

Great Themes of the Bible

Volume 1

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Preface

The biblical story is rich. It was developed over the course of slightly more than a thousand years. The exact number of authors who contributed to the Bible is unknown. The precise historical setting of many of the writings is unknown. The meaning of a number of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek terms that appear in the original text is debated. And still the Bible is the most quoted, the most discussed, the most influential book in Western culture, and thus most worthy of careful consideration.

This first of three volumes dedicated to the exploration of some thirty-nine great themes that span the Old and New Testaments is aimed at enabling the educated, serious student of the Bible to gain insight into how various topics are presented in Scripture. There is no effort to “prove” or “defend” the authority of the Bible, though that is a worthy task. Rather, the importance of the material is assumed and approached accordingly.

The equal value of both testaments is likewise assumed. Sometimes the traditional terminology of Old Testament and New Testament is employed. At other points some newer terms are used, such as First Testament and Second Testament. Also, BCE (Before the Common Era) and CE (Common Era) are used in place of BC (Before Christ) and AD (Anno Domini) in keeping with the present scholarly consensus.

Matters of scholarly interpretation are not, for the most part, discussed in any great detail. They may inform the presentation, but they are not the focus of this study. One particular position is of some importance, however. At the time of Jesus and the development of the New Testament, neither Judaism as it is now known nor Christianity as a religion existed. These two great religious traditions developed in parallel beginning in the second century of the Common Era. Thus, when English translations speak of “Jews” they are being somewhat anachronistic. In the Bible “Christians” and “Jews” have far more in common than might be presumed on the basis of current history. The recognition of this important fact is crucial for understanding the social context and the writings that came out of that era, particularly when considering the Second Testament.

It is the hope of the author that this work will enable those interested in gaining a greater understanding of the Bible, which serves as the foundation of Christian discipleship. Thanks are due to the members of the March-Hester adult church school class of Highland Presbyterian Church in Louisville, Kentucky, for reviewing, discussing, and offering suggestions to the author concerning the content of most of this book. Also, to those of Westminster John Knox Press who provided invaluable technical assistance, and particularly to editor Donald K. McKim for his encouragement and understanding, thank you.

God

In a book on themes of the Bible, it may seem strange to begin with God. God is hardly a “theme.” God is the living source of grace and life that animates the world and offers comfort and guidance to millions of believers. God is better called “person” or “subject” than “theme.” God cannot be objectified or defined or fully described in human language. God is richer than the stories told about God, greater than the experiences ascribed to God. God is God, and that is all there is to say!

Nonetheless, in a book dealing with the great themes of the Bible, it is important to trace the rich variety of witness offered concerning the living God in order to begin to comprehend the one whom the Bible says is the “main player” across the centuries of the divine/human drama that fills its pages. What’s more, it is important to remember that the God of the Old (or First) Testament is the same as the God of the New (or Second) Testament, at least so far as the New Testament is concerned. The Bible does not support the widely held opinion that the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath while the God of the New Testament is a God of grace. The God and Father of Jesus Christ is the God of Israel and Creator of the universe and all that is in it.

The Names of God

The General Name

The English word “god” is a general word for any divine being. While those who cherish the Bible may understand “god” to refer usually to the God of Israel and the Father of Jesus, the term itself is nonspecific. “Deity” could be its substitute in many instances. The Hebrew word for which “god” is the translation, *El* (with its plural *Elohim*), is also a general word for a divine being, though within some Semitic religious traditions, *El* is also a proper name of one of the chief deities. In Greek, the term for “god” is *theos* and, like *El*, usually is a general word for deity.

These terms were used in the ancient world within an assumed context of what we call polytheism. There was a whole company, a pantheon, of deities, gods and goddesses, who interacted with each other and on occasion with humankind. Each of these deities had a name and had to be addressed accordingly. The ancients did not assume that one word, *El* or *theos*, was sufficient to refer to the multiplicity of the gods, quite unlike the way we, in English, regularly use the term “God” to include the totality of the divine.

