

The Message of God’s People in the Old Testament

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The principal task of God’s people in the Old Testament¹ was to worship and serve the Lord (Exod 4:22–23a; 15:13–14a; 19:5–6), and to present a right picture of God (Deut 4:5–8; Isa 66:19; Ezek 36:22–24; 37:27–28), a picture which, at the beginning of human history, had become distorted in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:1–6).² Sinfulness makes humans naturally afraid of God (Gen 3:10), and a twisted view of God

¹ There are two important delimitations of this article: (1) It is assumed that the Old Testament people formed the so-called Old Testament Church. For further study, see my article, “The Concept and Notion of the Church in the Pentateuch,” in *For You Have Strengthened Me”: Biblical and Theological Studies in Honor of Gerhard Pfandl in Celebration of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Martin Pröbstle, Gerard A. Klingbeil, and Martin G. Klingbeil, (St Peter am Hart: Seminar Schloss Bogenhofen, 2007), 3–22; and Joseph E. Coleson, “Covenant Community in the Old Testament,” in *Wesleyan Theological Perspectives* 4 (1984): 3–25. (2) This paper does not analyze the teaching of the Old Testament in its entirety (wisdom literature, legislative material, rebukes, calls for repentance, etc.), but mainly evaluates the message of the Old Testament people which needed to be carried and transmitted to others. I can only deal with the topic in the form of a summary, highlighting principle points, and thus I have to simplify. (3) This is not an exegetical but a theological study, therefore the reader should not expect a depth exegesis. However, the author of this article strongly believes that good theology must be built only on a solid exegesis; this is why supportive exegetical material for different theological points is provided in the notes.

² See my article “The Nature and Definition of Sin: A Practical Study of Genesis 3:1–6,” in *The Word of God for the People of God: A Tribute to the Ministry of Jack J. Blanco*, ed. Ron du Preez, Philip G. Samaan, and Ron E. M. Clouzet (Collegedale: School of Religion, Southern Adventist University, 2004), 289–306.

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worsens the situation. This is why the primary mission of the Old Testament Church³ was to present the correct character of God and His loving and righteous acts (Pss 67:1–7; 96:2–9; 105:1–2; 126:2–3; 145:11–12). Only when people are attracted to God and are convinced of His unselfish love toward them personally and toward the world will they trust Him, enjoy His company, follow Him, and live gratefully according to His Word.

I. The Content of the Message

What was in essence the message of the Old Testament Church? To epitomize the content of the Hebrew Scriptures in a few points is an almost impossible task. I will dare to summarize it into five principal themes that are dominant throughout the Old Testament:

1. God Is the Creator. The message of the Old Testament people opens with a cornerstone proclamation: God is the Creator (“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” [Gen 1:1]).⁴ This marvelous confession was the bedrock of all their proclamations because on this premise and critical recognition (Heb 11:3,6) hung the rest of divine revelation. God’s people do not try to prove God’s existence and His creative activity; they simply assume it and boldly declare it. The Creation account testifies to how God created humans in His image and in total dependency on Him. When the prophet Jonah, first missionary to the Assyrians, was asked by sailors who he was, he confessed that he worshiped “the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land” (Jonah 1:9). The theme of Creation permeates all biblical material, which is full of references to the God Creator (e.g., Gen 14:19–22; Deut 32:6; Pss 8; 19; 33:9; 104; 139; Isa 40:28; 41:20; 45:7–8; 46:9–10; 55:11; Jer 10:6–16; 51:15–19).

For the Old Testament people of God, the doctrine of Creation was an article of faith on which their message depended. All their thinking was tied to Creation, and their essential doctrinal points can be directly or indirectly traced to their Creation roots. Without protology (the biblical doctrine of first things; i.e., the Creation and the Fall), there is no soteriology (the biblical doctrine of salvation), nor eschatology (the biblical

³ We use the phrase “Old Testament Church” in a broad sense which encompasses Old Testament people who believed in and worshiped the true living God from the time of Adam and Eve onward. Israel was a nation from the ethnic point of view, but also a Church when they worshiped the Lord. Thus, we do not equate the Old Testament church with Israel, even though it is included as a community of faith.

⁴ All translations of the biblical text are taken from the New International Version.

