

WEEK 1
Ideas for LFL OT

What are your questions? What would you like to see addressed?

Chronology
How it all fits together

My experience

Moody Bible Class
Cornell Bible Study

Our beautiful Bibles

MSS

The Canon
"Books" in Bible Times

Genres
Reading skills.
Bible with family trees and diagrams? Footnotes? Appendices?

"Thought for the day"? Moral lessons?

So how should we read it?

Walton *Lost World of Scripture*

NIV *Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*

John Drane *Introducing the Old Testament*

Gordon Wenham *Exploring the Old Testament, Pentateuch*

Philip Satterthwaite and Gordon McConville, *Exploring the OT, Historical Books*

Ernest Lucas *Exploring the OT, Psalms and Wisdom Literature*

Gordon McConville *Exploring the OT, the Prophets*

Christopher Wright *How to Preach and Teach the Scripture for All Its Worth*

George Guthrie *Read the Bible for Your Life*

George Guthrie *Reading God's Story*

Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*

MAJOR BACKGROUND ISSUES FROM THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

Most of us are probably unprepared for how different the ancient world was from our own.

Israel was immersed in the "cultural river" of the ANE

"To think about the ancient world, we can use the metaphor of a cultural river that flowed through the societies and thoughts of the peoples and nations of the ancient Near East. Israel was immersed in that cultural river; it was embedded in that conceptual world. Sometimes God gave revelation that drew them out, as Moses from the Nile, and distinguished them, but generally we should think of them in this cultural river. Sometimes they were floating on its currents; sometimes they veered out of the currents and stood apart. At other times they swam resolutely upstream against those currents."

1. The Great Symbiosis

People in the ancient world believed that the gods had made people as slave labourers because they were tired of growing their own food and taking care of their own needs. People cared for the gods, who lived an opulent, pampered lifestyle, and, in turn the gods took care of people because they had a vested interest in doing so.

Thus there was a co-dependent relationship of mutual need.

This provides the context for understanding
temples
rituals
worship
religious obligation

Israel is called to a far different way of thinking, because God has no needs.

2. Presence of God in Sacred Space

People in the ancient world highly desired that their god take up residence with them.

It was important for the god so that they could be pampered, and important for the people so that they could receive blessing.

The presence of the god created sacred space that had to be respected and honoured.

Limited access and purity requirements were taken very seriously.

This shows why all religion in the ancient world was local.

Only those who lived in the vicinity of the temple could be engaged in caring for the gods, and the gods would only be interested in caring for and protecting those who could take care of him/her.

Yahweh was a very different sort of God.

3. Gods in Community

In the ancient world identity was found in one's community rather than in one's individuality.

Like people, gods found their identity in relationship to the group to which they belonged.

Each god had a constellation of attributes, just as people have different skills and abilities.

The pantheon of gods was characterized by a hierarchy:

- cosmic gods
- national gods
- city patrons
- clan deities
- ancestral deities

and by differentiation, according to their

- jurisdiction
- manifestation
- attributes.

Given this cultural reality, we can surmise that it was very difficult for the Israelites to adjust to a single God spanning all levels of hierarchy and all categories of jurisdiction.

4. Revelation and Manifestation of Deities

The deities in the ancient world were generally not believed to be forthcoming—that is, they were generally believed not to reveal themselves broadly (with exceptions in responding to divinatory inquiries).

Consequently, one could never be sure what the god expected from people.

Whenever something went wrong, people would assume that they had offended some deity.

However, they did manifest themselves in different ways.

The sun, moon, planets and stars were all considered manifestations of gods.

The most important manifestation of a god was in the image, which the god commissioned. The god then took up residence in the image.

The image was able to act as a mediator for the presence of the deity, for the care of the deity, and for the worship given to the deity.

The Israelites were to have no such mediators, for no man-made image could accomplish these things and Yahweh had no needs to be met by the image.

5. Spirit World

Other classes of spiritual beings included

- chaos creatures

- demons

- servants of the gods

- spirits of deceased humans.

These creatures were not believed to be morally flawed.

Sometimes their intrinsic nature wreaked havoc.

Some could serve apotropaic functions.

Others were more inclined to devour.

None of this fits in to how we think about demons today.

The OT lacks demons almost entirely.

Chaos creatures (Rahab, Leviathan?) less free of Yahweh's control.

6. Natural vs. Supernatural

The ancient world didn't differentiate them.

They didn't speak of "miracles" but of signs and wonders that were manifestations of God's power.

Israel was much like the rest of the world in this respect.

7. Deep Reality

In the ancient world people did not circumscribe reality within the category of historical events. They did not ask, "Did it really happen?"