This language problem is important for at least two reasons. First, our translations of the Bible often disguise the vast difference between the theological perception that prevailed at the time of its writing and those that are common in predominantly Western culture. The reality of a multiplicity of divine beings was assumed and not debated. The Bible may warn against worshiping other deities, denying their power, but it generally leaves unchallenged the basic assumption of their existence. Second, as will be seen below, personal names are quite essential in talking about the work and character of the God of Israel. The God of Israel and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ was not simply a divine being with no distinct identity, but rather a personal deity with a very special personal name.

The Covenant Name

Clearly the most distinctive personal name by which the God of Israel was to be addressed was YHWH, the so-called sacred Tetra-

grammaton (“four-letter word”). The exact pronunciation has been lost because during the latter years of biblical tradition, out of respect for and the desire not to profane the name, the scribes ceased pronouncing it. When they read the Bible, they used terms like “Lord” or “the Name” when the text had “YHWH.” Indeed, already by the third century BCE the earliest Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) used the Greek word *kurios* (lord) each time the sacred name was encountered.

In English there have been two main efforts at suggesting the pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton. One suggestion has been “Jehovah,” based on a use of vowels inserted quite late in the textual tradition (actually the vowels from the Hebrew word for “Lord”) with the preserved consonants YHWH. The term “Jehovah” is not really possible by the rules of Hebrew pronunciation, but the tradition has continued nonetheless.

“Yahweh” has been the other major suggestion. Modern biblical scholars, noting Hebrew terms such as *hallelujah* (literally, “praise Yah”) found in a number of psalms (e.g., 146:1; 147:1) and Hebrew names like Isaiah (literally, “Yah is salvation”) and Elijah (literally, “my God is Yah”), have surmised that the first syllable of the divine name is “Yah.” The second syllable is then assumed to be “weh” on the basis of verbal forms that might have been used. The case for the pronunciation is persuasive, but the meaning of the term created, “Yahweh,” remains open for debate.

Some light is shed on the enigma of the covenant name when one examines the central biblical passage where the revealing of the sacred name is recounted. While tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro in the region of Horeb, Moses encounters God (Exod. 3:1–12). Moses is instructed to go to Egypt to seek the release of God’s enslaved people. Moses wants to know God’s name in order to be able to identify God and to give Moses some authority when he speaks to the people to whom he has been sent. To Moses’ inquiry the following exchange takes place:

God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” God

also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD [YHWH], the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’” (3:14–15)

The Hebrew word translated by the Greek Septuagint (and most modern English versions) as “I AM” is a verbal variant from the root of the word that constitutes the sacred name YHWH. There continues to be debate as to the best translation. Many prefer something like “I cause to happen what happens” or “I bring into being whatever exists” or “I am present,” rather than the static sounding “I am” implied by the Greek. Whatever decision is made, the important point is that this etymological issue is never mentioned again in the Bible.

What YHWH did was what was definitive, not what the name might theoretically mean. And what YHWH did was deliver Israel from slavery in Egypt (Exod. 6:1–15:27). What YHWH did was establish a covenant with Israel, giving instruction on how to live in community (Exod. 19:1–24:18). What YHWH did was promise the continuation of the gracious, forgiving, divine presence with the people as they traveled through the wilderness and to the land of Canaan (Exod. 34:1–35). What YHWH did was establish justice, care for the needy, work toward peace, and provide security and ample resources for the people (Pss. 146–147). And when the Gospel of John presents Jesus saying “I am” repeatedly, the person and deeds of the covenant God YHWH are intended to be remembered (John 4:26; 6:20, 35; 8:12, 58; 10:11; 11:25; 13:19; 14:6; 15:1; 18:5–6). Similarly, when the Second Testament writers refer to Jesus Christ as “Lord,” the memory of God’s covenantal name is being recalled.

