of Israel. He was well respected but his sons were not. The people were certain that, after his death, they would once again fall into a time of chaos as "each person did what was right in their own sight." And so, the people asked that Samuel appoint a King over them like the other nations. Samuel did not want to do this. The King of Israel was God and God should have been all the "king" the people

needed. Samuel also warned the people that a King would impose taxes and conscript the people into armies. Nevertheless, they still insisted on having a King. So God brought Saul to Samuel and told Samuel to anoint Saul as King of Israel. This appointment was later affirmed in front of all the people by a casting of lots.

Saul was a member of the tribe of Benjamin and was tall and handsome. Based upon the text, he was also a fairly adept military leader. Yet, according to scripture, Saul failed to follow the commands of God and so God determined that another should be anointed. God sent Samuel to anoint David, son of Jesse, as King over Israel while David was yet a boy. However, this anointing was done in secret and neither Saul, nor the people, were told that God had already replaced Saul. For some years David served in the Court of Saul, never telling him that Samuel had anointed him King over Israel.

The story of David's rise as the recognized and acknowledged King of Israel is too long to detail here. Suffice to say that David ultimately drew an army to him and led a successful revolt against the rule of Saul. David, in a very astute political move, conquered the Jebusite city of Jerusalem and made it the new capital of Israel. Not only was Jerusalem a city that was easily defended but it had no ties to any of the other tribes and was thus neutral ground to all the tribes.

David is extolled in scripture as the most faithful of all the Kings of Israel. He loved God and sought to serve God, despite such horrible lapses as his affair with Bathsheba. He wished to build a Temple for God in Jerusalem but God told him that he had too much blood on his hands. Instead God told him that his son Solomon, who would succeed him as King, would build the Temple.

David's reign was troubled by strife within his family. One of his sons killed another because of the first son's rape of a sister. His son Absalom led a rebellion against David that came very close to succeeding. On top of that, when David's troops successfully defended his rule, David openly mourned the killing of Absalom, thus angering his troops who had fought and died to defeat Absalom. Finally, David left another potential revolt in the making when he died after naming Solomon, the youngest of his sons, to succeed him.

Solomon was David's son by Bathsheba. Solomon is best known for his wisdom, obtained from God. God offered Solomon anything he wished and Solomon asked for wisdom to rule the people. Solomon, however, fulfills the worst predictions of Samuel made when the people asked for a King. He undertakes huge building projects throughout the land, including building his own palace and the Temple in Jerusalem (Solomon's house was larger than God's house.) These projects were very expensive and he taxed the people to the breaking point. These projects also took many laborers so Solomon conscripted both soldiers and laborers. Finally, Solomon was a very astute politician and sealed treaties with many other nations by marrying into many royal families. Despite his wisdom which should have told him better, and the law which prohibited intermarriage, David had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. These wives and concubines all worshiped different Gods and Solomon both allowed that worship and participated in that worship, thus angering God.

Solomon's successor was his son Rehoboam. After Solomon's death the people asked Rehoboam if he would temper his rule instead of taxing them and enslaving them as Solomon had done. Although counseled by older and wiser heads to agree to a more moderate approach to government, Rehoboam proclaimed that he would outdo Solomon when it came to harsh rule of the people. In the face of a ruler worse than Solomon, ten of the tribes of Israel broke away forming the Northern Kingdom of Israel under the rule of a King named Jeroboam (who, incidentally, had been anointed king over this kingdom by a prophet of God before the kingdom even existed.) The capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel was Samaria. The Southern Kingdom was called Judah and also included the tribe and territory of Benjamin. Its capital remained Jerusalem.

For the next two hundred years Israel was a divided nation. The Northern and Southern Kingdoms occasionally joined together against a common enemy and occasionally warred between themselves. The Divided Kingdoms came to an end when the Assyrians conquered the Kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C.E.

