

Making Sense of the Old Testament: 7 Key Moments

Our Prayer

Holy God, We thank you for the gracious gift of faith. With the apostles before us, we ask that you open our hearts to the power of your Word and increase our faith that we may be bold followers and joyful witnesses to the message and mission of your Son, Our Lord, Christ Jesus. Amen.

Scriptural Synopsis

- + “... the biblical story reveals that human beings were created to dwell harmoniously with God. The story of Eden depicts holy people living in a holy land – a harmony that is ruptured by sin. The rest of the Bible shows how God seeks, through a progression of covenants, to restore his created images to holiness. God calls Abraham and promises him land and descendants, a holy land and holy people...”
- + “The covenant with Moses centers on the law to instill righteousness in the people and the tabernacle that is God’s dwelling in the midst of the people during their journey. The covenant of David establishes his throne of kingship as the instrument for instilling righteousness among the people and for building the temple in which God would make his name dwell.”
- + “The people of Israel, nonetheless, lose the throne of David and enter a period of exile. Even when they enter back into the physical holy land, there is no more Davidic king and the glory cloud never descends upon the reconstructed temple. The prophets not only foresee and explain the destruction of the kingdom of David, but they also promise a time when God will restore his blessings of holiness upon his chosen people. The long awaited restoration becomes a reality with the coming of Christ Jesus the holy one of God.”

Seven Key “Moments” in the OT

1. Exodus

+ The Exodus Event

- Cry of the people – Ex 2:23-25
- God’s divine power mobilized – Ex 4-14
- Joy of liberation – Ex 15:1-21
- New Identity / Covenant – Ex 19
- New Responsibilities / Law – Ex 20
- Covenant Community

+ CONCLUSIONS

- **God listens, cares passionately, responds** cf. Ex 3:7-8
- **God is a freedom-giver, who liberates us from oppression**
cf. Isa 61:1-2, Lk 4:16-30
- **Covenant fidelity brings ‘life’**
- **Covenant identity demands outreach to poor and vulnerable**
cf. Deut 10:17-18, Psalm 112

+ FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

- God does enter our lives, guides and directs us. He is like a loving parent who carefully teaches good choices are life-giving and bad choices lead to consequences.
- How do we see God acting in our lives?

2. Abraham

+ The Story of the Patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob; Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel

- Gen 12:1-5, 7 Abraham called, promises made
- Gen 15:6 – “Abram put his faith in the Lord, who credited it to him as an act of righteousness” cf. Rom 4:1-25, Gal 3:6-9
- Gen 17:9-11 – Covenant of circumcision

+ Sacrificing Isaac – Gen 22

- “God put Abraham to the test...” Gen 22:1
- “... because Abraham obeyed me...” Gen 26:3-5

“Abraham, the great model of faith, emerges as a curious mixture of faith and doubt, of certainty and confusion... In the Bible, faith is not viewed in the sterile and rationalistic sense of ‘assent of the mind to certain truths or propositions about God.’ It is not the mind that believes; it is rather the person... Faith, in the Bible, is a loving trusting commitment of the whole self to God, a holding on securely to God in spite of everything. At times we are confused; we struggle and doubt. This is not opposed to faith; it is part of faith, the part that says we care enough about our relationship to God to question and argue (Gen 15:2-3) and even at times to laugh (Gen 17:17).”

Fr. Michael Guinan OFM, The Pentateuch

+ CONCLUSIONS

- Faith involves forging a relationship with God built on trust
- God is trustworthy. Promises are honored
- Faith involves a journey
- Faith Includes Challenges / Uncertainty
- Hope Is Necessary / God has a Plan

+ FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

- Faith is essentially trusting in God’s plan and letting go of our own. When do you find it difficult to do this? How can you get better at it?
- The story of Abraham is told as a journey. What does this metaphor say about faith?

3. Creation

*+ Psalm 8 - O Lord, our Lord, how glorious is your name over all the earth!
You have exalted your majesty above the heavens... What is man that you should be mindful of him, or the son of man that you should care for him?
You have made him little less than the angels, and crowned with glory and honor...*

+ Creation Account #1 – Genesis 1:1-2:4a

+ Creation Account #2 – Genesis 2:4b – 3:24

+ “These two narratives together attest to the grandeur and preciousness of creation, to the well-ordered generativity of the world willed by God, and to the extreme vulnerability of that order, which can readily be put at risk.”

