

AN OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY:

From Abraham to Modern Israel

Lesson 2

The purpose of this OT survey is as a means to connect over 10 years-worth of dots as we made our way from Creation to the end of the Old Testament with Ezra and Nehemiah, and the return of the Jews from their Babylonian exile. We began our survey of the Old Testament with the father of the Hebrew people, Abraham. This is because except for the first 10 chapters of Genesis, the entire Bible, OT and NT, Genesis through Revelation, tells us about God and about the Kingdom of God, through the history of the Hebrews.

Last week we followed Abraham from the time when the Lord convinced him to leave his family and his homeland (Mesopotamia) to travel to a new, unnamed place that God would establish as a land set apart for Abraham's descendants. God established a covenant between He and Avraham that promised Abraham a new homeland and that his descendants would be a countless multitude. However, Abraham was already an elderly man and his equally elderly wife had always been barren. So Abraham had no children to carry on his bloodlines, let alone to provide a catalyst for the millions of descendants inherent to the promises contained in that covenant with God. Thus being aware of this dual dilemma, Sarah offered to give Abraham her maidservant to provide him a son; and that is what happened. Ishmael was born and Abraham was thrilled.

However sometime later God told Abraham that this wouldn't do; rather the son of Abraham who would carry on this covenant promise would come from his legal wife Sarah. Sure enough Sarah became pregnant and produced a boy child, Isaac. But now Sarah was not happy that her son was second fiddle to her maidservant Hagar's son Ishmael so she demanded that Abraham banish them; he complied.

In the midst of this, the Lord told Abraham that Isaac was to be considered as Abraham's firstborn son and that Ishmael was to be sent away; Abraham was devastated by this demand. However, the Lord said that he would assure that Ishmael would prosper and produce a myriad of descendants. Ishmael became the father of the Arab races as we know them today.

As our lesson came to a close last week, we found that Abraham's son Isaac was now grown, about 30 or so years of age, and was provided with a wife, Rebecca, because the production of children was at the center of the Abrahamic Covenant. Rivka was actually a member of Abraham's extended family back up in Mesopotamia. Immediately after she was brought to Canaan by Abraham's faithful servant, she and Isaac were wed. Shortly thereafter the first Hebrew, Abraham, died and was buried next to his wife Sarah in a burial cave in the area of Hebron.

ANCIENT NAMES OF GOD

Before we proceed with our survey, a discussion of the many "names" of God is appropriate because in the Bible we encounter a variety. It is valuable for every Bible and history student to grasp that the Israelite culture sprang from Mesopotamian roots; the same roots Avraham was born into. It would in no way be incorrect to characterize Noah, the 2nd Adam who repopulated the world, and his family as the first Mesopotamians (after the Flood, of course).

Mesopotamian culture, or better, the many Mesopotamian cultures, was, as were all other ancient civilizations ever scientifically scrutinized, based on a worship of multiple gods. In the first few generations following Noah (*Noah*) mankind again perverted his relationship with God and quickly abandoned the truth that Noah taught: that there is only one God. As I pointed out earlier, it can be traced to Nimrod, the builder of the infamous Tower of Babel, as the person responsible for bringing together the various notions of paganism that had grown in fallen man's mind, and establishing a religion.

Nimrod, the black-skinned son of Cush (we now call this nationality Ethiopian), was a grandson of Ham. Recall that it was Ham who disgraced his father Noach (*Noah*), and it was Noach's curse upon Ham that was destined to produce descendants who would war against the descendants of Noach's other two sons, Shem and Japheth. Nimrod gathered his subjects

together, built a tower to reach up to his distorted view of Heaven, and declared war against God. The result of Nimrod's religion was the notion of a spiritual universe that contained many gods, arranged in a hierarchy, with "one god that was above all the other gods". And the title the Mesopotamians gave this "highest god" was El. This was not monotheism; rather, it was that there was a god, the "El", that was preeminent over the other gods.

As the various clans that had once emanated from Noah spread out and grew into tribes, nations, and people groups throughout Mesopotamia, the Middle East, and North Africa, and beyond, they took with them a fairly common grouping of gods. Although the names of these gods and the exact hierarchy would incorporate minor differences from culture to culture and language to language, they all represented the same basic "Mystery Babylon" system developed by Nimrod, and advanced by his wife Semiramis after his death.