Understanding the Old Testament The Divided Kingdom and the Prophets Amos, Hosea and Micah

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? Micah 6:8

³⁶ "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" ³⁷ He said to him, " 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' ³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." Matthew 22:36-40

One reason so many people become confused when reading the Old Testament is that they miss the fact that the Kingdom established under Saul, David and Solomon was divided into two Kingdoms. To add to the confusion, the Northern and greater Kingdom was named Israel. The Southern Kingdom, comprised only of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, was named Judah. Thus people first read about the King of Israel and then read about the King of Judah and become lost trying to figure out what happened. Samaria was the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and Jerusalem was the capital of Judah.

Israel was the name given to Jacob after he wrestled with God by the river Jordan. Gen 32:28. Israel means "to strive with God" and was both an appropriate name for Jacob as well as the people descended from Jacob. The people of Judah would no doubt have also considered themselves the people of Israel since they were descended from Jacob.

This use of names to describe whole peoples is another source of confusion for people trying to understand the Old Testament. Many parts of the Old Testament are written as verse or

poetry. In those passages the people that are being addressed may be referred to by a single name. Consider, for instance, this passage from Hosea 11:3:

*Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
I took them up in my arms;
but they did not know that I healed them.*

Ephraim (*ee'free-uhm*) was a tribe formed when the tribe of Joseph was split into two tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh. When it appears in scripture it is almost always a reference to the whole Northern Kingdom of Israel. See also Amos 7:2 where “Jacob” refers to the Kingdom of Israel.

The Kings of Israel were fearful of the continuing influence of Jerusalem which held Solomon’s temple. Its people still made periodic pilgrimages to the Temple to sacrifice and attend religious festivals. They no doubt spent time listening to the priests and scribes of the Temple. In order to curb the influence of Jerusalem and the Temple, the Kings of Israel established places of worship and sacrifice at Bethel and Shiloh.

Israel was a prosperous Kingdom, but it also had a very stratified society. The rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer. People observed the religious festivals but the society became more and more oppressive. There was also a great deal of apostasy, the age old problem of the People of Israel. North and South they continued to worship the Canaanite Gods, especially Baal and Astarte. These gods were sometimes worshipped through ritual prostitution that the Law proclaimed to be adultery and fornication. The references to “poles” or “high places” in the Old Testament are references to those places where the Canaanite Gods were worshipped. It was these troubled societies that the Prophets Amos, Hosea and Micah addressed.

Prophets are not, except in the broadest sense, fortune tellers or seers. Biblical Prophets do not predict the future. Prophet (Hebrew *nabi*’) means “one who speaks for another.” As used in the Old Testament it always refers to one who speaks for God. The prophet is one who says, “Thus sayeth the Lord.” Consider Amos for instance. Amos was a shepherd and farm worker who came out of Judah with the call to preach to Israel. His message was straightforward. The people were following the religious forms but were ignoring the core of the law which is focused on how we treat one another, especially those less able to defend themselves. For instance, consider this passage from Amos 5:21-24:

²¹ *I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.*
²² *Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.*
²³ *Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.*
²⁴ ***But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.***

The people were going to Church, but it was not possible for a poor person to receive a fair trial (justice) and no one was living in righteousness, i.e. right relationship with God. (You might recognize this as a passage quoted by Martin Luther King in his "I Have a Dream" speech.)

- ¹² *For I know how many are your transgressions,
and how great are your sins—
**you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,
and push aside the needy in the gate.***
- ¹³ *Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time;
for it is an evil time.*

Amos 5:12-13. The law was filled with commands to treat the poor with respect, to administer justice without regard to wealth or status or citizenship and to help those who were poor. The people of Israel were neglecting those commands.