W. Brueggemann

+ **God's order vs. chaos – Ps 74:12-17 – dragons in the waters ,**
cf. Is 51:9-10, Ps 89:9-11, Isa 45:18, Isa 27:1, Job 26:12-13, Ps 104:5-15

+ **CONCLUSIONS**

- **God is a life-giver, creation is good, God is to be praised, given thanks and obeyed**
- **God has created the world as a place of blessing, order, productivity and justice**
- **Sin / chaos is present in exploitation, disorder, abuse, oppression, etc.**
- **God has the power / will to turn chaos to new creation, death to life, esp. in Christ**

+**FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION**

- **If God is a life-giver with power to turn chaos to creation, how do I or can I participate in this endeavor? Cf. Psalm 8**
- **Reflect on Zacchaeus (Lk 19) and the prodigal son (Lk 15) where 'new life' replaces deathly existence. Where have you encountered new life in Christ?**

4. Monarchy (1020-587 BC)

“The most important period of OT Israel is that of the monarchy – the time of David and Solomon, the time in which prophecy developed and flourished.”

Fr. Joseph Jensen OSB

+ **“The Lord is King”**

- **Ps 93 – throne stands firm, trustworthy**
- **96:10-13 – governs with equity, justice**
- **99:4 – justice and judgment -- worship**
- **146:3-10 – raises up those bowed down**

+ **Israel Requests a King – 1 Sam 8:6-22**

+ **Israel's Ideal King – Deut. 17:14-20**

+ **Saul – c. 1020-1000 BC**

+ **David – c. 1000-961 BC.**

+ **Solomon – c. 961-922 BC.**

+ **Hezekiah – 715-687 BC**

“He put his trust in the Lord, the God of Israel, and neither before him nor after him was there anyone like him among all the kings of Judah. Loyal to the Lord, Hezekiah never turned away from him, but observed the commandments which the Lord had given to Moses. The Lord was with him and he prospered... ” 2 Kings 18:5-7

+ **Manasseh – c. 687-642 BC**

+ **Jeremiah to Jehoiakim 609-598 BC in Jer. 22:15-17**

“Must you prove your rank among kings by competing with them in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink? He did what was right and just, and it went well with him. Because he dispensed justice to the weak and the poor, it went well with him. Is this not true knowledge of me? says the Lord. But your eyes and heart are set on nothing except your own gain, on shedding innocent blood, on practicing oppression and extortion.”

+ **CONCLUSIONS**

- **The king was to be God’s “anointed” representative + mediator**
- **Monarchy, overall, failed because kings’ inattentiveness to Torah expectations**
- **Israel looked to a future “messiah” who would enact God’s will and rule rightly**

cf. Isa 9:2-7, 11:1-9, Jer 23:5-6, Ezek 34:23-24, Amos 9:11-12

+ **FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION**

- **Deut. 17:14-20 indicates that the primary activity of the king is to study / know / enact God’s law. Could this be true for world leadership positions today? In the Church? Work? Family?**
- **How has God called you to be a leader? What stresses and challenges do you encounter in fulfilling your role?**

5. The Prophets CCC #64

“The prophets proclaim a radical redemption of the People of God, purification from all their infidelities, a salvation which will include all the nations.”

+ **Pro-phetes -- “speaks for another” Knows the heart of God**

+ **Not fortune-tellers, but “forth-tellers”**

- **“not a mouthpiece, but a partner, an associate with God”**
- **“lives not only his own personal life, but also the life of God”**
- **Shares “a fellowship with the feelings of God”**

The Prophets by Abraham Heschel

+ **Prophetic Task**

- Criticize / Grieve
 - Dismantle the dominant consciousness
 - Penetrate the numbness of sin
 - Counter the politics of injustice / exploitation cf. Jer 8:18ff.
 - Energize = provide hope, assurance, consolation
cf. Ezek 37, Isa 43:1-6

+ **3 MAJOR "TARGETS" for OT prophets**

- Idolatry – Jer 10:3-16, Hos 8:1-6
- Religious Formalism – Amos 5:21, Hos 6:6, Isa 1:11-17
- Social Injustice – Isa 58:1-9, Amos 2:6

+ **CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE PROPHETS**

- ... were attuned to God's will, and knowing God well, spoke for God
- ... warned of consequences for sin & offered consolation for fidelity
- ... were universally persecuted
- ... were people of hope! Not just doomsayers
- ... anticipated future messianic era cf. Jer 31:31ff., Ezek 36:24-28

+ **FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION**

- Can you recall a time when you had the opportunity / challenge to be prophetic? What was that experience like?
- Compare your response to Jeremiah's in Jer 20:7-18
- Where / how is the Church prophetic in her mission?