They considered "reality" a small slice of a reality that transcended history.

What we call their mythology was more real to them than their history. When ancient people talked about events, they often found the most significant reality in what God/the gods had done, not in what people had done. We misunderstand when we think of mythology as made-up stories about gods that did not exist and therefore treat them as fairy tales.

Ancient Israel's thinking was very similar to the ancient world in this regard.

8. Creation and Order

When we think about creation and origins we think in material terms.

In the ancient world people were much more inclined to think of creation not so much as manufacturing the material cosmos, but establishing order in the cosmos and making it function with a particular purpose in mind.

Gods were the source of order, wisdom was the pursuit of order, creation was the establishment of order.

Israelites would have thought of the cosmos and God's creative work in similar terms, but of course, Yahweh was the Creator.

9. Religion and Magic

These were not different categories in the ancient world, and it is not possible to separate them from one another.

Magic entailed the exercise of power (in spells, hexes, exorcisms, sorcery, necromancy, etc.) but operated on the power associated with the name of a person and the name of a deity.

Divination was understood to provide access to what the gods were doing (signalled in the stars, terrestrial occurrences, dreams, entrails of sacrificed animals, and in many other indicators).

Israelites were forbidden to practise most forms of divination and were not to use God's name to attempt to control him.

10. Death and Memory

Ancient people considered community as extending beyond the world of the living. When someone died, he joined the group of ancestors in the underworld, yet also remained in the community of those still alive—remembered by them and still receiving care from them (in the form of meals to the dead).

Burial customs reflected these beliefs. If someone was left unburied they were unable to join their ancestors and thus were left homeless, uncared for, very unhappy, and prone to haunt the living.

During their lifetime, people would strive to do things that would make them remembered. Chief among these was having children.

Israel thought in very similar ways.

11. Identity in Community

In this context arranged marriages made sense. Levirate marriage was important.

Religion was a family choice, not an individual choice.

Families worshipped the gods within their family circle. A woman who married outside her family circle would adopt the gods of that clan.

Guilt and blessing both operated on a communal level.

Israel thought in very much the same terms.

12. Retribution Principle

People believed that the righteous would prosper and that the wicked would suffer.

This led to the belief that if one pleased the gods (took care of them well) one would receive their blessing, and that if one didn't, the gods would be angry and lash out.

Such a belief led people to believe that if someone were prospering, they must be doing well by the gods, and if they were suffering they must have done something to anger the gods and must be shunned.

This applied not only to the individual but also to the community, family or clan.

Some of the Psalms and Proverbs seem to affirm this principle. A full reading of the Bible, especially the book of Job, nuances this principle.

from Cultural Backgrounds

1. The Great Symbiosis
2. Presence of God in Sacred Space
3. Gods in Community
4. Revelation and Manifestation of Deities
5. Spirit World
6. Natural vs. Supernatural
7. Deep Reality
8. Creation and Order
9. Religion and Magic
10. Death and Remembering
11. Identity in Community
12. Retribution Principle

Walton, John H. *The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority*

In addition to the challenges of comprehending ancient literary culture, there's a considerable "lostness" in how the Bible came into being.

Much of what was eventually written was first revealed in oral forms.

For example:

We find God speaking to Jeremiah for twenty-three years, and after all those years and sermons only then telling him to write what he had been preaching.

Or Jesus preaching and living out the truth for three years with no hint of writing down his teaching or even suggesting that his followers should preserve anything in writing.

Or the book of Acts recording the first thirty years of the history of the early church with no reference to written forms of the gospel.

How does all this affect

- how you read the OT
- how you think about the OT
- how you apply the OT to your own life?

Proposed Outline

1 Introduction

2 Genesis 1-11

3 Patriarchs

Abraham to Joseph

4 Exodus

Moses

Covenant(s)

God's revelation of himself Ex 3 and elsewhere. Job

The Passover, wilderness, Tabernacle, Promised Land

Relationship with surrounding nations.

5 Sinai. Ten Commandments. The laws and the feasts. Sacrifice.

6 Israel asks for a king.

Saul. David.

God's promise to David.

Solomon.

The Temple

7 Psalms

8 Proverbs and wisdom literature, Eccles. SS

9 Historical books

10 Prophets

11 Exile

12 Return. Rebuilding of Temple

Read through the OT in 40 weeks

a. I have a possible schedule. Ask me if you'd like a copy.

b. Anyone interested in doing it as part of a group, we'll be meeting every Tuesday at 7:00 here in the church for questions and discussion. Starting next Tuesday, April 10.