Names Appropriated from Canaanite Sources

As the tradition is remembered, prior to Moses especially, there were a number of names of deities in the land that later came to be claimed in reference to YHWH. Many used the general term *El* as part of the name. *El Olam* (“Everlasting God”) was associ-

ated with the sanctuary at Beersheba (Gen. 21:33). *El Bethel* (“God of Bethel”) was remembered at Bethel (Gen. 35:7). At the spring Beer-lahai-roi, *El Roi* (“God who sees”) was encountered (Gen. 16:13). *El Shaddai* (“God of the mountain” or possibly “God of the breasts”), usually rendered as “God Almighty” in English translations, probably referred to a deity associated with a particular mountain range (Gen. 49:24–25).

The plural form of *El*, *Elohim*, has a distinctive usage in the Old Testament. While in some instances the term simply refers to a multiplicity of (usually pagan) deities (e.g., Exod. 12:12; 18:11; Ps. 82:1), in most places the term is used in a singular sense as a reference to the one God to be identified as YHWH. Grammarians call this a “plural of majesty” and understand it to indicate something like “Most Divine God.” When *Elohim* is so used, it refers to the totality of God, the fullness of the Divine. In the historical tradition of the First Testament, the term was most used prior to the revelation of the name of YHWH to Moses in Exodus (Gen. 1:26; 20:13; 35:7; cf. Exod. 3:15; 6:2–3).

While initially these names probably designated Semitic deities unrelated to YHWH, they were appropriated by the Israelites and, over the course of time, came to be understood as referring to the only God worthy of worship, namely, YHWH. Deities originally associated with natural phenomena and a particular place came to be interpreted as different manifestations of YHWH, who had a close, covenantal relationship with Israel’s forebears (Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob, Leah, and Rachel), moved about with them (being unbound to any one particular place), and demonstrated divine power in providing protection and guidance to them.

One further term may have been drawn originally from the broader Northwest Mesopotamian setting, namely, “Rock.” In Akkadian (ancient Assyrian and Babylonian) prayers, “great mountain” was a term sometimes used to refer to the deity. Also, in Israel’s prayer traditions God is called “Rock” (e.g., Pss. 18:2, 31; 19:14; 28:1; 78:35). The prophet Isaiah used “Rock” as an epithet for God several times (Isa. 17:10; 26:4; 30:29). In one of the

earliest traditions, Yahweh is praised as the Rock who gave birth to his people (Deut. 32:18). Further, Israel's Rock provided security and stability (Deut. 32:4, 15, 30–31). While the term may sound impersonal in English, the activities ascribed to the "Rock" are quite personal and are in accord with the other language for God already noted.

Metaphors for God

Besides the names used in reference to God, the Bible also uses numerous metaphors and epithets to describe the variety of ways that God interacts with humankind. Only a few of the more frequently used will be considered, but they will be instructive of the manner in which God was perceived and remembered.

From the social context of governance at least three terms emerged. First, there is the term "king." Across the ancient world "king" was a primary referent for a deity. Obviously the existence of earthly kings suggested that the gods were like kings, the guardians of the public welfare and enforcers of justice. Each nation or city-state had a divine king who was the special patron of that people. Israel was no different. The term "king" (or in its verbal form "to reign/rule") is often used in the book of Isaiah to extol Israel's God (Isa. 6:1, 5; 41:21; 43:15; 44:6) and declare Yahweh's reign over all the earth (Isa. 52:7, 10). Allusion to the reign of God is also found frequently in the Psalms (cf. Pss. 5:2; 29:10; 44:4; 68:24; 95:3; 97:1; 99:4; 146:10). Jesus announced the imminent coming of the reign (the kingdom) of God during the course of his public ministry (Matt. 6:10; 16:26; Mark 1:15; 9:1; Luke 9:27; 11:2), and the first generations of disciples continued the message (cf. Acts 8:12; 19:8; 1 Cor. 6:9; Gal. 5:21; Rom. 14:17; Rev. 11:15; 12:10; 22:5).

A second term closely related to "king" and widely used is "shepherd." In ancient Middle Eastern societies it was common to refer to the ruler as "shepherd." In the ancient law code of the Babylonian king Hammurabi (1792–1750 BCE), the king is designated "shepherd" of the people, their guardian and protector.