Hosea is a particularly confusing book. Hosea had an unfaithful wife, Gomer, possibly a Temple prostitute. In his verse he uses her as a symbol for Israel and describes the punishment that her Husband (God) will use to bring her back into right relationship. While a very disturbing text if viewed from the standpoint of domestic relationships, its real focus is the same as Amos: apostasy, lack of Justice in the Courts and a general lack of righteousness. And it contains one of the most powerful descriptions of God and God's nature to be found in the Old Testament and possibly the bible:

*I will not execute my fierce anger;
I will not again destroy Ephraim;
**for I am God and no mortal,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come in wrath.***

Hosea 11:9. One of our greatest failings is envisioning God to be no more than a larger version of ourselves. We strike out in anger, so why shouldn't God? And indeed you can find passages that speak of God striking out in anger. But here Hosea makes a profound statement about the true nature of God. God is no mere mortal, but the Holy One and God does not strike out in wrath as a human would.

Micah speaks to both Israel and Judah, again with a focus on apostasy, justice and righteousness. Once again his message is not to worship God with the forms of religion but with the very fabric of our lives:

- ⁶ *“With what shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?*
- ⁷ *Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,*

the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”
⁸ ***He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
 and what does the LORD require of you
 but to do justice, and to love kindness,
 and to walk humbly with your God?***

Micah 6:6-8.

The Kingdom of Israel was doomed. It lasted only 200 years. Assyria was on the march, conquering nation after nation. In 722 B.C.E. Samaria fell to the Assyrians. The Assyrians had a policy of resettling the people in the conquered lands to discourage feelings of patriotism and the rebellion that would follow. The “Ten Tribes of Israel” were carried away to be dispersed into other lands of the empire and people of other lands were brought to the land that would, in Jesus’ day, be known as Samaria. Judah now stood alone.

Understanding the Old Testament Judah, the Prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, and the Exile

¹⁶ *Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, ¹⁷ learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. Isaiah 1:16-17 NRSV*

¹⁶ *And I will utter my judgments against them, for all their wickedness in forsaking me; they have made offerings to other gods, and worshiped the works of their own hands. Jeremiah 1:16 NRSV*

In 722 B.C.E. Assyria conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Its capital, Samaria fell in that year and the majority of its people were carried into exile. The Assyrian armies then swept South and laid siege to Jerusalem in Judah. It seemed that Jerusalem would fall as well. But, the prophet Isaiah proclaimed that God would deliver the City. And indeed the besieging armies of Assyria were struck with sickness and died by the thousands. The armies retreated to Assyria and Jerusalem knew over 100 years of relative peace. (See Isaiah 37:36-38.

But, the people of Jerusalem took the wrong message from the deliverance. Instead of repenting and returning to the rule of Law, they decided that God would never allow Jerusalem to be destroyed because of the Temple. So 100 years later when Jeremiah warned the city that it must repent, he wasn’t believed:

³ *Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. ⁴ Do not trust in these deceptive words: “This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.”*

⁵ *For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, ⁶ if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, ⁷ then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever. Jeremiah 7:2-7*

Jeremiah warned the people not to listen to those saying that the Lord would not destroy the Temple. Finally, Jeremiah was left with the message that Jerusalem would fall and the people would be taken into exile.

Thus said the LORD: Go and buy a potter's earthenware jug. Take with you some of the elders of the people and some of the senior priests, ² and go out to the valley of the son of Hinnom at the entry of the Potsherd Gate, and proclaim there the words that I tell you...

¹⁰ Then you shall break the jug in the sight of those who go with you, ¹¹ and shall say to them: Thus says the LORD of hosts: So will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can never be mended. Jeremiah 19:1-2; 10-11 NRSV.

Yet, God did assure Jeremiah that the people would return one day, that the people would accept a new Covenant:

³¹ The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Jeremiah 31:31-34 NRSV

The armies of Babylon did lay siege to Jerusalem and Jerusalem was eventually destroyed. The Temple was also destroyed and the priests and scribes, the educated, the royalty and the artisans were taken into exile. The only people left in Judah were the farmers. They would be in Babylon for seventy years.