The Canaanite gods that Avraham, and later the Israelites, encountered in the land of Canaan were simply a continuation and variation of the Nimrod-Mesopotamian gods. How is that? Because the founder of the land of Canaan, Noah's grandson Canaan, was himself born a Mesopotamian, was raised in that system and he took it with him when he migrated. When God sent Avraham into the land of Canaan, he would not have found the Canaanite religious structure at all foreign to him; rather, he would have been well familiar with it. It must be remembered that Avraham's father was a merchant of idols; that is, a maker and seller of carved figurines representing the various gods of the Mesopotamian cultures.

When Avraham ratified God's covenant with Him and became the first Hebrew, Avraham's clan and offspring did not instantly swear-off all the gods of old in exchange for the true One God of the universe. Almighty God would have become simply another god in their hierarchy of gods, even if He was now the "El".....the **highest** god above all the other gods. In fact, we get constant reminders in the Bible that the Hebrews forever struggled with idolatry; that is, the worship of these other gods, other Ba'als from their past. Let us not make the mistake of thinking that they discarded one for the other. Rather, they accepted some hybrid mixture of God Almighty with other lesser gods. If you'll keep this in mind when reading the Old Testament, you'll have a more complete context for understanding the thought processes of the Hebrews in those days.

From among the scores of examples of Hebrews worshipping other gods can be found familiar

Biblical stories such as Rachael stealing her father's household deities when her husband Jacob fled from Laban; of a brazen serpent god being worshipped in the Holy Temple of Jerusalem prior to 700 BC; and of Solomon who built the Temple and yet allowed his hundreds of foreign wives and concubines to worship the pagan gods from whatever nation they had come. Even more, Solomon permitted altars of sacrifice to these gods to be built right next to Israelite holy sites, including the Mount of Olives, and he actually participated in some of the cult practices (for this he was constantly criticized by tribal elders and prophets). Nearly all the kings and monarchs that followed Solomon did essentially the same thing. And, well before Solomon, when Moses was leading the Israelites out of Egypt, how could we forget the infamous Golden Calf incident as a prime example of people who worshipped the God of Israel but instinctively held onto and sought other gods as the occasion arose. The Golden Calf the Israelites rebelliously constructed at Mt. Sinai was simply a high Egyptian deity called the Apis Bull, which they were so familiar with as a result of their long captivity in Egypt.

Throughout the Bible we have prophets and the writers of the Holy Scriptures finding cause for anger and complaint against the Hebrews for their idolatry; for their insistence on accepting the existence of scores of false gods in addition to the Lord God Almighty. This is proof in and of itself of the prevalence of multiple-god worship by the Israelites, even at the same time they were pledging their allegiance to Yahweh, Jehovah, Yehoveh, El, God Almighty. Let us not be too harsh in our judgment upon them: the Hebrews represented the first organized monotheistic religion, and that was a radical notion in and of itself. The very concept of One God, and only one god, ran against the grain of all human beings' natures.

The Bible indicates that God's personal name is formed from the Hebrew letters YHWH or in some dialects YHVH (yud-heh-vav-heh). It is critical to grasp that most other words for God were, up to then, not NAMES, but fairly impersonal titles and characteristics.

Now an interesting transformation did happen that we need to pay attention to; and as we see this transformation happen in the Bible it can get a little confusing. The Canaanite word "El" took on a double meaning; not only did it indicate the highest god of the pantheon of gods; it was now considered the formal NAME for the highest god. In other words, it's not unlike in our culture where we can discuss the spiritual realm and speak of **a** god, as in a generic god or one god among many (little "g" god), and at the same time refer to the Judeo-Christian god as "God", making this god's formal **name** to be "God". We see this same concept reflected in several places in the early Scriptures such as when Jacob named a particular place "El Beit-el". Here we see this peculiarity where the word "el" is repeated. That is because el is being used as BOTH a proper name and a simple noun. So, while a literal translation would be "God,

House of God”.....its proper MEANING is “House of the god, El”.

