



River Were Benefice

Grappling with the Old Testament

A Lent Study Programme for 2023

being challenged today
by the voices from
our shared history

Lent 2023

Resource and aid to reflection



introduction

Why study the Old Testament?

For many in church the Old Testament seems an "optional extra". To more and more of us it appears to have only marginal importance for our understanding of what it means to be a Christian.

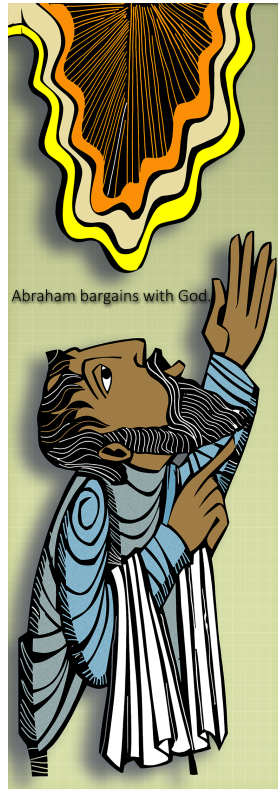
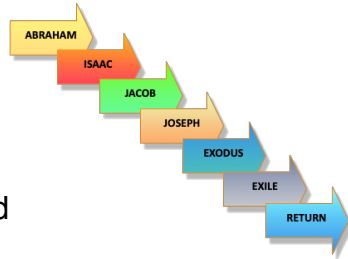
Each new generation seems less familiar with "the story" - the great sagas, myths and narratives; the dynamic personalities and fundamental concepts and insights that are integral to an appreciation of our faith story.

To the informed reader, the Old Testament opens up a multitude of channels of enquiry and of interpretation. These can deepen and enrich our faith.

In these lenten sessions some will be challenged and others surprised. In the end everyone should be more confident in recognising how the Old Testament can be, and should be a part of our Christian understanding and consciousness.

The Old Testament is full of profound insights reflecting more than a thousand years of Hebrew and Jewish history. In it we encounter a peoples' religious and cultural growth. From wandering tribal groupings, through a semi-theocratic monarchy to the transformation into a people rooted in a faith,

Grappling with the Old Testament

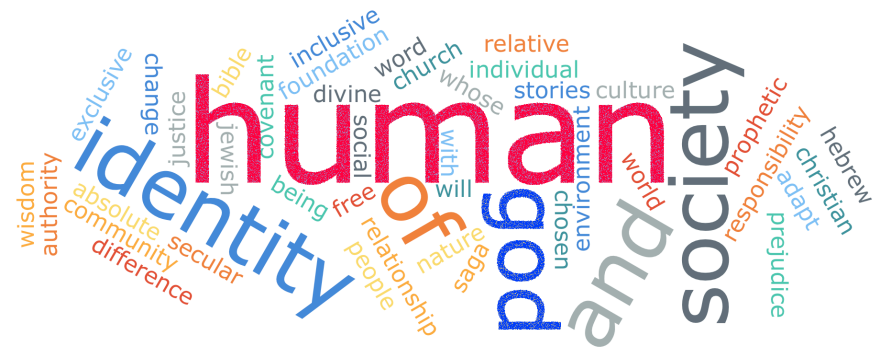


largely freed from a specific geographical location and destined to be one of the world's great religious traditions.

The Old Testament opens to us the fullest range of human frailties and the need felt by the Hebrews to continue the spiritual quest to discover who we are in the face of God?

This resource

This resource booklet relates to the weekly lenten sessions and provides further material for reading and reflection.



contents

Lent 2023

Session 1

Introduction	1
Session One: Our place in the World.....	5
Further reading	11
Acknowledgements	11

our place in the world

what are human beings that you spare a thought for them,
or the child of Adam that you care for him?

Yet you have made him little less than a god,
you have crowned him with glory and beauty,
made him lord of the works of your hands,
put all things under his feet....

From Psalm 8, New Jerusalem Bible Translation

The Foundation Myths of the Old Testament

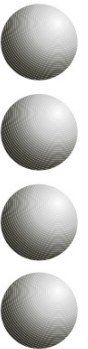
*Meaning through stories with their origins in
a pre-literate, pre-settled society.*

Genesis chapters 1 to 11

In the opening chapters of Genesis are the age-old
(strongly edited) stories of the origins of the world, of
mankind and of the human situation. This is not
surprising. Found in all cultures are accounts in
narrative form of the “questions” of origin and creation.
The technical term for such stories is '**myth**'.

