

**GRACE EPISCOPAL CHURCH**  
Sheboygan, Wisconsin

**Adult Education**

**THE OLD TESTAMENT IN CHRISTIAN BELIEF**  
12 April—17 May 2015  
Session 1

For many Christians the Old Testament is an enigma. How do these writings, which include descriptions of events and practices in a culture very far removed from our own, relate to our own growth in faith? We are not nomadic pastoralists. We do not live in a strictly patriarchal, Bronze Age society in which slavery is an accepted institution, and which God is explicitly invoked to give bring destruction on enemies. We are a pluralistic society, not a chosen people identified by blood and clan.

The God of the Old Testament can Himself seem foreign. He is described as jealous, wrathful, as One who “hardens the heart” of the opponent. This seems to be a very different Person from Jesus Christ, in whom we encounter supreme examples of compassion, mercy and forgiveness. And, we at least believe we have been taught that the Old Testament is mainly law, and that this law has been superseded by Jesus Christ.

Faced with these challenges, the default option that many Christians engage in is to opt out from any close examination of the Old Testament, or to view it as something specific just to the time and place of its revelation. To engage in this option, however, is to ignore certain uncomfortable facts:

- That the Old Testament comprises the majority of the Bible.
- That when Jesus refers to Scripture He is talking about the Old Testament, and cites it as authoritative.
- That Jesus Himself says that He has come to fulfill that Law, and that not the least part of it will pass away (Mtt. 5.17ff).
- That when Paul, Peter, James, and John are writing the only Scripture in existence is the Old Testament, which they cite as authoritative.

In order to be informed in our faith we *must* actively engage the Old Testament; we must respond to the guidance of the “Moses and the prophets”, as phrased by Jesus Himself (Lk. 16.29-31). Indeed, and as further set forth in Jesus’ words, the Old Testament points to who the Messiah is (Lk. 24.13-25); that He has come to fulfill the Law (Mtt. 5.17); and Messiah is the “end” (fulfillment) of the Law (Rom. 10.4). In this course, therefore, in addition to exploring how the Old Testament came together, its structure and theological “shape”, we will explore questions posed about the Old Testament in the New: (1) Is the God of the Old Testament a different God from the One revealed in the New (*cf.* Heb. 1.1-2; Jn. 12.41)? (2) Is there a “Christian Canon” found as a subset of the Old Testament (*cf.* 2 Tim 3.14-17; Acts 17.11)?

## 1 Peter 1.10-12

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours made careful search and inquiry, inquiring about the person or time that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated, when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in regard to the things that have now been announced to you through those who brought you good news by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look!

---

### The Shape of the Canon

1. The word “canon” comes from the Greek word for reed. A papyrus reed was used as a standard measure of length in Alexandria, Egypt (a Greek city).
  - a. The word is used in the Church to signify a measure or standard.
    - i. A writing is canonical in that it has been deemed to meet the measure of inspiration.
  - b. The criteria by which the Church selected works as canonical include:
    - i. *Apostolicity*: Can the work be identified with a specific apostle (New Testament) or prophet or oral tradition (Old Testament)?
    - ii. *Use in public liturgy*: Has the work been used in public prayer or instruction?
    - iii. *Catholicity*: Has the work been used in the Church in all or almost all lands? For example, the First Letter of Clement (A.D. 96) meets all other criteria, but was not known or used outside of Rome and Greece. It was therefore not included in the canon (of the New Testament).
    - iv. *Age*: Is there an unbroken tradition of the knowledge of and use of the work?
    - v. *Inspired character*: Is the content of the work consistent with the history of salvation set out in the rest of the canon?
2. *Problems in formation of the canon*:
  - a. The ancient Christian canon relied on the *Septuagint* (LXX), a Greek version of the Old Testament.
    - i. The LXX contains some text variations (psalms, for example, are numbered differently).
    - ii. The LXX contains all the books which are considered part of the Apocrypha in Post-Reformation Bibles.
    - iii. The Roman and Orthodox Churches follow the LXX text tradition.
  - b. The canon in the West now generally follows the Masoretic Text (MT).
    - i. The MT has all the Old Testament in Hebrew.
    - ii. The MT includes vowel pointings in Hebrew.
      1. These vowel pointings did not exist in ancient Hebrew (“Proto-Hebrew”).
      2. The MT was not completed until the ninth century after Christ.

3. The Masoretes (an hereditary clan) thus developed a different text (with some different vowel interpolations) from that of the LXX.
  4. In modern practice the differences are not material, but be aware of the text tradition in use!
  - c. The Hebrew manuscripts do not include chapter and verse organization. Organizing the Bible by chapters and verses did not arise until the Renaissance.
  - d. Reformation changes: The Protestant Reformers relegated most of what is now the Apocrypha to a secondary status (useful for teaching, but not establishing doctrine).
3. The Old Testament is divided traditionally (including by Jesus) into:
    - a. The *Law* (sometimes referred to as the *Pentateuch* or “The Five Books of Moses”).
    - b. The *Prophets* (usually further divided into the “Former Prophets” and the “Latter Prophets”).
    - c. The *Writings*, e.g., the Psalms and “Wisdom Literature;” certain histories.
  4. The Law consists of: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy:
    - a. Genesis: The name derives from the Greek word for “origin”.
    - b. Exodus: Also from the Greek, here referencing the history of the Hebrews leaving Egypt.
    - c. Leviticus: the “priestly book”. The name is derived from the name of the priestly caste, the “Levites”. The book sets forth many rules of priestly practice.
    - d. Numbers: The name derives from the story of the census of the tribes of Israel (Num. 1 and 26).
    - e. Deuteronomy: From the Greek word for “second law”. The book recapitulates much of the law set forth in Exodus and Leviticus.
  5. The Pentateuch is thought to have been written and re-written over centuries, tracing back to a tradition starting (probably orally) with Moses.
    - a. Under the “Documentary Hypothesis” (also called “JEDP Theory”), four authorship/ redaction strands are identified by scholars.
      - i. These are scholarly *theories*, not proven fact.
    - b. The four traditions identified are:
      - i. The *Jahwist* (“J” is the German “Y”), from the proper Name of the Lord. Ninth century, B.C., writing in the southern kingdom (Judah).
        1. God is referred to by His proper Name.
        2. J uses anthropomorphic terminology with reference to God (e.g., God walks and talks in the Garden of Eden).
        3. J emphasizes storytelling.
        4. The J source is the earliest and most comprehensive source in the Law.
      - ii. The *Elohist*, from the Hebrew word for God (*elohim*) used in this tradition. The word has a plural form but takes a usage in the singular by context and verb form.

