



*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

Part Two



# Session 2

## Freedom and Cohesion in a Fractured World

The great sagas of the Old Testament narratives

### 1. The Historical Narratives of the Old Testament.

Critical study of the historical narratives show a marked difference between the book of Deuteronomy and what precedes it. There are, however, marked similarities in thought between Deuteronomy and what follows it. Thus arose a clear analysis of the narratives in the Old Testament which shows the following 'sets' of history;

- a. The narrative block contained in the **first 4 books of the Old Testament** (the so-called "Tetrateuch")
- b. **The Deuteronomic History** – a survey of the period from the Exodus to the Exile. Deuteronomy is a work of Law followed by a narrative rooted in its perceptions and standpoint. (*Deuteronomy, Judges, Kings*)
- c. **The Chronicler's History**, with its post-Exilic and priestly in outlook. (*Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah*)

Both the Deuteronomic History and the Chronicler's History reached their final forms after 500 BC and reflect the ideas of a post-exilic community.

### 1. The Early Sagas of the Covenant People

The ancient stories begin with Abraham and his departure from Ur (*Genesis 12*);

<sup>1</sup>Yahweh said to Abram, "Leave your country, your kindred and your father's house for a country which I shall show you; and I shall make you a great nation, I shall bless you and make your name famous; you are to be a blessing!

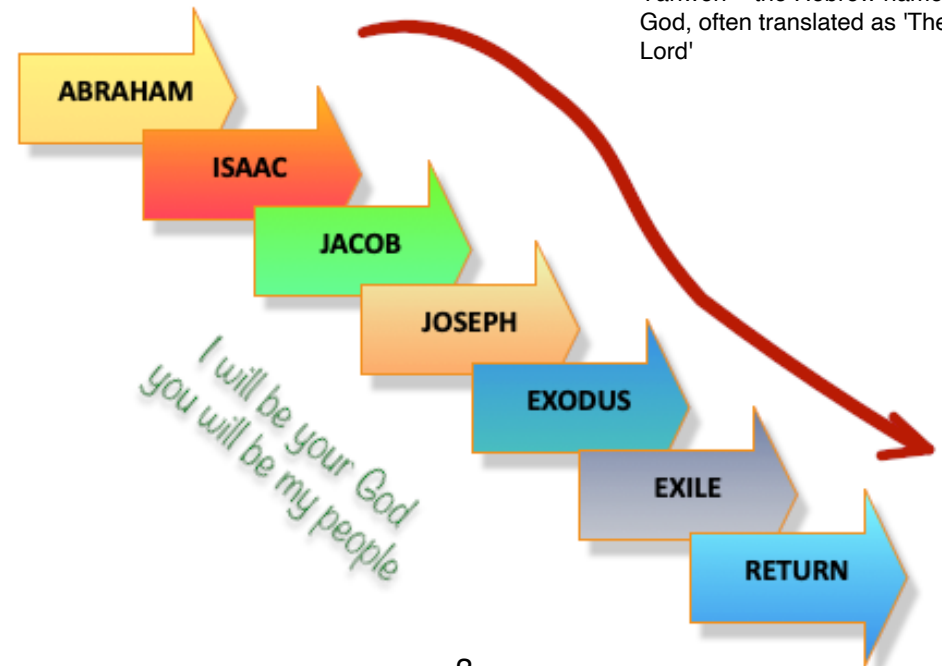
"I shall bless those who bless you, and shall curse those who curse you, and all clans on earth will bless themselves by you."

<sup>4</sup>So Abram went as Yahweh told him...

New Jerusalem Bible translation

saga

Yahweh = the Hebrew name for God, often translated as 'The Lord'



the ancient stories  
are to be lived out

These foundation stories end with the sight of the Promised Land by the dying Moses. They are part of the DNA of Judaism and also treasured in the Christian Church. Some have drawn a comparison between these stories and those of the Norse Sagas. Both are ancient stories, rooted in kernels of remembered history and conflated or concertinaed into a connected saga. This sets out the foundations of the people. The biblical Sagas were part of the oral tradition of the Hebrew people.

Central to the Old Testament narratives and thinking is **the Exodus** story. In this, the story of the struggle and liberation of the Hebrews from Israel, resides the single most important, defining event for the Jewish people.

Consider how the Exodus event is brought to bear on the understanding of the period of Exile in Babylon, the return and the subsequent history of Judaism in Europe and the establishment of the modern state of Israel.

Saga



## For discussion and reflection

**'Freedom in the Promised Land'** – a much used (and abused?) phrase.

- i. Consider how it underpinned the calls for justice in the USA at the time of the leadership of Martin Luther King, in South Africa in the struggle against Apartheid and, more recently, in the 'Black Lives Matter' movement internationally.
- ii. What of the establishment of the modern state of Israel in 1948?

At Pesach (the Jewish Passover festival) the story of the Exodus is re-lived in families. The story is retold and acted out in parts by children. Symbolic foods are shared representing elements in the story. The communal nature of this festival is central to its meaning (*YouTube can provide examples of this*)



What about our celebration of the Eucharist each Sunday? Is this of the same 'order' – are we 'remembrancing'? If so, where is our Promised Land of freedom?

# 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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