

# Old Testament Themes



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## Preface

After teaching Bible to students in a variety of settings for more than twenty years, I have come to the conclusion that they appreciate a good story but seldom see how one story may connect with others in the text. Certainly, any systematic study of the Bible reveals certain literary patterns and recurrent motifs, but to get the “big picture,” it is necessary to identify major themes that appear in many of the narratives and tie characters, events, and theological positions together throughout the entire canon of scripture. It is the task of this volume to provide a “road map” of four major Old Testament/Hebrew Bible themes: covenant, universalism, remnant, and wisdom. These have been sketched out in less detail in the introductory textbook that I co-authored with James Moyer, *The Old Testament: Text and Context* (Hendrickson, 1997). In this volume I have attempted to show that these four themes comprise the literary and theological glue of the ancient Israelite writers and for those persons responsible for drawing the text into its final, canonical form.

As a way of introducing these themes and the task of this volume, let me first define each:

**Covenant:** This term applies to the association between Israel and Yahweh. It implies an agreement by God to provide “land and children” to the Israelites in return for their exclusive worship and obedience to the word of Yahweh. It originates in the ancestor stories of Genesis, is made more explicit through legal pronouncement in Exodus, is tied to the fortunes of the monarchy for a time, and finally forms the basis for the maturing of Israelite religion into Judaism in the postexilic and intertestamental periods.

**Remnant:** Because Yahweh is portrayed as a just God who strictly adheres to the stipulations of the covenant and is concerned that no righteous person be destroyed without warning of danger, the remnant theme provides that warning. God, angels,

and prophets repeatedly remind the Israelites that they must obey the covenant or face God's angry retribution. These statements are designed, according to this theme, to allow the righteous to make the necessary changes or demonstrate their allegiance to Yahweh so that they will survive the inevitable destruction and form a "righteous remnant" that will rebuild the nation.

**Universalism:** Since they lived in a polytheistic society, it was often difficult for the Israelites to adhere to strict monotheistic beliefs. They were drawn first into henotheism, which allowed them to continue to believe that other gods existed while they chose to give their allegiance to Yahweh. Only after the exile did they fully separate themselves from the tendrils of such beliefs. The universalism theme appears to have been used to demonstrate to the Israelites why they should give their trust to Yahweh and to prove that this God is the only God. This is often accomplished by placing a statement of absolute faith in Yahweh's power as the lord of the universe in the mouth of a non-Israelite.

**Wisdom:** I have combined the wisdom theme with the overriding social custom of reciprocity, which forms the basis of most interactions between persons and nations in the ancient Near East. It was the task of wisdom to educate the people so that they would be aware of wise thought, wise speech, and wise action. Included in this process is the recognition of how honor and shame are tied to what is considered to be wise and foolish in ancient society.

It is my hope that this thematic approach to the biblical narrative will facilitate understanding and draw the reader more closely into the world of the Bible. Of course, these four are not the only themes that could have been discussed, and in fact I have pointed out many subthemes, motifs, and other literary devices. However, to simplify the task and, I hope, to promote more careful examination of the biblical text by my readers, I have stopped with just four major themes. In any case, I encourage the reader to enjoy the stories, but to repeatedly think, *Where have I heard that theme before?*



## Introduction

Over the years many of my students have remarked that the Bible contains themes that appear to run throughout the text, tying narratives together and providing a sense of continuity. In fact, the biblical story as we know it was unknown to the ancient Israelites. They experienced the tales of Abraham, Moses, David, and Deborah in oral form. It was relatively late in the Israelites' history that a systematic attempt was made to pull these disparate stories together and form a **canon** of scriptures. Certainly, the average Israelite was aware of the ancestral stories and the law as it was developed and taught in his or her own day. But as the society grew and became more complex, the laws and the stories about the nation's origin also had to change. They were transformed to meet new situations and new understandings of God's covenant with the Israelites.

Because the biblical materials were developed, compiled, and finally written down and edited over many centuries, it is understandable that the final editors of this vast amount of material would want to insert a core message. In this volume, I have attempted to isolate and discuss four of these major themes: **covenant**, **remnant**, **universalism**, and **wisdom**. It will become clear from my frequent cross-references that these themes dovetail with each other. It invariably will happen that an episode being described in one chapter will call to mind how that situation relates to one or more of the other themes. Those that I have chosen are not the only major themes that could be discussed, but I think they are the most central. In order to touch on some additional subthemes, I have incorporated short

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discussions and insets within the chapters that help to illuminate these motifs and cultural traits.

In some cases it has been necessary to retrace a portion of Israelite history to explain these themes, but that is done in as brief a manner as possible. It is not the aim of this work to provide a comprehensive history of ancient Israel, and I would refer readers to the Select Bibliography for volumes that provide that type of information. However, to provide a quick reference and a sense of historical sequence, I have provided a simple guide below to some of the most frequently mentioned events, persons, and places:

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### Near Eastern Personal and Place Names

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**Babylon**, a major city in central Mesopotamia on the Euphrates River, and center of empires in the eighteenth and sixth centuries B.C.E.