Later in the Bible, El would drop its Canaanite origins and become the exclusively Hebrew YHWH. Theologians refer to these four letters representing God’s name, YHWH, as the Tetragrammaton. Now, of course Y-H-W-H (or Y-H-V-H) are English alphabet characters, which come from a fairly modern alphabet. In ancient Hebrew, these letters as originally written by the finger of God on those stone slabs were the Hebrew characters Yud-Heh-Vav-Heh (or in another Hebrew dialect Yud-Heh-Waw-Heh). Since whether expressed in English or Hebrew these letters/characters are all consonants, we have had to speculate at the vowel sounds in order that it could be a spoken word. The commonly held pronunciation is Yah-Way or Yah-Vey. This was later English-ized into the word “Jehovah” that we commonly use as the name of God in Christendom.

A long time later, about 500 BC, following the Babylonian Exile of the Jewish people (Babylon was in Mesopotamia), we find that the Jews began using the title “El-ohim” whenever referring to God, or whenever the four letters “YHWH” were encountered in the Scriptures. It is believed that “El-ohim” was used because it was a commonly used word throughout the Middle East region simply meaning “God” or “the God”, and likely was borrowed from the Babylonian culture the Jews were exiled into (remember, El was a native Mesopotamian word). It is interesting that, in reality, the term El-ohim is plural. So, in modern English we would be correct is translating El-ohim to Gods (plural). However, we would miss the point because the plural did not always mean “more than one” in Hebrew word structure. It would, as in the case of El-ohim, simply indicate preeminence or greatness.

We see many Hebrew titles (not names) of God beginning with the prefix “El”: El-Roi (God sees me), El-Shaddai, El-Elyon (God most high), and many more. This is unmistakably a result of continuing Mesopotamian influence. *Titles* of the God of Israel that revolved around the concept of “El”, the highest god of all gods, would certainly have been more understandable to the world at large at that time than the actual *name* of God: the exclusively Hebrew, and nearly unpronounceable, “YHWH”.

By the time of Alexander the Great, as the Greco-Roman era dawned (around 300 BC), we find a taboo developing among the Jews against speaking the name of God (YHWH) out loud; this taboo still exists today among religious Jews. It was probably a protective reaction due to

the mystical theatre of the Greek gods suddenly being introduced into the Jewish culture, challenging the established influence of the ancient (and familiar) pantheon of Mesopotamian gods. Therefore, from about the 3rd century BC on, we begin to see the usage of a new word for the God of Israel: Adonai. But, as always, Adonai is not a NAME, but rather is a title.

Often it is mistakenly taught that Adonai is a Greek word, since it appeared in the Greco-Roman era; not so. Adonai is a Hebrew word, and its root word is “Adon” means “Lord” or “Master”. The addition of the suffix “ai” makes the word plural. However, unlike Elohim, which although is technically a plural form, actually it is used to denote greatness, the “ai” at the end of Adonai is indeed plural and means more than one. This is not multiple god worship; rather it introduces the concept that although there is but One God, He manifests Himself in more than one form. This is borne out in the writings of the Rabbis in the Mishnah, and this concept found its way, no doubt, into the Christian concept of the Trinity.

So, from around 300 B.C. forward whenever Jews wanted to refer to God they would use various terms including “El-ohim” meaning “God”, or they used the term “Ha-Shem” meaning “The Name”, or they used the term “Adonai”, meaning “My Lord” or “My Master”, and a few others. They would do this even when reading Scripture and encountering the Hebrew letters YHWH. So they ceased saying God’s formal name and exactly how to pronounce it was lost.

The early gentile Church fathers didn’t share this taboo with the Jews about avoiding saying (or writing) God’s name and, in their desire to distance themselves from Judaism, began to once again use God’s actual name: Yahweh or Yehoveh. Yehoveh (which is how I think it was pronounced) was later English-ized into the word “Jehovah” that is commonly used in the Church today when referring to God’s name. Jehovah became predominant in the Church and the usage of other and older names and titles all but disappeared.

Starting in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the ancient Hebrew terms such as “Adonai”, “Elohim”, “Ha-Shem”, and “Yahweh” or “Yehoveh” begin to find their way back into the writings of Christian Theologians. The reason for this is twofold: 1st, because each of these Hebrew terms has subtle but different meanings, our current better understanding of Hebrew and Greek texts has allowed us to use the word that more precisely fits with the context. And 2nd, there has been a recognition that our early Church fathers intentionally fostered an anti-Semitic attitude by substituting Greek, Latin, and English words and phrases for the more

straightforward (and well understood) Hebrew original.

