



## WHO IS GOD?

THEME

1

PART

1

### Old Testament Witness

#### SUMMARY

The Old Testament has much to say about who God is and what God does. God is portrayed as creator of heaven and earth, as one who is separate and distinct from creation, yet also involved with creation. God is the source of life, the ultimate Lord, the one to whom all worship and honor is due. God chose to be revealed to the nation of Israel and its leaders as personal, as one whose purposes are carried out in human history. Having chosen Israel as a covenant people with whom to be present and on whose behalf to act, God's purposes and plans were to be realized primarily through word, wisdom, and spirit.

#### BASIC BIBLE REFERENCES

*Genesis 1:1-2*  
*Exodus 3:1-15*  
*1 Samuel 3:1-21*  
*Deuteronomy 6:4-9*  
*Psalms 103:6-14; 148:1-14*  
*Isaiah 6:1-8; 57:15*

#### WORD LIST

Holiness  
 Immanence  
 Monotheism  
 Revelation  
 Steadfast Love  
 Transcendence

#### There Is One God

The central confession of faith for the nation of Israel in the Old Testament is found in the Book of Deuteronomy. Read **Deuteronomy 6:4-9**. In verse 4 we find what has been called the "watchword of Israel's faith": *Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.*" This verse is called the Shema from the Hebrew word for "hear." Its importance for the nation is seen in the instructions which follow in verses 6-9.<sup>1</sup> While surrounding nations worshiped *many gods* (polytheism), Israel expressed its faith in a single deity (monotheism). In Deuteronomy 4:32-39 this one God is confessed as unique; there is *no other*.

#### God Is the Creator

Israel also confessed its faith that God was the creator of the heavens and the earth. The first two chapters of Genesis contain two accounts of the creation of all things. Both stories indicate that God alone is the one who is the creator. Read **Genesis 1:1-2**. This theme is affirmed in the Psalms and the prophets (see Isaiah 40:28). Read **Psalms 148:1-14** for a majestic picture of the comprehensiveness of God's creation. It includes the natural order, cosmic entities, and all the elements of earth.

<sup>1</sup> The word LORD when spelled with capital letters stands for the divine name in Hebrew, YHWH. Sensitivity to the holiness of the name of God led Jews in reading to substitute the word "LORD" for YHWH.

God is the source of all life in the cosmos and existed before all else in the creation. See Psalm 90:1-2 for a stirring testimony of this faith. God is also described as the *Most High* (Psalm 9:2); the *king* (Psalm 47:2, 7); and *Judge* over all the earth (Genesis 18:25). These images point to God's sovereignty over all creation. *God Almighty*, one of the Old Testament names for God, captures this conviction (Genesis 17:1; 28:3).

## God Reveals

God's presence in the world is known through revelation. There are many indications of this throughout the Old Testament. One graphic story is the revelation of the divine name to Moses from a burning bush. Read **Exodus 3:1-15**. God *called* to Moses from the bush and revealed to him the divine identity.<sup>2</sup> The "hidden God" became the "revealed God." The basic meaning of "reveal" (Hebrew *gala*) is "to uncover; to strip away." God must remove the obstacles for humans to attain knowledge of the divine.

The story of the young boy Samuel in the temple also illustrates this. Read **1 Samuel 3:1-21**. Neither Samuel nor the priest Eli could come to a knowledge of God until God *called* and was *revealed* (verses 7 and 8). This revelation is God's free choice. God chooses to be revealed and make the divine will known through *the word of the LORD* (verse 21). Samuel, the human receiver of revelation, listens to what God says (verse 10).

God as the creator is shown to be prior to all creation and to be over and beyond the created order. Yet the revealer is one who is intimately concerned with creation, communicating the divine will to humans. "Transcendence" is the term often used to describe the "beyondness" of God in relation to creation. "Immanence," on the other hand, indicates God's involvement with or in creation. Read **Isaiah 57:15** for a striking picture of the one God who is both the *high and lofty one* but who also dwells with *those who are contrite and humble in spirit*. Although greater than creation and all humanity, God does not remain aloof from creation. God is revealed to human beings and communicates with them in ways they can understand.

## God Is Personal

The Old Testament also portrays God as entering into relationships with people. This is only possible because God is personal, a characteristic that distinguishes the God of Israel from the surrounding deities of Israel's neighbors.<sup>3</sup>

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2 The name "I AM WHO I AM" may also be translated "I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE."