**Cyrus**, king of Persia from 559–530 B.C.E., who conquers the Neo-Babylonian empire and allows the exiles to return to their homelands

**Damascus**, the capital city of Syria (Aram) and chief rival to Israel from 1000–800 B.C.E.

**Hammurabi**, king of Babylon from 1792–1750 B.C.E., responsible for uniting Mesopotamia under his rule and issuing a law code that has many parallels with biblical law

**Nebuchadnezzar**, king of Babylon from 605–562 B.C.E., who captures Jerusalem in 598 and again in 587, leading to the exile of the people of Judah and the destruction of Solomon's temple

**Nineveh**, the capital of the Assyrian empire from 1000–612 B.C.E., located in the northeastern section of Mesopotamia, on the Tigris River

**Ugarit**, a Mediterranean seaport city on the coast of northern Syria that served as a trading center and "middle-man" for the Hittite empire in Anatolia and the Egyptians from 1600–1200 B.C.E.

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## Major Biblical Events

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- ca. **1000 B.C.E.** United Israelite monarchy established—Saul, David, Solomon the first rulers, Jerusalem becomes the capital under David, and Solomon builds the temple
- ca. **940 B.C.E.** Kingdom divides into Judah in the south and Israel in the north—Jeroboam, the first king of Israel, sets up rival shrines at Dan and Bethel
- 722 B.C.E.** Israel is conquered by the Assyrian king Sargon II and its population is deported
- 587 B.C.E.** Jerusalem is destroyed along with the temple by Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, and a large percentage of the people of Judah are exiled
- 540 B.C.E.** Cyrus of Persia conquers Babylon and allows the Israelite exiles to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple

I have also employed some insights from social scientific studies of traditional societies. Anthropology, sociology, and psychology are all useful in exploring the development of ancient cultures. They help to explain the context of customs, styles, and practices that seem quite foreign to us today. Although one must be careful in drawing analogies between modern ethnographic studies and ancient peoples, this is becoming an increasingly important tool, along with archaeological discoveries, in reconstructing the world of the Bible.

Note that I separate Israelite and Jewish. This is intentional, because the religion of the Israelites (1200–550 B.C.E.) was a mixture of practices and beliefs. It should be labeled *henotheism* rather than *monotheism*. The prophets are continually haranguing these people about their idolatry and their allegiance to false gods. That implies a belief in the existence of gods other than **Yahweh**. However, the official religion of the Israelites by the time of the monarchy was Yahwism, so they had chosen to worship a particular God while accepting the idea of other gods populating the universe. This is *henotheism*. *Monotheism*, the belief in a single God, did not become a tenet of Jewish belief until

after 500 B.C.E. when the exilic experience had transformed the Israelite people into the Jewish people.

### Aids for Using This Volume

To make this volume more reader-friendly, I have omitted the scholarly apparatus common to works for specialists, such as footnotes or other forms of documentation. I have provided a select bibliography to aid in further study and as an indication of sources that I found helpful in writing this manuscript. However, the bulk of what is written comes from my own twenty years of experience of teaching the biblical story and from numerous articles and books that I have previously published.

Throughout the volume the reader will find parenthetical references to scripture inviting him or her to make comparisons, recall previously discussed topics, or make connections. This is my way of asking you to go beyond what you find on the page. Explore the text and see what riches can be found in a more careful study of its language and stories.

As an aid to seeking out particular topics or references, an index of major subjects, as well as a scripture index, appears at the end of this book. Technical terms are placed in boldface type throughout the text, and a short glossary defining these terms is provided as an aid to comprehension.

All biblical quotations are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version*. Some quotations are taken from ancient Near Eastern texts that parallel the biblical materials. References to these works are found in the Bibliography, but they are regularly cited in the body of the text as:

ANET = J. Pritchard. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3d ed. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969.

OTP = V. H. Matthews and D. C. Benjamin. *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East*, 2d ed. Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1997.

The major Near Eastern texts that I will mention are:

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## IMPORTANT NEAR EASTERN TEXTS

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### **Creation and Flood Epics:**

Memphite Hymn to Ptah (Old Kingdom Egypt, 2575–2134 B.C.E.)

Enuma Elish (Old Babylonian, ca. eighteenth century B.C.E.)

Gilgamesh Epic (Sumerian, ca. 2500 B.C.E.)

Atrahasis Epic (Babylonian, 2000 B.C.E.)

### **International Treaties:**

Treaty between Ramses II and Hattusilis III (Egyptian and Hittite, 1280 B.C.E.)

Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon (Assyria, seventh century B.C.E.)

### **Law Codes:**

Hammurabi's Code (Babylon, eighteenth century B.C.E.)

Middle Assyrian Laws (Assyria, ca. 1050 B.C.E.)

### **Historical Documents:**

Merneptah Stele (Egypt, 1208 B.C.E.)

Mesha Stele (Moab, ninth century B.C.E.)

Annals of Sennacherib (Assyria, 701 B.C.E.)

Cyrus Cylinder (Persia, 540 B.C.E.)

### **Prophetic Texts and Stories of the Gods:**

Balaam (Deir 'Alla, Jordan, ca. 700 B.C.E.)

Baal and Anat Epic (Ugarit, ca. 1600 B.C.E.)

### **Wisdom Literature:**

Aqhat Epic (Ugarit, ca. 1600 B.C.E.)

Keret Legend (Ugarit, ca. 1600 B.C.E.)

Teachings of Ptah-hotep (Egypt, ca. 2500 B.C.E.)

Teachings of Amen-em-ope (Egypt, ca. 1100 B.C.E.)

Teachings of Ankhsheshonqy (Egypt, ca. 800 B.C.E.)

Teachings of Ahiqar (Assyria, eighth century B.C.E.)