After this long explanation about the evolving use of God's name here is the important bottom line that we should understand: more than 90% of the time that we encounter one of the titles of God in Holy Scripture.....Lord, God, or whatever.....the original Hebrew word in the Bible is actually YHWH, God's formal name. Let me say that in a different way: more than 9 out of 10 times that our English Bibles use the words Lord or God, the original Hebrew is actually Yehoveh. God's actual formal name is used over 6000 times in the original Hebrew of the Old Testament, but our modern translations reduce the use to but a handful of times. Especially because in Christianity the word Lord is virtually synonymous with the word Christ, when we read the OT too often when we run across the word Lord we automatically take that to be referring to Jesus. But when we find that the Father's name YHWH is actually what is written there, it changes the entire dynamic and meaning, doesn't it?

Let's move on with the progress of the Hebrew people in the form of Abraham's son, Isaac.

YITZ'CHAK (ISAAC)

The Bible doesn't tell us much about **Yitz'chak** (*Isaac*). He wanders around some, but not nearly to the extent of his father **Avraham** (*Abraham*). His wandering is not as an aimless person; rather it was that he was an owner of flocks and herds that needed fresh pasture lands on a regular basis. He appears to have done well for himself, inheriting his father's wealth [**Gen. 25, 26, 27, 28**]. God appears to **Yitz'chak** (*Isaac*), as He did to his father, and gives him the same promise about fathering many nations, thus alleviating any doubt that Isaac would carry on the line of the covenant promise. His wife Rivkah (*Rebecca*) gives him twin sons, **Esav** (*Esau*) and **Ya'acov** (*Jacob*). **Esav**, being the first one out of the birth canal, was the rightful heir to his father's wealth and authority. But, years later, in what the Bible describes as a casual and impulsive transaction, Esav (*Esau*) sells his birthright to Ya'acov (*Jacob*) for the princely sum of a bowl of lentil soup. Actually, selling a birthright was a somewhat common practice.

We fast forward. Yitz'chak (*Isaac*), now about 135 years old and blind and knowing that his death is near, decides its time to give the customary blessing to the firstborn of his twin boys, who is **Esav** (*Esau*) (although they were twins, Esau exited the birth canal first). The effect of this blessing is to validate that son's right to the family's wealth and to inherit the father's authority. Yitz'chak (*Isaac*) is unaware of Esau's dumb deal in selling his firstborn birthright to **Ya'acov** (*Jacob*); and Esav (*Esau*) intends to keep it that way. When Yitz'chak (*Isaac*) instructs Esav (*Esau*) to go hunting and get him some fresh meat for the blessing, his brother Ya'acov (*Jacob*) and mother Rivkah (*Rebecca*) devise a cunning plan. The name Jacob turned out to be prophetic; for, in Hebrew it means heel catcher (the Bible tells us that when Esav was born, Jacob was hanging on to his heel). However, heel catcher is probably not to be taken literally; it is thought by most scholars to be an ancient Hebrew idiom, which meant **deceiver**. Before Esav can return from the hunt, Ya'acov (*Jacob*) disguises himself as Esav, goes into Yitz'chak's (*Isaac's*) tent, and dupes the nearly blind old Yitz'chak into giving Ya'acov (*Jacob*) the firstborn blessing; Isaac believes that it is Esav he is blessing. Esav (*Esau*) returns from the hunt, finds out what has transpired and is devastated. He pleads with his father to change the blessing. But such a blessing is, by tradition, irreversible for any reason. Rivkah (*Rebecca*) knows her twin sons well and fears that upon Yitz'chak's (*Isaac's*) imminent death Esav will kill Ya'acov for his treachery. Upon their mother's urging, Ya'acov (*Jacob*) flees to his uncle Lavan (*Laban*), far away, up in Haran of Mesopotamia.