3 We can also say the personhood of God distinguishes the God of the Bible from the "God of the philosophers"—from "ideas" of God such as the "unmoved mover" or "pure power" or "pure being."

There are many descriptions of God's "character" in the Old Testament. Read **Isaiah 6:1-8**, the story of Isaiah's vision in the Temple, for one characteristic of God. "Holiness" is prominent here (verse 3) and means being "set apart." God is holy and is "set apart" from creation and from humans. God is "God." "Holiness" also implies "purity." Isaiah was aware of his sinfulness and how unworthy he was to stand in the presence of the divine as the *holy* one (verse 5). He recognized that his sinfulness separated him from God.

Other important "attributes"—descriptions of who God is—are found throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. Two key terms are *righteousness* and *justice*. These are action terms. They express who God is and what God does. God *acts* in these ways and *delights* in them since they are ways of describing the divine nature. Special care and concern for the poor and weak are expressions of these attributes. God's people are required to act in these ways if they are to carry out the divine will.<sup>4</sup>

Yet God's justice and righteousness are never set in contrast to God's *mercy* and *grace*. The Hebrew word *hesed* is a wonderfully rich term which links these characteristics together. It is often translated *steadfast love*. The term also carried with it overtones of God's determined faithfulness to the covenant established with the people of Israel. This loving faithfulness works for salvation and deliverance through righteousness and justice. Read **Psalms 103:6-14** for a moving portrayal of the magnitude of God's *steadfast love*. Even sin and evil cannot turn back the purposes of God's redeeming love, as this psalm and other portions of the Old Testament show (see Exodus 34:6).

## God's Covenant

Israel's story begins with God's call and covenant with Abraham. Read Genesis 12:1-9 for the story of this call and the covenant promise. Throughout the lives of Abraham and Sarah God promised to bless them, give them the land, and be with them. Their son Isaac also received a revelation and promise of God's presence (see Genesis 26:24). So did Isaac's son, Jacob (see Genesis 28:13). These successive revelations are referred to when God is identified to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:6). Through the covenant relationship, God established the nation of Israel and became known as *the LORD*, *the God of the Hebrews* (Exodus 3:18) and *the God of Israel* (Exodus 5:1).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> On "righteousness" (Hebrew *sadaq*) see Psalms 119:39, 40, 144; Isaiah 24:16. On "justice" (*mispat*) see Psalm 111:7 and Isaiah 30:18. God will never pervert "justice" or "the right." See Job 8:3 and Jeremiah 9:24.

<sup>5</sup> Another dimension of the covenant is the parental imagery used to describe God's relationship with Israel. Notice that God is portrayed by both male imagery (see Psalms 89:26; 103:13) and female imagery (Isaiah 49:15; 66:13).

## God's Purposes

Israel's story throughout the Old Testament shows that the nation was conscious of God's power at work in history. Divine purposes were being carried out with the formation of the covenant people, through their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, and by God's rule in the nation through kings and other leaders. At times, even apparent evil could serve divine purposes. In Genesis 50:20 for example, we are reminded how God was at work to bring good out of misfortune in Joseph's life. God's purposes were sure and certain to be accomplished. This is true on both the national and personal levels.

## God's Word

God is personal and acts in history to carry out divine purposes. One way God is described as working in creation is through the *word* (Hebrew *dabar*). In ancient cultures, one's *word* was seen as an extension of oneself. A frequent Old Testament formula is: *The word of the LORD/God came to . . .* (see for example Jeremiah 1:11; Ezekiel 1:3). This phrase indicates that it was not merely a piece of information but God's message and will that were made known in that special situation.

The divine *word* is also seen as the powerful agent of creation itself. Read Genesis 1:3, 6, 9. God's *word* is the effective means by which divine purposes in history are accomplished. In Isaiah 55:10-12 the return of the people from exile is modeled on the image of God's word returning triumphantly from carrying out divine purposes. At times, the word is a message of *salvation* (Psalms 107:19-20); other times, it is a notice of *judgment* (Jeremiah 8:8-12). Through all, God's word is eternal (Isaiah 40:8).