We must not understand the word “myth” to mean “fairy
tale” or “children’s story”. Here we use “myth” as a
technical term for a literary and religious form.

Elsewhere this form is found in oral or written form in
such well-known collections as;



myth

- ◆ The Australian Aborigine “Dreamtime” stories.
- ◆ The tales of the Norse gods and heroes of Scandinavia.
- ◆ Classical Greek mythology

These stories may come in such forms as poetry, prose, song, drama and choral speaking. Often more trivial matters appear in these stories, but the broad concerns of religious myth are pointed at questions about;

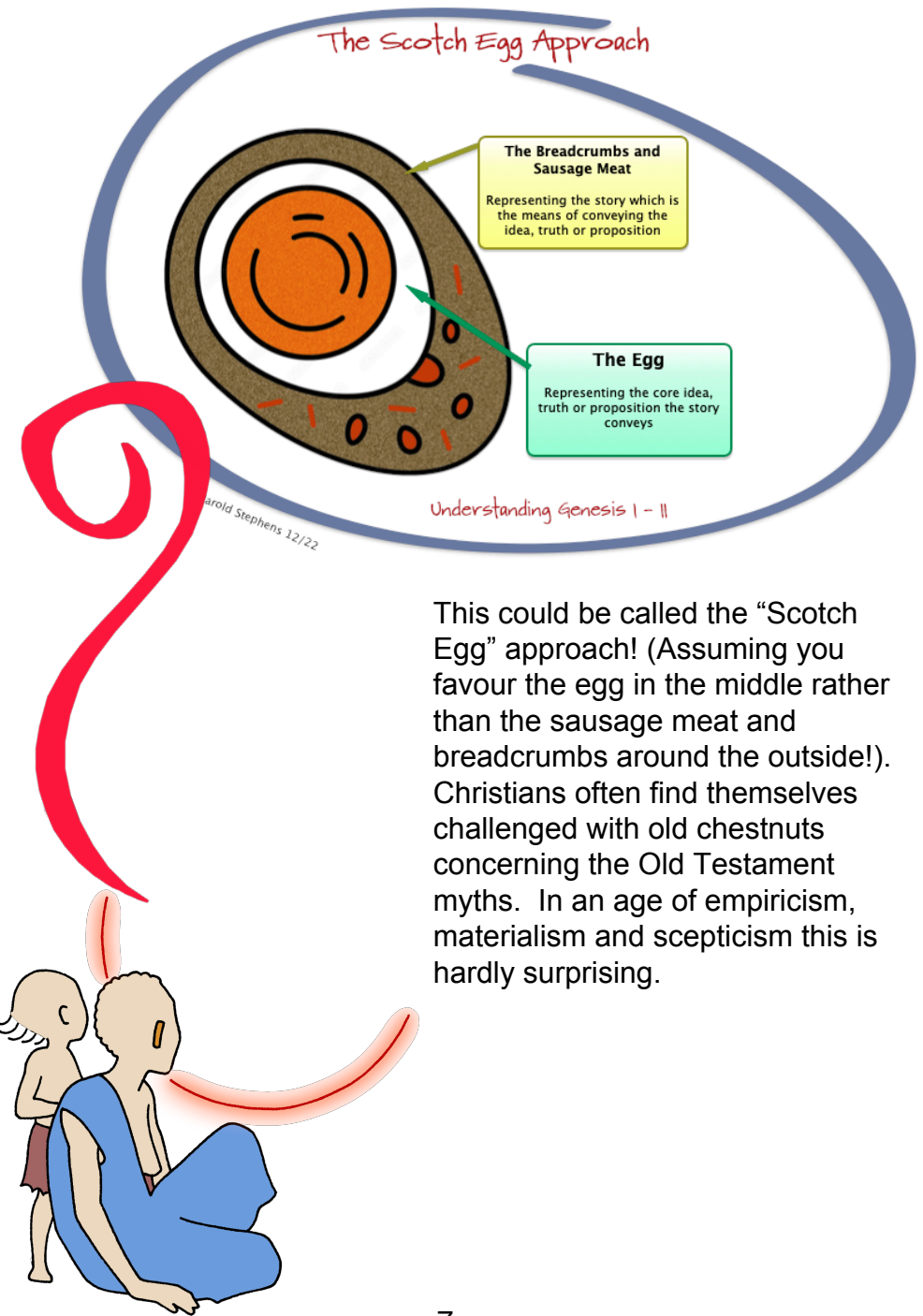
- ◆ Our existence
- ◆ Our experiences of good and evil
- ◆ Our relationship with and responsibilities to the natural world.
- ◆ Our relationship with and the nature of the Divine.
- ◆ Our relationships with others.
- ◆ Other mysteries and puzzles about existence.

