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What Is the Message of the Old Testament?

Author(s): John A. Widtsoe

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Abstract: This article affirms that the Old Testament teaches of God and His commandments.

EVIDENCES AND RECONCILIATIONS

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THE contents of the Old Testament center upon the history of the people chosen of God to accomplish a mighty purpose, a people who because of their own actions passed through periods of progress and degeneracy. In telling the story, the writers have sought to show that obedience to divine laws of conduct leads to joy, while disobedience brings only sorrow and defeat. In that respect the teachings of the Old Testament are universal—fitted for any people, at any time.

To drive home the lesson, every literary device is used. History appears, especially of contemporaneous events. There is constant resort to formal preaching and teaching. Poetry, allegory, figures of speech, parables are employed with powerful effect. Everywhere, the knowledge of the day, sometimes limited, is reflected in the telling of the story. Intelligent readers always separate the message of a book from its form of presentation. That must be done in reading the Bible, if its true meaning is to be caught.

The principles of truth, the Gospel, have been taught by the Lord to man, from the beginning of the human race. At times, men have been divinely inspired to commit to writing the eternal truths pertaining to human existence. Thus have come the Holy Scriptures.

Nevertheless, though the doctrine contained in the Old Testament has been given by the Lord, the actual writing has been done by mortal men, in their own language. This is always so. The Lord, speaking to the Prophet Joseph Smith, said, "These commandments are of me, and were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding." That is, the Lord does His work in our behalf through earthly instruments. Naturally, therefore, in outward form there may be errors, or we may misunderstand; but in inner substance, the eternal truth is preserved for those who read understandingly. This doctrine has been stated in unusual beauty by Moroni, "Thou hast also made our words powerful and great, even that we cannot write them; wherefore, when we write we behold our weakness and stumble because of the placing of our words; and I fear lest the Gentiles shall mock at our words."

Further, it is well known that the original manuscripts of the Old Testament have passed through numerous hands before they reached the form available to us. They were copied by hand. Inaccurate as well as accurate, dishonest as well as honest, unbelieving as well as believing scribes have had access to them. Material may have been added or taken away; mutilations may have occurred; through misunderstandings, or by deliberate act, errors and changes may have crept into the text. In the words of Joseph Smith, the Prophet, "I be-

lieve the Bible as it read when it came from the pen of the original writers. Ignorant translators, careless transcribers, or designing and corrupt priests have committed many errors.

The human element in the formation of the Old Testament explains many things otherwise obscure. There are many episodes in the Old Testament that suggest a lack of respect for human life. Undoubtedly, the Giver of Life may at His will take it. There may be times when life should be forfeited because of sins committed. Yet, it is probable that in some reported cases, the Lord has been credited with commands that came from the lips of the human leaders of the day. It is to be observed also that ancient Israel altogether too often adopted practices peculiar to the primitive peoples of the day, rather than those revealed by the Lord. Similarly, there are episodes which suggest low standards of sexual morality, such as characterized the tribal neighbors of ancient Israel. Such immoral episodes and other deviations from the law of the Lord seem to be recorded as warnings. Men were no better then, than they are now. But it must always be kept in mind that the God of Israel thundered to the people in the wilderness, "Thou shalt not kill," and "Thou shalt not commit adultery." Never has there been an abrogation of these commands.

Though allowances must be made for human imperfections, yet the Holy Scriptures have never been wholly at the mercy of man. The essential message of the Lord to His children on earth has ever been preserved. The books of the Old Testament bring to us the unchanging doctrine of God's nature, man's relationship to Deity, and the glorious, eternal destiny of righteous, obedient mankind. They contain the most precious truths of humanity. They give the most complete exposition of God's law for human conduct. As they relate the story of God's dealings with His people, the nature of our Father in Heaven becomes better understood. Without the books of the Old Testament, the earth would be poor indeed.

The Hebrew scriptures rise above the folklore of the nations as a sun-bathed mountain peak rises out of the mists; for example, the Babylonian Epic of the Creation centers around the battles of two gods who are both sea monsters. The one monster overcomes the other and from his body the earth is created. This account is translated as follows:

Then took their stand Tiamat and the leader of the gods, Marduk;

For the fight they approached, for the battle they drew near.