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doctrine of last things—i.e., the Second Coming of Christ, the Judgment, and the New Earth).⁵

The message of Creation is about life, and the essence of genuine life is about relationship. In the Creation stories, God is presented as the One who is transcendent and universal, establishes relationships, because the purpose of the first Creation narrative (Gen 1:1–2:4a) is about establishing a close relationship between God and humans. The second Creation account (Gen 2:4b–25) is about building a relationship in the most nuclear human cell—marriage.⁶ These two relationships, vertical and horizontal, are complementary and must always come in their described, ordered sequence so that human life can be meaningful, beautiful, and happy and humans can develop all their potential. We were created in a total dependency upon God; therefore, only from Him can humans receive all they need for building deep bonds of lasting relationships. First comes a cultivation of a loving relationship with God, then with one's marriage partner, and finally with other people. Trust is the foundation of these relationships. The people of the Old Testament thus presented the living God and the God of relationships! This emphasis on the Creator helps the people of God to have a wall of defense against the infiltration of idolatry (Isa 40:18–28; Jer 10:3–12), which is the primary denial of God's creative power and His uniqueness (Exod 15:11; 20:2–6,23; Deut 4:35,39; 6:14–15; Neh 9:6; Ps 86:10; Isa 44:6–11; 45:18) and is a constant danger and an attractive alternative (humans are like a “factory” for fabricating idols—unfortunately, a very successful “factory”).

Claus Westermann accurately observes that the biblical message about our Creator is always in the context of praises. One cannot understand God as the Creator without admiring and praising Him at the same time. This conjunction with the exaltation of God is vital—He is unique,

⁵ Claus Westermann, *Beginning and End in the Bible*, Biblical Series, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 1, 7, 17–20; 33–39; Norman R. Gulley, “The Impact of Eschatology on Protology,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 11/1–2 (2000): 51–101.

⁶ From the Garden of Eden until today, we have two precious God-given gifts: the Sabbath (the climax of the first Creation account) and marriage (the apex of the second Creation narrative). For a more detailed interpretation of the biblical-creation accounts, see Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1967), 43–66; Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with New JPS Translation/Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 3–23; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1 (Waco: Word, 1987), 1–72.

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alive, no one is like Him, He is above all, and only He can create life. This is why He is worthy of our praise and adoration (see, for example, Pss 8:1–9; 19:1–4; 104:1–3,31–35; compare with Rev 4:11).⁷

2. The Messiah Will Come. The message of the Old Testament people gravitates around God's promise of the Seed⁸ who will overcome the serpent (Satan) and bring victory over evil. This expectation was their theological center. This promise, given by the God Creator and Judge in the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve sinned (Gen 3:15),⁹ is the foundational hope of the Old Testament people (Gen 4:1; Num 24:17; Deut 18:15, 18; Isa 7:14; 9:6; Micah 5:2). This hope focused on the victorious substitutionary death of the Messiah on our behalf (Isa 53; compare with Gen 22:13–14) and was incorporated into the sacrificial system (Lev 1–7; 16) with blood playing the pivotal role (Exod 12:13,22–23; Lev 17:11), thus pointing to the death of the Lamb of God for sinners.¹⁰ The people of God bore witness to this expectation of the coming of the Messiah, and their eyes were fixed on the future fulfillment of this crucial promise (Isa 11:1–9; 52:13–53:12; Jer 23:5–6; Ezek 34:23; 37:24–28; Hag 2:7; Mal 3:1).¹¹

⁷ Claus Westermann, *The Genesis Accounts of Creation*, trans. and intro. by Norman E. Wagner (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), 37.

⁸ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., made the strong point about the centrality of this promise in the Old Testament message. See his *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978).

⁹ See Afolarin O. Ojewole, "The Seed in Genesis 3:15: An Exegetical and Intertextual Study" (Ph.D. diss., Andrews University, 2002).

¹⁰ Angel M. Rodriguez, *Substitution in the Hebrew Cultus*, Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series, vol. 3 (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 1979); J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), 422–444; Philip E. Satterthwaite, Richard S. Hess, and Gordon J. Wenham, eds., *The Lord's Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).

¹¹ See Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003); Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); Fredrick C. Holmgren, *The Old Testament and the Significance of Jesus*, foreword by Walter Brueggemann (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); Donald Juel, *Messianic Exegesis: Christological Interpretation of the Old Testament in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Messiah in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); John Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994); and Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992).

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Truth about the Messiah as the Promised Man, His identity, and function was unfolded more fully during the ongoing time. The Pentateuch lays down the solid foundation for messianic expectations. First, God gave the promise about the Victorious Seed in Gen 3:15, which is rightly called the “mother prophecy”¹² that gave a basis for all other messianic promises, and then Eve added her understanding of this statement in the hopeful words: “I have received a man that is the Lord” (Gen 4:1; translation is mine); it means that according to her understanding, the Messiah would be divine.¹³ Afterwards it was stated that God would “dwell in the tents of Shem” (Gen 9:27); He would come from Abraham’s offspring, and through Him the blessing would be truly mediated to all the families of the earth (Gen 12:3). The Messiah would come from the tribe of Judah (Gen 49:10), would act as a victorious king (Num 24:17), but at the same time He would be a prophet (Deut 18:18). This person would bear different titles like Seed, Shiloh, Scepter, Star, King, and Prophet. Later in the Messianic Psalms, His mission was more defined (Pss 2; 22; 24; 110); and in the figures of the Davidic King (Isa 11:1–10; Jer 23:5–6; Ezek 34:23–26; 37:24–28), the Servant of the Lord (Isa 42; 49; 50; 52:13–53:12; 61:1–3), and the Son of Man (Dan 7:14), these messianic expectations were brought to a climax. In addition, the prophetic material contains many messianic predictions and new titles for Him (for example, Isa 4:2; 7:14; 9:6; Jer 23:5–6; Ezek 21:25–27; 34:23–31; 37:15–28; Dan 9:24–27; Hos 3:3–5; Mic 5:2; Hag 2:6–9; Mal 4:2).¹⁴