Such myths arose from ancient oral traditions and authentically represent the continuing experiences of the developing communities from which they sprang.

Oral tradition is an effective and efficient means of transmission used in traditional societies. Such texts have genuinely ancient roots even if reshaped in part by later editing.

Genesis 1-11

One way to make sense of myth in the Old Testament (*Genesis 1 – 11*) is to try to go to the heart of the matter. For a Jewish reader the key question about the stories in this collection is not “Did it happen like that?” but “What light does this shed on the meaning of my existence?”, or, “To what truth or truths does this story direct me?”.



Within the Churches there can be a confusion and an inconsistency of understandings and attitudes of how to respond to these challenges.

Here let us consider one of the most ancient religious stories preserved in the Old Testament. A story passed down orally through generations before it was finally to be enshrined in the written word.

To Jews the point of this story (Adam and Eve etc.) is not primarily about historical evidence. The first priority is neither about asserting the existence of Adam and Eve nor of the Garden of Eden. Rather, and in common with so many other examples of this type of religious narrative, this story addresses a key question about human experience and existence.

Refer to Genesis 2 verse 4 to 3 verse 24

Consider this....

"..... how can you believe all? It's all a load of old rubbish. How can you believe in things like Adam and Eve, the Garden of Eden and all that, when we all know about evolution? It's all made up like fairy stories....."

how to respond?

The rôle of myth in making sense of our world is evident within the Bible as it is in all ancient societies. There is a crucial rôle for narrative and imagery in reflecting human spiritual experience and insight.

For discussion and reflection

1. Matters of free will, human identity and moral responsibility

The account of the 'Fall of humankind' in the Bible (Genesis 3) represents the debate within human society about what it means to be human – collectively as well as individually. To be morally responsible, we are told, is to be aware and in control of our actions and able to choose. But do we have free will? Are we to be held responsible for the past failings of humanity (collectively or individually?).

'The woman saw that the tree was good to eat and pleasing to the eye, and that it was desirable for the wisdom that it could give. So she took some of its fruit and ate it. She also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened...'

(Genesis 3:6 & 7, Revised New Jerusalem Bible translation)

2. Whose world is it?

- i. *What of humanity's relationship with the natural world, its resources and the current environmental crises?*
- ii. *human responsibilities for and relationship with the natural world.*



whose world is it?

'God said, 'Let us make man in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves, and let them be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven, the cattle, all the wild animals and all the creatures that creep along the earth.'

God created man in the image of himself,
in the image of God he created him,
male and female he created them.

God blessed them, saying to them, 'Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it....'

Genesis 1:26 – 28. Revised New Jerusalem Bible translation

Further reading

The following is not an exhaustive or comprehensive list. It may help the reader to begin to find more to read and discover.

SCM Study Guide to the Old Testament by John Holdsworth. © John Holdsworth 2005. Published by SCM - Canterbury Press. ISBN 978 0 334 02985 4

A History of the Bible (The Book and its Faiths) by Prof. John Barton (Especially Part One). © John Barton 2019. Published by Penguin Books. ISBN 978 0 141 97850 5.

Reading the Old Testament, An Introduction by Lawrence Boadt © 1984 Paulist Press. ISBN 0 8091 2631 1

How to Read the Old Testament by Etienne Charpentier. Translation © 1981 John Bowden. Published in English by SCM Press 1982. ISBN 0 334 02057 3.

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