6. The Exile - 587-537 BC

+ **Why an Exile? Detach from land -- Destroy spirit / resistance**

Suppress national identity

- Only political, ecclesiastical and intellectual leaders exiled – 4600?
- Diaspora
- Jerusalem Attacked
- 2 Kings 24:8-16 - Nebuchadnezzar takes city, deports king and elites
- 2 Kings 25:9 – Temple destroyed

+ Life in Babylon

- Physical – Jeremiah 29:4-7
- Spiritual – Temple, Holy of Holies, sacrifices, priests, kings, sacred city / land, national freedom are gone --Davidic dynasty ends cf. 2 Sam 7
- Emotional – Lamentations, Psalm 137, 74

+ Prophetic Comfort

- Deutero-Isaiah – ch. 40-55, is filled with images of comfort, hope, rebuilding, renewing, recreating – a new Exodus
- Ezekiel 37 – “dry bones”
- Jeremiah 31:31-34 – new covenant

+ Positive Developments in Exile

- identification with covenant community is intensified – esp. Law + Tradition
- Monotheism + Torah + Sabbath emphasized
- Synagogues develop

+ CONCLUSIONS ABOUT EXILE

- Was due to Israel's infidelity to the covenant
- Israel learned to pray / live differently:
no Temple, no cultic sacrifice, no kings
- Torah-centered, priests-driven
- God was with them throughout

+ FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

- Have you ever been part of a community (religious/secular) that experienced exile? Where was/is God in that experience?
- As a person of faith, have you experienced periods of spiritual exile? What are the positive & negative aspects of those experiences?

7. The Restoration – 1-2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah

- + King Cyrus of Persia releases exiles – Ezra 1:1-4, 6:3-5, Isaiah 44:28-45:1
 - a new Temple? Haggai 1:2-11
 - Beginning of modern Judaism: prayer, worship, ritual purity, cultic priests as leaders

+ Nehemiah

- “cupbearer to the king” of Persia – Neh 1:11 c. 445-417 BC
- Rebuilt walls of Jerusalem in 445 BC – Neh 2:17ff.
- Appointed governor of Judah – fought off surrounding enemies and cancelled harsh debts
- Opposed marriages with foreigners

+ Ezra

- c. 458 ? 398?
- “Father of Judaism” and “a Second Moses”
- Jewish priest and scribe devoted to study of Torah – Ezra 7:6
- Regularized / reorganized religious practice within Jewish community – Neh 8
- Refused intermarriage – Ezra 9-10

+ CONCLUSIONS FROM EXILE AND RESTORATION

- God is an Exile-ender and a bringer home
- Religious life of Jewish community was intensified
- Monotheistic faith celebrated in Torah/Law - replaces idolatry
- Synagogue complements Temple as place of worship + life
- Renewed interest in Sabbath observance

+ FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

- Does “restoration” (i.e. new beginning) occur in the Church today? In the past?
- What does it say about God?
- Which of these 7 “moments” made the deepest impression on you? Why?

King David’s Prayer – 1 Chronicles 29:10-13

Blessed may you be, O Lord, God of Israel, our Father, from eternity to eternity. Yours, O Lord, are grandeur and power, majesty, splendor, and glory. For all in heaven and on earth is yours; yours, O Lord, is the sovereignty; you are exalted as head over all. Riches and honor are from you, and you have dominion over all. In your hand are power and might; it is yours to give grandeur and strength to all. Therefore, our God, we give you thanks and we praise the majesty of your name. Amen.

INTRODUCTION OF OLD TESTAMENT CLASS 2 ASSIGNMENT QUESTION

Select one of the seven **OT “moments”** and respond to **both of the following**:

- a) Briefly describe the significance of this moment for the people of Israel, *i.e.* what did they come to know about God? About themselves?**

- b) What wisdom does this “moment” bring to your life / ministry / spirituality?**

Email or mail your responses within two weeks to:

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