The Exile was the most influential event in the life of Israel after the Exodus. During the Exile the Old Testament was edited into the form we have today. Much of the history of Israel as contained in the Old Testament was written during the Exile and is meant to explain why the people had suffered this terrible calamity; to explain where they had gone wrong. The Exile also posed a Theological dilemma of sorts. With the Temple destroyed, where would God reside? It was during the Exile that the people concluded that God inhabits the whole world. Also, with the temple destroyed, Synagogue worship became important to the spiritual life of the people. In Babylon, and when the people returned, they brought the Synagogue tradition with them.

Finally, the writer of Second Isaiah brings words of great comfort to the people:

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand

double for all her sins. Isaiah 40:1-2

Understanding the Old Testament

The Return: Ezekiel, Ezra and Nehemiah

Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and strip kings of their robes, to open doors before him—and the gates shall not be closed: ² I will go before you and level the mountains, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron, ³ I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by our name. Isaiah 45:1-3 NRSV

The People of Israel were saved from their exile to Babylon by the Messiah. Messiah means “the anointed” and usually the anointed one of God. According to Isaiah, the Messiah, the anointed one of God who saved the people, was King Cyrus of Persia. Cyrus was an instrument of God even though he did not realize that he was an instrument of God until his conquest was completed.

The prophet Ezekiel had been preaching to the people that their time of punishment would be coming to an end and that the people of Israel would be given new life by God. The famous vision of the Valley of Dry Bones is a vision of the return of the people to Israel:

¹¹ Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ ¹² Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³ And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴ I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act,” says the LORD. Ezekiel 37:11-14 NRSV

Although the stories of Elijah and Elisha contained miraculous healings, this portion of Ezekiel may be the earliest affirmation in Jewish tradition of the belief that God can bring resurrection from death; that what has been destroyed can be made new again through the power of God. In the case of the exiles the resurrection is metaphorical but, by the time of Christ, a theology of resurrection had developed within some traditions of Judaism.

When Cyrus is established King over what had been the Babylonian empire, he acknowledges that his victory was brought about by the God of Israel and orders that the people return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple.

² “Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. ³ Any of those

*among you who are of his people—may their God be with them!—are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem;*¹

A group of people largely composed of the children of those originally exiled return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. They are led in these efforts by Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah. The rebuilding of the Temple takes well over a decade and is hampered on many fronts including opposition within the Persian Government. Eventually King Darius, successor to Cyrus, discovers Cyrus' decree and orders that the Persian officials and others stop interfering with the project. When the Temple is finished there is both weeping and celebrating. Weeping because the new Temple is but a shadow of the Temple of Solomon but celebrating that the Temple is finally rebuilt. Ezra leads the people in re-establishing worship in the new Temple and reaffirming the law of Moses. Nehemiah is a two term governor of Jerusalem and oversees the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem.

One aspect of the return was the conclusion of the former exiles that their problems over the centuries had stemmed from intermarriage. Their solution to this problem was extreme. The men of Israel divorced all their foreign wives and disowned the children of those marriages. These events are described in Ezra 9-10.

Understanding the Old Testament

The Rule of the Greeks and Romans and the Book of Daniel

I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. ¹⁴ To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed. Daniel 7:13-14

As should be apparent by now the Old Testament is, in part, a history book and a commentary on history. The Old Testament begins in pre-history with creation, the fall and the flood. The fundamentalist/creationist view, ignoring science that contradicts the conclusion, dates human history as beginning around 4000 BCE as opposed to a date of around 15 million BCE for the emergence of hominides. We have greater confidence about dates the closer we come to the present. Most scholars agree that the entry into Canaan, the Promised Land, came around 1200 BCE and the anointing of Saul at around 1050. The return from exile began in 538.

