

Two Key Events

The EXODUS – the formative event in the history of people of Israel. Living as slaves in Egypt, oppressed and forced to work as labourers, they were able to escape from their oppressors. Under the leadership of Moses they survived the dangers of a very long arduous journey across the mountainous desert of Sinai to the land from which their ancestors had come, the land the LORD God had promised to Abraham. Through this experience they were formed as the people of Israel, and acquired some of their defining characteristics – the shared memory of hardship and escape, the covenant with the LORD God who chooses Israel, and the laws which are to shape their life as a community.

The EXILE – a traumatic event which reshaped Israel's faith. In 586 BCE the Babylonian army invaded Judah, captured Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple, the royal palace and all the other major buildings in the city. The King, the royal officials, all the soldiers and scribes and leading citizens were deported into exile in Babylon. Here they lived, subject to a people with a very different faith from theirs, with daily reminders in the buildings around them that they were in a society that was more powerful and more technologically advanced than their own. Here they began to rethink their faith, a process that continued after they were free to return to Judah in 538.

Seven Key Themes

CREATION

In the beginning God created the universe and all that is in it, and it was very good. That assertion is put right at the start of the Old Testament, (though it was not the first chapter to be written). It is an assertion that undergirds everything that follows. Because the God whom Israel worships created the universe, He ultimately controls it. He is Almighty. Several of the Psalms are hymns of praise to God for the wonders of the world he has created, eg Psalms 8, 19, 104, 147. The writer of Isaiah chapters 40-55, writing during the Exile in Babylon, frequently speaks of the Lord as the Creator, “who created the heavens..., who spread out the earth ..., who gives breath to the people upon it” (42.5).

COVENANT

The covenant is a key theme of both the Old and New Testaments. It gives its name to them, for both the Hebrew word *berith* and the Greek word *diatheke* can be translated as “covenant” or “testament”.

A covenant forms a deep and permanent relationship between two parties, a lasting commitment between them. Probably the best example of a covenant in everyday life is marriage, which is “for better, for worse ... till death us do part”.

The Lord makes his covenant with Abraham (Genesis 17.1-8). He remembers this covenant when the people are slaves in Egypt (Exodus 6.2-8). He renews it through Moses on Mount

Sinai (Exodus chapters 19-24). He makes a further covenant with David (Psalm 89.3-4). At the Last Supper Jesus said “This is my blood of the new covenant (or testament)”. And before all these is God’s covenant with Noah “and with every living creature” in Genesis 9.8-17.

ELECTION

The initiative in making the covenant lies with Lord God. “The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession” (Deut, 14.2) He chooses Israel to be the people through whom He will work out His purposes to bless all peoples. We are reminded of Jesus’ words “You did not choose me but I chose you” (John 15.16). It is the Lord who takes the initiative.

THE LAW

A key part of the covenant is that Israel’s obligations under the covenant are to keep the Law. Central to this are the commandments in “the book of the covenant” in Exodus chapter 19-23. The Lord’s promise and his warning is that he will give Israel his “blessing if you obey the commandments of the Lord” and his “curse if you do not obey (them)” (Deut 1126-28).

JUDGMENT

The core idea is that the judge is someone who puts right what is wrong. So if people are being cheated, are being oppressed, have had something stolen, they can appeal to the judge to put right where they have been wronged. So when Israel breaks the laws that are part of the covenant with the Lord, the Lord puts right this wrong and restores justice by punishing Israel. The Lord’s judgment is seen as carried out in historical events, for example defeat by foreign armies, and especially in the capture and destruction of Jerusalem.

SALVATION or REDEMPTION

But beyond the Lord’s judgment is his salvation or redemption. The core idea here is one of deliverance. The classic example is the Exodus. “Blessed be the Lord who has delivered you from the Egyptians and from Pharaoh” (Exodus 11.10). The unnamed prophet of the Exile, encouraging his fellow exiles to look beyond their present captivity, again and again speaks of “The Lord your redeemer” eg Isaiah 41.14; 43.14; 44.24). The Psalms are full of prayers for deliverance, from sickness, from danger, from enemies and from sin.

LOVE

Running through the Old Testament is the theme of the Lord’s love for His people. “It was because the Lord loved you that the Lord redeemed you from slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh the King of Egypt.” (Deut 7.8) “You are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you” says the Lord (Isaiah 43.4). Hosea 11.1-4 pictures the Lord as a father, helping his little son to learn to walk, and then picking him up and kissing him. The law commands “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart” (Deut. 6.5), and “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Lev.19.18) and “You shall also love the foreigner, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt” (Deut.10.19).