## God's Wisdom

Another way the divine word is described as working in creation is through *wisdom*. Read Job 28:20-24, 28, where wisdom belongs to God. In Proverbs 8:22-31 wisdom is preexistent, conversing with God and standing before all works of creation. Here and elsewhere in Proverbs the figure of wisdom is personified as female, portrayed in a joyful relationship with creation and humanity. In Old Testament "Wisdom" books (Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon), wisdom summons people to decision and gives them the choice of following the way of good or evil, life or death (Proverbs 4:13, 14, 22, 23). Wisdom reveals the divine will to and for humanity. Those who find wisdom find *life* and obtain *favor from the Lord* (see Proverbs 8:35-36).

## God's Spirit

Finally, God's Spirit works with word and wisdom as special means of divine actions. The Spirit is involved in creation and is the source of the *breath of life*. A typical formula to describe how God communicates with a prophet is to say: *The spirit of God came upon . . .* The Spirit also endowed Israel's leaders with power. For examples of this see Judges 6:33-35 and 14:5-6. After the time of David and Solomon, Israel anticipated a future king on whom *the spirit of the LORD* would rest. Read Isaiah 11:1-2; 61:1-4. No one can escape the Spirit; it is the dynamic power through which God moves history toward a whole new creation.

God's Spirit also acts personally as well. It works with the word of God and with wisdom. Note the role of the Spirit in the visions of Isaiah 44:3 and Ezekiel 36:26-30. The Old Testament anticipates with hope the universal distribution of the Spirit in the age to come. See Joel 2:28-29, quoted in Acts 2:16-21.

## FOR FURTHER STUDY AND REFLECTION

### Memory Bank

1. A basic knowledge of the Bible includes knowing where to find:
  - The Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)
  - God's call to Moses (Exodus 3:1-15)
  - Isaiah's vision and commission (Isaiah 6:1-8)

### Research

1. Footnote No. 4 lists Bible references for righteousness and justice. Review these and write brief definitions for each term.
2. Read an article on *hesed* (steadfast love, loving kindness) in a Bible dictionary.
3. Both male and female images are used to describe God's relationship to Israel. Review the references in footnote No. 5 and other passages which have similar imagery.

### Reflection

1. In the second century A.D. a church leader named Marcion claimed the God of the Old Testament was a God of law and wrath, while the God of the New Testament was a God of love and grace. The church rejected his view.
  - a. To what extent do people in your church seem to agree with Marcion's position?





# WHO IS GOD?

THEME

1

PART

2

## *New Testament Witness*

### SUMMARY

The New Testament witness to God is focused on Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Followers of Jesus were convinced that he conveyed the presence of God. Major portions of the New Testament attest to this conviction in varying ways. In particular, the “divineness” or “divinity” of Jesus Christ comes through in these writings. The Spirit of God, called the Holy Spirit, also conveyed God’s presence in various ways. The Spirit displays characteristics of personhood and divinity, yet stands distinct from Jesus. Throughout the New Testament, the Son and the Spirit are linked with the Father.

### BASIC BIBLE REFERENCES

*Matthew 1:18-23*  
*Mark 8:27-29; 12:28-30*  
*Luke 4:14-21; 24:44-49*  
*John 1:1-14; 14:15-31; 20:24-29*  
*Acts 2:16-36*  
*1 Corinthians 15:3-8*

### WORD LIST

Christ/Messiah  
 Lord  
 Paraclete  
 Pentecost  
 Synoptics  
 Word

### Responses to Jesus and His Message

Jesus clearly affirmed the priority and “oneness” of God as expressed in the faith of Israel. Read his response to the scribe in **Mark 12:28-30** and recall its Old Testament source in Deuteronomy 6. Jesus also affirmed that God could be known personally. His teachings and prayers testify to this. Jesus taught that God relates to humans as a caring parent. See Matthew 6:25-33 and the parable of the two sons in Luke 15:11-32.

Jesus’ followers, however, went on to believe that Jesus himself is what God is. They found that Jesus conveyed and reflected this in his own person. Jesus became the source of their experience of God as well as the object of that experience. In their experiences with Jesus, his followers believed they experienced God. Jesus’ words and actions were disclosures of the God of Israel.

New Testament writings indicate that these responses to Jesus took shape as confessions of faith. They were expressions of how those in Christian communities had experienced Jesus and how they continued to experience the reality of his presence in their midst after his death and resurrection.

### The Person of Jesus

Throughout the New Testament Jesus is recognized as a fully human person. Read Galatians 4:4-5 and Hebrews