Alexander the Great defeated the Persian Empire in 331 BCE. Alexander's empire began the Hellenization of the whole Mediterranean region. Greek culture dominated everything including art, literature, music, science, philosophy, religion, cuisine and architecture. An instructor of mine used the omnipresence of Coke and McDonalds around the world as a modern example of the type of cultural dominance that occurred. The Hellenistic influences are apparent

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Ezr 1:2-3). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

today throughout the Middle East. Alexander died in 323 BCE and his empire was divided among his generals. Ptolemy and his line ruled Palestine for the next 150 years.

In the beginning, the Greeks mostly tolerated the stubbornness of the Jews in adhering to their faith. However, with the ascension of Antiochus Epiphanes IV in 172 BCE came persecution. The practice of Judaism in any form, including circumcision or possessing the Torah, became a capital crime. These persecutions are described in 1 Maccabees:

⁴¹ Then the king wrote to his whole kingdom that all should be one people, ⁴² and that all should give up their particular customs. ⁴³ All the Gentiles accepted the command of the king. Many even from Israel gladly adopted his religion; they sacrificed to idols and profaned the sabbath. ⁴⁴ And the king sent letters by messengers to Jerusalem and the towns of Judah; he directed them to follow customs strange to the land, ⁴⁵ to forbid burnt offerings and sacrifices and drink offerings in the sanctuary, to profane sabbaths and festivals, ⁴⁶ to defile the sanctuary and the priests, ⁴⁷ to build altars and sacred precincts and shrines for idols, to sacrifice swine and other unclean animals, ⁴⁸ and to leave their sons uncircumcised. They were to make themselves abominable by everything unclean and profane, ⁴⁹ so that they would forget the law and change all the ordinances. ⁵⁰ He added, "And whoever does not obey the command of the king shall die." 1 Mac 1:41-50

⁵⁶ The books of the law that they found they tore to pieces and burned with fire. ⁵⁷ Anyone found possessing the book of the covenant, or anyone who adhered to the law, was condemned to death by decree of the king. ⁵⁸ They kept using violence against Israel, against those who were found month after month in the towns. ⁵⁹ On the twenty-fifth day of the month they offered sacrifice on the altar that was on top of the altar of burnt offering. ⁶⁰ According to the decree, they put to death the women who had their children circumcised, ⁶¹ and their families and those who circumcised them; and they hung the infants from their mothers' necks. 1 Mac 1:56-61

Still the people resisted.

During this time of persecution, the Book of Daniel was written. The first half of the book, written mostly in Hebrew, contains stories of faithfulness set during the Babylonian Exile. These include the familiar stories of Daniel in the Lion's Den and the Men in the Fiery Furnace. The second half of the book, written in the Aramaic commonly used in Palestine during that time, is a form of literature known as Apocalyptic.

Apocalyptic literature emphasizes specific themes. It divides time into two eras: the evil present and the future reign of God. It describes the eternal struggle between Good and Evil. It uses symbolic language to describe current events, usually describing these scenes as visions. Apocalyptic proclaims that God will always ultimately prevail over Evil, but that Evil will seem to prevail for a time. Apocalyptic calls the people to be faithful to God in the face of persecution; to be faithful during the Evil times. In the Book of Daniel Chapter 7 there are references to four beasts. Most scholars believe that the images are meant to describe the Babylonian, Median, Persian and Greek Empires. The last beast with ten horns is the Greek Empire. The "little horn with the arrogant mouth" is believed to represent Antiochus Epiphanes

IV. Daniel should be seen by Christians as a proclamation that God is ultimately in control of creation and that we must be faithful even in the face of persecution.

In passing, I believe that I should address how some Christians have, in my view, misused the Book of Daniel and other apocalyptic literature. A minority of commentators who follow a belief system known as “Dispensationalism” (which includes, among other things, the belief in the Rapture of a few and the punishment of many) claim that the final beast is meant to be Rome. Hal Lindsay, the author of *The Late Great Planet Earth* and also a Dispensationalist, asserted that the last beast was the European Common Market. In his vision, the Lion/Eagle beast was the USA and the Bear beast was the former Soviet Union. Even though all his predictions from the 1970s failed to materialize, he continues to offer predictions about the future. The symbolism of apocalyptic literature is so broad that it can be applied to many things in different eras.