YA'ACOV (JACOB)

In Haran, Ya'acov (*Jacob*) meets Rachel, one of Lavan's (*Laban's*) daughters, at the family well (Lavan is Ya'acov's uncle, his mother's brother) **[Gen. 29, 30]**. It's love at first sight. As a fugitive, with nothing else to offer, Ya'acov (*Jacob*) agrees to 7 years of bond servitude to Lavan (*Laban*) in return for the right to marry Rachel. The 7 years pass, and in a sure sign to Ya'acov (*Jacob*) that what goes around comes around, during the marriage ceremony Leah, Lavan's oldest daughter, is secretly switched out for Rachel. By the time Ya'acov (*Jacob*) finds out, it's too late.....Leah is now his legal wife. So, in a promise for another 7 years of servitude Lavan also gives Rachel to Ya'acov (*Jacob*).

Make no mistake, Ya'acov (*Jacob*) was not an eager and foolish young man when he married first Leah, then Rachel; he was 84 years old! So, the giving up of 14 years of his life for Rachel had to have been well thought out. Not only had Jacob received more than he originally bargained for, but his two wives, who were sisters, quarrel constantly for the next several years, which coincides with a growing hostility between Ya'acov and his father-in-law Lavan.

After completing 20 years of servitude to Lavan (14 for Rachel and Leah, plus 6 more in exchange for some livestock), Ya'acov, knowing something bad is about to happen, gathers his family and flees **[Gen. 31]**.

As they prepare to secretly depart, Rachel steals her father's household gods and takes them with her on their journey. Taking his daughters and grandchildren is one thing; but taking his gods is quite another, so Lavan forms a posse, pursues and catches up to Jacob and his family **[Gen. 32]**. Rachel is a clever and determined girl, so even after a thorough search of their campsite, Lavan can't find his missing gods. The issue of the gods is important to Lavan because in that era the person who possessed the family gods could claim legal inheritance of the family authority and wealth. Possessing her father's gods was Rachel's ticket to all her father owned when he passed on. Lavan's sons could not have been happy about this, either. Ya'acov (*Jacob*) survives the ordeal by agreeing to Lavan's demands that he take no other wives. Ya'acov now moves on and returns to Canaan to face his brother Esav (*Esau*), not really expecting to survive this family reunion.

Nearing his destination, Ya'acov (*Jacob*) has an odd encounter with what some Bibles describe as an angel, others as the Lord, and finds himself in an all-night wrestling match. Whatever the meaning of the encounter, it produces a changed heart in Ya'acov (*Jacob*), not to mention a permanent disability. But, something else gets changed as well; Ya'acov is told by God that he has a new name, and that name is ***Yisra'el*** (Israel).

It is at this point in history, and not before, that an identifiable people was created that God would call His own.....the Israelites (sometimes in the Bible called the Jacob-ites). While Jacob (now called Israel), his offspring, and their descendants could rightfully be called Israelites, only some would eventually come to be called Jews. I'll expound on that confusing matter in due time.

Expecting the worst, Ya'acov (from here on alternately called Israel and Jacob) finally encounters his twin brother Esav (*Esau*), who, it turns out, is also changed **[Gen. 33]**. Tears flow. Israel (*Jacob*, Ya'acov) offers gifts of reconciliation to Esav. Esav, now a wealthy man, refuses, but Israel insists. They part in peace.

Israel heads for Shechem, by now a walled city-state in Canaan; this is the same place where God told Abraham that this is the Land He would give to him and his descendants (but in Abraham's time, Shechem was little more than a small settlement). Israel purchases land for his clan from the King of Shechem, intent to settle down permanently. Being near a city brings mutual security, and is formalized in a pact resembling a treaty. Part of any agreement of this type is that the residents of the city and the members of the people who wish to live outside the city walls become allies and join each other in fending off marauders. But things quickly sour when the King of Shechem's son rapes Israel's only named daughter, Dinah, (it is probable that he had other daughters as well) and her incensed brothers lead a raid of revenge leaving many of the city dwellers dead in the wake [**Gen. 34**]. Israel is heartbroken over the murderous actions of his sons upon the innocent people of Shechem. He knows they cannot stay so they pack up and head to Beth'el. God appears to Israel with assurance that the covenants given to Abraham, then to Isaac, and now to himself, remain intact. His beloved wife, Rachel, for whom he gave 14 years of servitude to marry, dies giving birth to Israel's 12th and last son, Ben-Yamin (*Benjamin*). It's now about 1800 BC.