The lord spread out his net and enclosed her,

The evil wind from behind he thrust into her face.

As Tiamat opened her mouth to its full extent,

The evil wind he drove in, so that her lips could not close.

With the mighty winds he filled her belly.

Her courage was taken away, and she opened her mouth.

He let fall the spear, he burst open her belly,

He cut through her inward parts, he pierced her heart,

He bound her and her life destroyed;

Her body he cast down and stood upon it.

Then the lord rested, he gazed upon her body,

The flesh of the monster he divided; he formed a cunning plan.

He split her open like a flat fish into two halves;

One half of her he established and made a covering of the heavens.

He drew a bolt, he established a guard,

And not to let her waters come out, he commanded.

(See George A. Barton, *Archaeology and the Bible*, pp. 272, 273.) (Concluded on page 319)

HOW THE CHURCH STANDS TODAY

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Life Insurance Company, president of Layton Sugar Company, and for many years counselor in the North Davis Stake presidency.

Sarah E. Stewart, noted educational and civic leader and Church auxiliary worker, widow of William M. Stewart, founder and first dean of the School of Education at the University of Utah.

Florence Neslen Evans, widow of the late John A. Evans, and mother of Richard L. Evans of the First Council of Seventy.

Lorenzo Argyle, believed to be the last

member of the first pioneer handcart company to come to Utah (the Ellsworth Company); was bishop of the Lake Shore Ward for thirty-four years.

Elizabeth Turner Cain Crismon, former member of the General Board of the L. D. S. National Woman's Relief Society under President Emmeline B. Wells.

Marion A. Condie, first counselor in Blaine Stake presidency.

Bishop James Johnson, Nampa Second Ward, Nampa Stake.

Bishop Henry Jones, St. Johns Ward, Malad Stake.

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Compare this near nonsense with the stately, clear, and understandable account given in Genesis, first chapter:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.

And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters, from the waters. And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day.

And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so. And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called he Seas: and God saw that it was good. And God said, Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind, whose seed is in itself, upon the earth: and it was so. And the earth brought forth grass, and herb yielding seed after his kind, and the tree yielding fruit, whose seed was in itself, after his kind: and God saw that it was good. And the evening and the morning were the third day.

And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years: And let them be for lights in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth: and it was so. And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night: he made the stars also. And God set them in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth, and to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness: and God saw that it was good. And the evening and the morning were the fourth day.

And God said, Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life, and fowl that may fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven. And God created great whales, and every living creature that moveth, which the waters brought forth abundantly, after their kind, and every winged fowl after his kind: and

God saw that it was good. And God blessed them, saying, Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let fowl multiply in the earth. And the evening and the morning were the fifth day.

And God said, Let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind, cattle, and creeping thing, and beast of the earth after his kind; and it was so. And God made the beast of the earth after his kind, and cattle after their kind, and every thing that creepeth upon the earth after his kind: and God saw that it was good.

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. (Genesis 1:1-27.)

The Bible account compared with the Babylonian, in the words of D. Bernhard Stade, is "as a clear mountain spring to the slough of a village cesspool." (See Fosdick, *Guide to the Understanding of the Bible*.)

What is the message of the Old Testament? From the first to the last, in the Pentateuch, in the historical books, in the poetical books, and in the prophets, it teaches the existence of a personal God, the Maker of the heavens and the earth, the Father of the human race. It teaches that the earth and all things upon it are provided for man's benefit, but that man must obey law, divine law, to secure the blessings he desires. It teaches that obedience to the moral law, given by God for human conduct, involving faith in God, not to be compared with man-made, ethical, selfish codes of action, is the most important concern of man. It is the message of messages for humankind.

That message remains unchanged in essence from the first to the last page of the Old Testament; but the people to whom it was given often fell from that truth, and then by slow degrees found their way back.

In the words of Brigham Young, "In the Bible are the words of life and salvation."

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