Two other books associated with this period are Jonah and Malachi. Despite the fish story in Jonah, Jonah is primarily a proclamation that God loves the world and is seeking the salvation of the world. Malachi is a book in the tradition of the earlier Old Testament prophets that calls the people back to faithful adherence to the Law. It also contains a prophecy of a “messenger” who will prepare the way for the coming of god. It is possible that John the Baptist viewed himself as this messenger.

The Maccabean Jews overthrew the Greeks around 163 BCE and Jewish rule of Palestine continued until 63 BCE when the Roman General Pompey conquered much of the region. Roman rule continued through the Fourth Century but was still relatively new when Jesus was born.

(Next week: Psalms and Proverbs [Final entry in the series])

Understanding the Old Testament The Psalms and Proverbs

¹⁷ *How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!* ¹⁸ *I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you. Ps 139:17-18*
NRSV

¹ *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?* ² *O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.*
Ps 22:1-2 NRSV

⁶ *Let everything that breathes praise the LORD!*
Praise the LORD! Ps 150:6 NRSV

The Book of Psalms is one of the Bible’s spiritual treasures. In its pages you will find prayers to express every feeling that you ever experienced. When the People of Israel prayed it

was from the heart; from the deepest depths of their souls. They did not hold back their joy, their fear, their anger, their despair or their sorrow. They took everything to God in prayer.

Once, while leading a Disciple Bible Study class, I told the class that it was okay to offer an angry prayer to God. One woman was shocked. “You can’t offer an angry prayer! That’s disrespectful! After all, Paul says to give thanks for everything in your life!” 1 Thess 5:18. “God might punish you if you’re angry with him.” I thought about that for a moment and then asked her if she really believed that God didn’t know how she felt, even if she wasn’t speaking words in anger. The people of Israel proceeded from the standpoint that God always knew what was in their hearts so there was no reason to try and disguise their feelings.

How do you speak of the profound sense that, wherever you go, God is always with you? Look to Psalm 139. Have you ever been overwhelmed by the immensity of creation and wonder how God could care about you? Look to Psalm 8. Ever **felt** like your body was being ripped apart and everyone around you was against you? Read psalm 22. How about a feeling that God is always with you, leading you through the hard times? Reflect on Psalm 23.

The psalms of the People of Israel are about our day to day interaction with God and our feelings about God. Some will shock you because of their brutality. Others will make you laugh because of the things about yourself they bring to your mind; your experience of life. If you have never taken the time to read all the psalms, set aside a brief time every day for a couple of months to read and reflect on the psalms. There are only 150 of them. I suspect that you will find your own prayer life enriched by the genuine emotions evoked by the psalms.

The Book of Proverbs is part of the Wisdom literature of the bible. Wisdom, as the term is used in scripture, is defined as the ability to discern the difference between good and evil in all that we do. It’s relational. It’s about how we get along with one another. And, according to scripture, Wisdom is part of God’s creation and is **characterized as a female**:

¹⁹ *The Lord by wisdom founded the earth;*
 by understanding he established the heavens;
²⁰ *by his knowledge the deeps broke open,*
 and the clouds drop down the dew. Proverbs 3:19-20 NRSV

As portrayed in the Book of proverbs, Wisdom, that knowledge of right and wrong, is a woman:

8 *Does not wisdom call,*
 and does not understanding raise her voice?
² *On the heights, beside the way,*
 at the crossroads she takes her stand;
³ *beside the gates in front of the town,*
 at the entrance of the portals she cries out:
⁴ *“To you, O people, I call,*
 and my cry is to all that live.
⁵ *O simple ones, learn prudence;*
 acquire intelligence, you who lack it.