Likewise, Yahweh is called “Shepherd” (Gen. 49:24; Pss. 23:1; 80:1), and the people of Israel are “the sheep of his pasture” or his “flock” (Pss. 79:13; 95:7; 100:3). Modern readers may initially understand “shepherd” as a pastoral reference, but in the ancient world, when used in connection with God, the metaphor was intended to recall God’s careful, reliable governance of the people.

A third term drawn from this same social sphere is “judge.” Before there were “kings” in Israel, there were leaders called “judges” who led the people in times of war and governed them. Their tasks included deciding issues of justice (Judg. 4–12). Thus, it was natural for God to be called “Judge” (Gen. 18:25; Isa. 2:4; 33:22; Ps. 94:2; Acts 10:42). This term was not as widely utilized as “king” or “shepherd,” but it was a powerful symbol of God’s protection and concern.

From the realm of family and kinship several important terms were drawn. One of the most important is “father.” This term was used early in Canaanite religion in reference to El as the “father” of the gods and in Babylonian hymns to refer to the deity as the “Father of the Land.” In later biblical texts God is called “Father” (Isa. 63:16; 64:8; Mal. 1:6). It is also interesting that the relationship between God and the Davidic dynasty is described in “father/son” language (2 Sam. 7:14–15; Ps. 2:7). This mirrors the manner in which some international political treaties of the time described the suzerain as “father” and the vassal as “son.” While drawn from the family sphere, this use of “father/son” is clearly political in intent.

The term “mother” is not directly used of God, but feminine and maternal images are. One of the basic words signifying divine “mercy” also means “womb.” God’s “womblike,” “motherly concern,” God’s mercy, is repeatedly mentioned (e.g., Exod. 34:6; Pss. 86:15; 111:4; Jonah 4:2). Further, in Isaiah God is compared to a nursing mother (Isa. 49:15), a woman in labor (Isa. 42:14), and a mother who comforts her child (Isa. 66:13).

In the New Testament, “Father” is used more frequently in reference to God and takes on a special significance because of Jesus’ use of the term. While Jesus used the same language for God as

the Old Testament when quoting or referring to the earlier tradition (Matt. 11:25; 27:46; Mark 5:19; 13:20; 15:34; Luke 10:21; 22:69), he apparently preferred “Father,” especially according to the Gospel of John (e.g., John 5:17–24, 43–45; 6:27, 37, 44–46). The Aramaic term for “father,” *abba*, however, is found only three times in the New Testament: once in the Synoptic Gospels (Mark 14:36) and twice in Paul’s writings (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). Though it has become commonplace for commentators to suggest that *abba* was almost equivalent to “daddy” in the contemporary North American context, that interpretation has been abandoned in more recent scholarship. Actually, rather than being informal and familiar, the term was one that expressed great respect and love for God and emphasized the obedience and trust Jesus had as “son.” “Father” clearly underscores recognition of both the authority and the personal nature of God.

Two epithets found in some of the later literature of the Old Testament that have continuing relevance are “Creator” and “Redeemer.” Both are used extensively in Isaiah 40–55, often ascribed to the “Babylonian Isaiah” or “Second Isaiah” (e.g., Isa. 40:28; 41:14; 43:1, 14–15). God’s work as creator became especially important as a result of Israel’s close encounter with Babylon, where the Babylonian god Marduk was praised as creator. The work of the “Creator” by the power of the divine word is described in Genesis (1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26; cf. John 1:1–5). As “Redeemer” God exercised a family responsibility. The head of a family was expected to rescue or ransom other members of the family who were taken into slavery. Isaiah proclaimed that in the past God had rescued Israel from enemies and from perilous situations and could be relied upon to do so again (e.g., Isa. 41:10–14; 43:1–7).

The Manifestations of God

The God revealed in the Bible is never fully disclosed. In the midst of God’s self-revelations only certain aspects of God are shared with humankind. The single most important revelatory

event in the Old Testament was the release of Israel from Egypt. Under the inspiration of God, Moses led the people out of bondage. Israel learned a great deal about God's power and intention toward them when they escaped the chariots of Pharaoh at the waters of the Reed Sea ("Red Sea" in the Septuagint; see Exod. 14–15). The "exodus" has been remembered as part of the Passover festival to this day. God acted because God heard the cries of distress from the people (Exod. 3:7), but as important as that is, little more is revealed about God and nothing concerning the essence of God.

