Old Testament History Summary

Beginning about Genesis 12 the Old Testament [O.T.] tells the story of the people of Israel and God’s relationship with them. It begins with Abram, a wandering nomad, a shepherd in Mesopotamia [the area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers]. Yahweh\* calls Abram, changes his name to Abraham, and directs him to go to the area of Palestine [Canaan]. Yahweh choses to unconditionally bless Abraham’s descendants with the land of Canaan as an integral part of the exclusive relationship between Yahweh and His chosen people, Abraham’s descendants. Yahweh unconditionally promises to make Abraham’s descendants, called Israel, a great nation and He also plans to bless all people; to bless all nations, through the Israelites. Genesis 12 to 50 follows incidents in the lives of four generations: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. At the end of Genesis, the Israelites are living in Egypt. In time they become Egyptian slaves. Led by Moses, they are eventually saved by Yahweh’s miracle, the Exodus, [their foundation story] and are led out slavery and out of Egypt toward Mount Sinai and toward the Promised Land.

At Mount Sinai the descendants of Abraham are given the promise that if they worship Yahweh alone, they will be blessed. If they choose to worship other gods, Yahweh will punish them. The Israelites agree to worship Yahweh alone. Yahweh gives them a guide [the Mosaic Law and the 10 commandments also called the Torah] to live by in their exclusive relationship with Yahweh. The Israelites agree to obey this Law. Unfortunately, they continue to choose the worship of other gods over worshiping only Yahweh. As a punishment for their apostasy, all those descendants of Abraham who left Egypt with Moses during the Exodus miracle are to die in the wilderness. Those who left Egypt and broke their covenant with Yahweh by worshiping other gods are to wander as a people in the wilderness for 40 years and die until a ‘new’ generation of Abraham’s descendants, their children, are allowed by Yahweh to enter into and inherit the Promised Land of Canaan.

Upon entering Canaan, Abraham’s descendants, Israel becomes a loose confederation of 12 tribes living in a new land that they did not know. A cycle of apostasy followed by punishment by Yahweh in the form of being oppressed or conquered by a neighbor enemy occurs. This is followed by Israel’s cry to Yahweh for salvation. Yahweh responds by sending a faithful leader to save Israel called a judge. Led by this charismatic leader, the people repent and are restored to wholeness and sole worship of Yahweh until that judge dies. When that judge dies, the people again fall away, worship other gods, and the cycle begins again.

In time, fearing annihilation and extinction by outside enemy neighbor nations, the people of Israel ask Yahweh for an earthly King. Under Kings Saul, David, and especially Solomon, the descendants of Abraham become a free united nation under Yahweh called Israel. The promises made to Abraham are fulfilled! The United Monarchy becomes the most powerful and most influential nation in the region. Because of Yahweh’s unconditional love for David, Yahweh makes the unconditional promise that David’s lineage would last forever. This eventually becomes one of the most important promises to the Jewish people. David’s son, Solomon, ruled Israel during their most prosperous and peaceful time. The Temple in Jerusalem was built by Solomon and central worship of Yahweh was established in this period. This was when their identity as a nation, as a people under Yahweh, was most pure and most prosperous. When Solomon dies, internal rivalries and divisions result in the splitting of the United Monarchy into a Northern kingdom, Israel, and a Southern kingdom, Judah.

Following the division of Israel the prophets, Yahweh’s chosen messengers to His people, become active. With the Israelites and their Kings repeatedly engaging in apostasy and wandering away from their promises to Yahweh, He consistently sends numerous prophets to call Israel back to a right relationship with Him. The O.T. records these prophets’ messages and Israel’s response to Yahweh’s messenger prophets.

Overtime each kingdom is subsequently conquered; Israel by Assyria in 722 BCE and Judah by Babylon in 586 BCE. The Temple in Jerusalem was also destroyed in 586 BCE. The descendants of Abraham were now in exile; either in a foreign nation, Babylon, Egypt, etc. or under foreign occupation in their homeland of Judah. When released from exile they were still in occupied territory and divided amongst themselves. Were the true chosen people of Yahweh those who were in exile in Babylon or those who stayed in occupied Judah? They were a divided people living in many locations but linked by heritage to Abraham and Moses.

Throughout Israel’s history, Yahweh sent His messages to His people through the prophets – priests, judges, and other faithful leaders. Yahweh called again and again to Israel to keep His covenant. Throughout Israel’s history the O.T. records their repeated failures to live up to their promises to Yahweh.

Scholars say here, during the exile and immediately following the exile, is where the story of Israel ends and the history of Judaism begins. At this time the name Israel is no longer used and the descendants of Abraham call themselves Jews from Judah. Living under foreign influence in many different locations, and so not to be assimilated into a foreign culture, the Jews began to redefine their identity. No longer will they be defined by geography. They will be defined as Yahweh’s chosen people. They become a religious community more than a nation under an earthly King. They realized Yahweh was the author of these events that affected them just as the prophets had proclaimed. For example, Ezekiel preached that Yahweh had gone into exile in Babylon with His people. The Jews in exile realized Yahweh could be worshiped anywhere – apart from Temple, Land, Priest, or Monarch. They remembered Yahweh’s promise to Abraham their founding father, Yahweh’s Exodus miracle [their foundation story], Yahweh’s giving them the Law through Moses, and Yahweh’s promise of a great nation in their own land that was fulfilled under David/Solomon. They remembered Yahweh, the God of Abraham, as their God. They decide the Sabbath can be a time to worship only Yahweh. They establish synagogues as the place to worship Yahweh alone and the place to read, study, and commit themselves to Mosaic Law, the Torah, since the Temple is so far away. Through worship of Yahweh and their commitment to follow the Mosaic Law, the Jews can reclaim their blessings from Yahweh. The Jews began to focus on themselves as religious community bound to Yahweh, their only God, and bound to each other through Mosaic Law and their ancestral relationship with Abraham.

Through the post exilic prophets, the Jews also began to focus on – look for fulfillment of -- the unconditional promise Yahweh made to David for the Davidic dynasty to continue forever. This is interpreted as Yahweh will send a Messiah, a deliverer, to return Israel to the glory and majesty of the reign of David/Solomon. Understanding their predicament in exile, their lack of power as a nation post exile, it is easy to see why the Jews longed for a military leader, an earthly King, a deliverer, to bring back to them the glorious days enjoyed by their ancestors during the reign of David [and Solomon].

Most of the O.T. was written, compiled and edited during the Babylonian exile after 586 BCE although final editing occurred probably in the 1st or 2nd century BCE.

\*Yahweh – In ancient Bible transcriptions the sacred and personal name for the Jewish God was written YHWH; pronounced Yahweh. The ancient Hebrews believed they could not say God’s name out loud because it was sacred. In Genesis, 2 names for God are used; Elohim and Lord [Yahweh]. It was not until the time of Moses -- Ex. 6:2-3 and Ex. 3:13-15 -- that the name Yahweh was revealed. My sources used Yahweh to refer to the God of Abraham, Moses, and David. I will use this also.

John V. Hanson – 2015 April