⁶ *Hear, for I will speak noble things,
and from my lips will come what is right;
⁷ for my mouth will utter truth;
wickedness is an abomination to my lips. Proverbs 8:1-7*

Wisdom is a woman. Many of the proverbs are not very favorable to women but there is no basis for challenging that Wisdom is portrayed as a woman in scripture.

The Book of proverbs provides a lot of advice, and some of that advice is pretty practical aimed at getting along in the world. For instance, consider this one:

Proverbs 26:17

¹⁷ *Like somebody who takes a passing dog by the ears
is one who meddles in the quarrel of another.*

Ever been there? Two people are quarreling and you decide to step in, either to take sides or try to resolve the quarrel. How did that work out for you? A lot of the time it does not work out well.

How about 26:18- 19:

¹⁸ *Like a maniac who shoots deadly firebrands and arrows,
¹⁹ so is one who deceives a neighbor
and says, "I am only joking!"*

Watch out for those practical jokes on the neighbor. They may well come back to haunt you. What you think is a real thigh slapper may not be funny to your neighbor.

I especially like this one: Proverbs 27:14

¹⁴ *Whoever blesses a neighbor with a loud voice,
rising early in the morning,
will be counted as cursing.*

You may be a **morning** person. You may like to get up early. You may think that it's a good thing to get up early. But when you do, keep it down. Even if you are shouting a blessing, your neighbor may hear it as cursing.

Then there is Proverbs 25:17:

¹⁷ *Let your foot be seldom in your neighbor's house,
otherwise the neighbor will become weary of you and hate you.*

Even four thousand years ago, people liked their privacy. A few neighborly visits are okay, but be careful over doing it.

For those who like to bargain there is proverbs 20:14:

¹⁴ *“Bad, bad,” says the buyer,
then goes away and boasts.*

And then there are those proverbs that deal with wealth and poverty. While laziness is condemned, the proverbs do not assume that all the poor are lazy: Proverbs 13:23

²³ *The field of the poor may yield much food,
but it is swept away through injustice.*

The poor may have the means of taking care of themselves, but their poverty makes them vulnerable to the rich who would cheat them of what they have. Proverbs also emphasizes that God does not look with kindness on those who cheat the poor or who will not give to help the poor: 14:31

³¹ *Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker,
but those who are kind to the needy honor him.*

22:2

² *The rich and the poor have this in common:
the Lord is the maker of them all.*

We are all made by God. If you oppress the poor you insult God and if you are kind to the poor you honor God. 19:17

Central to the biblical story and the law of Israel is that God hears the cries of the poor and oppressed. This proverb reminds us that it is wrong to pretend we do not see or hear the poor around us. Jesus spoke of what we do for the least person around us we do for Him. Proverbs 31:8-9

⁸ *Speak out for those who cannot speak,
for the rights of all the destitute.*
⁹ *Speak out, judge righteously,
defend the rights of the poor and needy.*

We are not only to give to help those less fortunate, but to speak out for them as well.

There are many more proverbs. I encourage you to take the time to look through them. The thought I will leave you with is this: The bible calls us to live our faith. The Book of Proverbs emphasizes that our faith is centered not only on God but on how God would have us live. As a text from James points out, what good is our faith if we will not give it life through our actions? James 2:14-26.

Conclusion

I began this series some eleven weeks ago. What I have attempted to provide in these articles is a simple guide for reading through the Old Testament without getting lost in the historical or theological context of the scriptures. I barely scratched the surface of what could be said about the Old Testament but I have hopefully cut a narrow path through the jungle that you can widen for yourselves. I'd be glad to discuss any of these articles with you and elaborate on any issues that concern you. I also hope that some of you might be interested in studying the bible with me or in a group among yourselves. The Bible is meant to be read by Christians in community and discussed in community. If you would like to be part of a bible study group, please contact me. Alternatively, if there is an interest in participating in an online bible study I'd be glad to explore that as well. The Bible is central to my faith as it is to yours, and I enjoy exploring it with others.