At the great theophany (the appearance of God) at Sinai, the people recognized the glory and holiness of God. They were afraid to approach the mountain and were in fact warned to stay at a distance (Exod. 19:12–18, 24). Moses was allowed to draw near to God, not to see God but only to hear God's voice (Exod. 19:20–25; 33:17–22). When the people left Sinai, they followed the "ark of the covenant" through the wilderness, with God's glory made visible in the fire and column of smoke that accompanied the ark (Num. 10:33–36). But they did not comprehend the full nature of God.

In the prophetic traditions of Israel, God was encountered primarily through the divine word that came to particular prophets. Amos recognized the great anger that God had for those who exploited the poor and ignored matters of justice (Amos 2:6–8; 5:21–24). Isaiah understood the judgment that God would level on Israel for its misdeeds (Isa. 5:1–7). Jeremiah became convinced that there was no hope of escaping disaster apart from an act of repentance that the people seemed incapable of rendering (Jer. 7:1–34). But Jeremiah also envisioned a day beyond the disaster when a new covenant of forgiveness would be fashioned by God (Jer. 31:31–34). Isaiah proclaimed a day of divine joy when renewal would be realized (Isa. 55:1–13). Even in Amos there is the announcement of a day of restoration (Amos 9:11–15).

But the prophets did not present a systematic statement about the essence or attributes of God. They said little or nothing about their own personal experiences of God. Rather they shared words

about the things that mattered to God: anger and forgiveness, sorrow and rejoicing, abandonment and faithfulness, concealment and transparency, each an aspect of the way God was experienced, but never the wholeness of who God is.

In the New Testament the same God is praised and obeyed. But more, the Second Testament testifies that God's very Word was manifest in the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth (John 1:14–18). Jesus embodied the agenda of God for the care of the poor and the release of all the imprisoned (Luke 4:18–19). Jesus was love incarnate, but his closest disciples did not recognize who he was until after God raised him from the dead (Matt. 28:1–20; Luke 24:1–49; John 14:1–14; 20:1–29). The incarnation of God in Jesus could have been anticipated—after all, God most often interacted with Israel in the same ways another human might. But while God was incarnate in Jesus, much mystery remains, and with the apostle Paul we await that day when we will see face to face (1 Cor. 13:12).

Some Concluding Reflections

So who is the God of the Bible? God is clearly the “main character” the Bible intends to put forward. From the first encounter with humankind in the garden of Eden in Genesis to the final coming of the heavenly city of God at the conclusion of Revelation, God is at the center of the story. The Bible is about God and the way God is related to the human family and all the universes that came into being at God's word.

God is presented in the Bible in very personal terms. God has a personal name, YHWH. God is every bit as complicated as any individual we may know. As with another person, we never fully understand or comprehend God. YHWH sometimes seems distant, at other times close (perhaps even too close when we are in the wrong). YHWH displays joy, patience, anger, disappointment, acceptance, disapproval, just like other people we know. And sometimes, just when we think we have God figured out, God does the totally unpredictable and intervenes in our world and rearranges our politics or even raises someone from the dead.

YHWH is the God of Old Testament and New Testament people. Indeed, YHWH is Lord of all the people of the world.

God's many names and the numerous metaphors used to allude to YHWH inform us about the things that matter to God. We never see God fully. We never are invited in the Bible to somehow blend into the essence of God. But God is not a remote First Cause or the Unmoved Mover either. God is Father/Mother, King, Shepherd, Rock, and in Jesus Christ God is present in a unique and startling way.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is important about knowing that God has an actual, personal name in the Bible? How can we enrich our use of "God" in reference to the Divine?
2. How does the use of many different names and metaphors for God help us to recognize the many ways God encounters us? Which of these are most important to you? Why?
3. What do we actually know about God from the names, metaphors, and manner of encounters between God and humankind? What don't we know?
4. If someone asked you, "Who is the God of the Bible?" what might you say?