Back up in Mesopotamia, the Babylonian culture is becoming more powerful and sophisticated, and it is led by the continuing domination of the Amorites. Using the pyramid-like towers they build, called ziggurats, they begin charting the skies as expert astronomers. Down in Egypt, the traditional Egyptian culture that has produced such an advanced civilization with its enormous Pyramids, libraries, agriculture, and science, all under strong central rule, is disintegrating. Foreigners now sit in the seat of Pharaoh in Egypt. Not just any foreigners, but Bedouin Sheiks, Semites! These Bedouins were not mindless barbarians. They easily adopted Egyptian ways, even adopted Egyptian names. But they were, by nature, tribal and wanderers and did not understand how to establish and maintain a large central government. Their rule was considered almost unbearable by the native Egyptians. Therefore the so-called Hyksos rulers were never able to unite Egypt the way the Pharaohs before them did, and Egypt declined for the next 150 years.

Y'HOSEF (JOSEPH)

Just a few years after Ben-Yamin (*Benjamin*) was born, 17-year-old Y'hosef (*Joseph*), Israel's openly favored son, fell victim to a vicious plot by his 10 jealous and angry older brothers [**Gen. 37**]. Thrown into an empty water cistern and sold to a passing caravan of Arab slave traders, Y'hosef (*Joseph*) was announced to his father as having been killed by a wild animal. Israel

was devastated, and he blamed his other sons, obviously unaware of the truth. He would grieve for years to come.

The caravan winds up in Egypt where Y'hosef (*Joseph*) is sold as a house slave to Potiphar, Chief Steward to Pharaoh. Y'hosef, young, good-looking, and highly intelligent, greatly impresses his master; nonetheless, he finds himself imprisoned as a result of false charges made against him by Potiphar's wife [**Gen. 39, 40, 41**]. While Joseph languished in prison the Pharaoh began having reoccurring nightmares. The local Egyptian wizards were unable to decipher these dreams so Y'hosef (*Joseph*) was called upon to try. Pharaoh was so impressed by Joseph's accuracy that, he promoted him to 2nd in command of all of Egypt. Potiphar now worked for Joseph. Y'hosef (*Joseph*), now 30 years old, has not seen his family in 13 years.

Meantime back up in Canaan where Jacob and his clan still resided, things were not good. Another famine had taken hold of the land, and Israel's tribe was in danger of not surviving. News arrived that Egypt had, through the adept management of a foreigner, Joseph, somehow foreseen the famine and stockpiled much grain. Reluctantly Israel sent his sons to Egypt to try and purchase grain [**Gen. 42, 43, 44, 45**]. Part of the reluctance was due to not wanting to lose another child, for Israel had never recovered from the loss of his precious Y'hosef (*Joseph*). This fear undoubtedly came from the common knowledge that the poorest of Egyptian society, unable to purchase grain, were selling themselves into bond-servitude to Pharaoh's government in return for food for their families. This foreign Pharaoh of a divided country was using the famine and Y'hosef's (*Joseph's*) abilities to construct a slave labor force to satisfy his ambitions. But God used the situation to enable Israel's survival.

When Y'hosef (*Joseph*) finds out it's his brothers who have come asking to buy grain he is crushed when they don't recognize him. Hurt, angry, he toys with them for a while. But knowing that any revenge he might extract would only serve to further hurt his aged father, Y'hosef not only gives them grain, he sends word to Israel that all his family should come to Egypt where Y'hosef, from his position of power, can assure their survival.

Israel comes with his entire clan, which now numbers 70 individuals, not counting Joseph [**Gen. 46**]. In fact, there many more than just the 70, but that's a discussion for another time. Israel dies there a few years later. But before he dies, he pronounces a blessing upon Y'hosef's (*Joseph's*) two male children, Ephraim and Manasseh, born by Joseph's Egyptian

wife; this act will have an enormous impact in the future. This deathbed blessing, the cross-handed blessing, put Joseph's younger child, Ephraim, ahead of the older child, Manasseh, for purposes of inheritance **[Gen. 48]**. But, the blessing also included the adoption of these two boys by Israel so that they were no longer his grandchildren, but his own children. This blessing had both immediate, and prophetic, effects. For, by adopting these children, the children were no longer Egyptians; they became Israelites. Let's pause here to take a look at this much-overlooked section of the Bible.

Next time we'll look carefully at one of the most important events in Holy Scripture: Jacob's cross-handed blessing.