



UNIT 1 - INTRODUCING THE OLD TESTAMENT

LESSON 10

RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENTS IN EARLY ISRAEL

The Bible is the story of God's unfolding self-revelation to man. By the end of the New Testament, revelation has reached a high point through the coming of Christ; His sacrificial death, His resurrection, and the exposition of the significance of these events through the New Testament writings. It is easy for the Christian to forget that God's revelation has been gradual. How much would we know about God if we did not have the New Testament? What have we learned so far in our study of the early books of Israel's history and faith? In this lesson we look briefly at three important subjects as they would have been known to early Israel: God, humans and sin.

1. God

Abraham received a special revelation of God, calling him to go to a new land, and promising him certain blessings. Genesis does not tell us what Abraham already knew of God (if anything), but it seems that God gradually revealed more of Himself to this man who followed in faith. Joshua's speech to Israel at Schechem, reveals that Abraham and his ancestors had "served other gods" (Joshua 24:3). In following God's call, Abraham was acknowledging Yahweh's sovereignty and protection, but he was not necessarily denying the existence of other gods.

By the time of Moses, Israel had learned more of Yahweh's power. It appears unlikely that the nation had progressed to a belief in one God so early in its history, and the law appears to be ambiguous on this point (Exodus 20:3 "no other gods exist or "don't worship other gods"?). Some writers have called Israel's faith at this point "practical monotheism" because the gods of Egypt are ignored as Yahweh delivers His people. H. K. Rowley writes: "Yahweh's will alone counted, and His power could not be challenged, while all the forces of nature were obedient to His will. He could choose for Himself what people He would. Whether other gods exist is neither affirmed nor denied. But that they mattered is implicitly denied."

Later writers in Israel affirmed monotheism very strongly and poured scorn on the worship of other nations (e.g., Isaiah 40:18-20). But the later period is outside the scope of our present study.

God's Holiness

Holiness denotes God's separateness from creation, and elevation above it (Exodus 15:11). The book of Leviticus is really an outcome of God's holiness, and a set of directions that Israel, as God's people, might also be holy (Leviticus 19:2; 20:7,8; 21:6-8 etc).

God's Covenant Love

The successive covenants (see Lesson 6) are a sign of God's love for humanity. His grace is seen in that He makes a covenant. Allied with this is God's mercy. God's longsuffering is also seen in this relationship.



The Names of God

There are three major names for God in the Old Testament:

- a. Elohim is a plural word meaning "gods" but is used in Hebrew with a singular word to mean "God". It means the One who completely possesses all the divine attributes.
- b. Adonai describes God as "Sovereign" or "Lord", pointing to His divine authority and executive rule.
- c. There is also the personal name Yahweh (or Jehovah).

To avoid using this divine name itself (out of a supposed reverence), a word meaning "Lord" was substituted in public reading. Much is lost in Bible reading if we forget to look beyond the substitute word to the personal, intimate name of God himself.

By telling His name to His people, God intended to reveal to them His inmost character. As a word, Yahweh is related to the Hebrew verb "to be". This verb goes beyond "to exist", it means rather, "to be actively present". Yahweh (Exodus 3:13-16) is the God actively present with his people - but the time He chose to make this known was when they, as doomed slaves, needed to be redeemed.

In other words, the idea of "active presence" tells us that God is with us, but not what sort of God he is. In choosing the time of the Exodus to reveal the meaning of His name, He identifies Himself as the God who saves His people and overthrows His adversaries.

In many places, additional names are used of God, and they are meant to reveal more of God's character.

E1 Shadday. Shadday probably means "mountain" and is used symbolically of changelessness and enduring strength, contrasted to the helplessness of humans (e.g., Genesis 17:1f; 28:3f; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3; 49:25).

E1 Elyon. "God most high" (Genesis 14:18).

El Roi. "God of seeing" (Genesis 16:13).

El Olam. "The Everlasting God" (Genesis 21:33).

E1 Elohe Yisrael. "God the God of Israel" (Genesis 33:20).



2. Humans (Mankind)

Briefly, three important things may be said about humans:

- a) They are capable of receiving God's revelation. This is exemplified by Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Joshua and the Judges.
- b) They are capable of obeying or disobeying God's commands. The laws given by Moses show this, and special emphasis is given to people's choice between obedience and disobedience in the book of Deuteronomy.
- c) They can enjoy a special relationship with God. This is shown by the covenant, originally a relationship between people, but used to explain the relationship between God and those people who are faithful to the covenant.

Humans are thus quite different from the animal world around them. They have the unique quality of God-consciousness.

3. Sin (and Forgiveness)

Three simple statements can be made about sin:

- a) It is common to all people. The numerous laws given to Israel, in order that sin might be purged and forgiven, imply that sin is the common experience of humans. These laws anticipate the New Testament teaching (Romans 3:23).
- b) It is abhorrent to God, for it is an offence against God's holiness (Leviticus 22:31~33). The heavy penalties prescribed for offences, show how seriously sin was viewed by God and the people of Israel.
- c) God requires sacrifice for people's atonement. See the first five chapters of Leviticus for some of the offerings. The teaching is most forcefully presented in Leviticus 16, where instructions are given about the Day of Atonement. The priest takes two goats, but kills only one. The other has Israel's sins confessed over it and bearing their sins is allowed to escape into the wilderness.

We can see in all these ceremonies, the preparation for the New Testament teaching of the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).



QUESTIONS

Question 1:

Briefly describe how people's understanding of God gradually increased.

Question 2:

How is God's love, grace, mercy and longsuffering shown in the covenants?

Question 3:

What are the 3 main names for God in the Old Testament, and what do they mean?

Question 4:

Explain from this lesson, why and how humans are quite different to the animals around them?

Question 5:

How do we know sin is abhorrent to God? What could be done about it in Old Testament times?

QUESTION FOR GROUP STUDY

How far short of New Testament teaching about God, humans and sin are the teachings of these early Old Testament books?