1. Written in the northern kingdom, Israel, after the fall of Solomon's kingdom (eighth century, B.C.) to respond to the need for an official account of Jewish origins.
2. Less vivid storyteller; fewer anthropomorphisms.
- iii. The *Deuteronomistic Historian*, from evidence of a thorough editing and reordering of the first five books undertaken in the seventh century B.C.
  1. Reflects northern and southern traditions, but written, probably, in the south (Judah) after flight from the north.
  2. Limited vocabulary, very repetitious.
- iv. The *Priestly* source, from evidence of a concern with cult practices.
- v. Probably reflecting the sixth century B.C. need of a community in exile (in Babylon), and thus stressing obedience to the Law.
- vi. Not a good storyteller.
- vii. God is in heaven, not involved intimately in human affairs.
- c. The Pentateuch can be divided into two strands of *Law* and *Narrative* (discussed *infra*.)

### The Ten Central Themes of the Five Books of Moses<sup>1</sup>

The Pentateuch represents not only a collection of narratives and law, but reflects a worldview which differs greatly from our own. It is useful, therefore, to identify the themes which are returned to again and again in this earliest collection of Scripture. The following are salient:

- 1) *Creation Establishes a Good World:* When Genesis 1 affirms that God created all things by speaking a word, it means that all is ordered by the divine plan and works together in harmony. After Creation was completed, God looked upon it and “found it very good” (Gen. 1.31). Thus, no matter the evil and failure that follow in world history, we are to recall that goodness will prevail.
- 2) *God has Blessed Human Life:* An important corollary of a good world is divine blessing upon it. Twice we are told in Genesis that God blessed the human race (Gen. 1.28; 9.1). Later, the blessing of Abraham (Gen. 12.2) is highlighted, as are those of Sarah and Isaac (Gen. 17.16), Jacob (Gen. Gen 27.27-29), of the whole people by Aaron (Num. 6.24-26), of the nation by Balaam (Num. 23.20), and, as the finale of the Pentateuch, of each tribe by Moses (Deut. 33.1-29).
- 3) *Humanity has a Tendency to Sin:* Much of the biblical narrative centers on the disobedience and sinfulness of God's creatures who refuse to heed or obey the divine will. In turn, many of the laws center on atonement (particularly in Leviticus), and on the need for repentance and turning back to God (in Deuteronomy in particular).
- 4) *God Delivers from all Evil:* If humanity tends toward rebellion, God is focused on forgiveness and mercy. God spares Adam and Eve, Cain and Noah, and others in order to give the human race a new start each time after it sins. God is revealed above all else as a liberating

---

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from L. Boadt, “The Pentateuch,” in *The Catholic Study Bible*, D. Senior, *et al.*, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), RG 36–55.

God in the Exodus. This becomes the heart of Israel's praise for God in the Passover celebration.

5) *God Fulfills His Promises:* The Pentateuch stresses again and again the fulfillment of the promise made to Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses that God will make them into a great people. The Lord has no characteristics of an ancient "god" patterned on the recurrent cycles of nature, but always the God of the future who calls forth in Israel a trusting hope that must expect new and greater divine acts still to come.

6) *The Covenant Binds God to Israel:* All peoples believe their gods relate to the world somehow, but only between Israel and the Lord do we find a union based on love and loyalty pledged to each other in permanent union that actually respects the role of the human partner. The covenant is the heart of biblical faith because it expresses a unique bond between God and people, built on past deeds but committed to future collaboration.

7) *The Law Expresses Israel's Bond to God:* The covenant establishes a relationship, but the laws of the Pentateuch show how that relationship is to be lived out by the people. The Law is not a set of restrictive rules, but a dynamic way of life that expresses faithfulness to God in actions as well as words, always with a flavor of joy (in worship and praise).

8) *Worship = Praise = Thanks:* To pray is to praise, and to praise is to thank God. The Pentateuch constantly points out what God has done for Israel, and the laws point to a spirit of rejoicing and thanksgiving on Israel's part in giving back to God a part of the gift to them: namely, praising the divine goodness in all things. (This theme is later reflected very prominently in the psalms.)

9) *Religious Life is Life in Community:* Israel is a people, not a collection of individuals. Discovery of the divine will and proper praise can only be given by human voices joined together. God's many revelations can be appreciated only when memories are shared and mutual goodness is shown in action to one another.

10) *God Directs all History:* The natural conclusion to be drawn from the attributes of God described above is that all things fall under divine providence. The central faith of Israel that there is one, and only one, God leads to the recognition of the divine lordship over all peoples and all events. God both blesses and punishes, sets obstacles as well as shows the way to pass through them. All things are in the hands of God, and so no course of action may be contemplated except to walk in the ways of the Lord.