3. God Will Establish His Kingdom. The message of the Old Testament people was about God’s kingdom. On the one hand, they rejoiced over the gift of life with an emphasis on the present joy of the physical dimensions, because God’s creation was “very good” (Gen 1:31); but on the other hand, they pointed to the future where the Lord would be totally in control and sin would be no more (Isa 24–27; 65–66; Ezek 38–48; Dan 2). God is the Sovereign Ruler of the whole universe; He reigns, knows the end from the very beginning, and will accomplish His purposes (Job 1:6; Isa 46:9–10). He is the Director of human history (Dan

¹² James E. Smith, *What the Bible Teaches about the Promised Messiah* (Nashville: Nelson, 1993), 38.

¹³ See Kaiser, *The Messiah*, 42.

¹⁴ Kaiser argues for sixty-five direct messianic passages in the Old Testament (six predictions in the Pentateuch, four in Job, five prior to and during the Davidic Era, eleven in Psalms, and thirty-nine in the Prophets of the Old Testament). See the summary chart in his book *The Messiah*, 240–242.

2:21) and will bring it to its climax by establishing His kingdom (Zech 14:9; Dan 2:44; 7:27). He is the mighty Warrior (Exod 15:1-3; Deut 7:1-2; Josh 5:13-15).¹⁵ God Himself (not humans by their political or religious achievements) will establish this kingdom on earth, and He will come personally to inaugurate it (Dan 2:45). The faithful people of God will inherit the kingdom of God (Dan 7:22,27). God is the King and Restorer of the lost paradise (Dan 2:47; Pss 24:7; 47:7,9; Isa 32:1; Jer 30:9; Hos 3:5). The resurrection of the dead will accompany this unique intervention of God in human history by establishing the kingdom of God (Job 19:25-27; Isa 26:19; Dan 12:2).

4. Salvation/Redemption Comes from the Lord. The biblical message reveals its straightforward paradigm—from Creation (Gen 1-2) through de-Creation (the Fall [Gen 3] and the Flood accounts [Gen 6-7]) to re-Creation (Gen 8-9; and fully in Rev 21-22).¹⁶ It is a deliberate design, and between Creation and the ultimate new Creation lies the story of redemption, of how God deals with sin and how He saves those who believe in Him.¹⁷ God's people testify that God is their Savior and Redeemer (Deut 32:15; 2 Sam 22:3; 1 Chr 16:35; Job 19:25; Pss 18:46; 19:14; 43:5; Isa 44:6; 48:17; 59:20; Jer 14:8; Hos 13:4) and that salvation comes from the Lord (Pss 62:1; 118:14; Isa 12:2; Jonah 2:9) as a result of His grace (Gen 6:8; Exod 34:6; Ps 103:8-11). Righteousness is received from the Lord as a free gift through faith (Gen 15:6; Ps 51:10-12; Hab 2:4; Isa 61:10), otherwise we are all sinful and our robes dirty (Isa 64:6; Ps 51:4-5; Eccl 7:20; Jer 13:23; 17:9). Only the Lord forgives transgressions, blots them out, and brings a solution to the sin problem (Exod 34:6; Pss 32:1-2; 103:12; Isa 1:18; 38:17; 43:25; 44:22; Jer 32:34; Mic

¹⁵ Tremper Longman III and Daniel G. Reid, *God is a Warrior* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997).

¹⁶ David J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, 2nd ed., *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series*, 10 (Sheffield: Academic, 1997.), 80-82, speaks about the creation—uncreation—re-creation theme in relationship to Gen 1-11.

¹⁷ Let us not forget that redemption and salvation are nothing more than a spiritual re-creation which culminates in the restoration of all things in Christ (Eph 1:10; 1 Cor 15:20,53-57). In this way a new concept of time is introduced which flows from the beginning of human history (Creation) to the ultimate end (establishment of the kingdom of God). This understanding of time is called “linear” in contrast to a “cyclical” pagan view of time. This is presented by the Old Testament people as a result of God's revelation.

7:19). The people of the Old Testament proclaimed this essential truth about the kingdom of grace.¹⁸

5. God Is the Ultimate Judge of All People. An indispensable part of the message of the people of God in the Old Testament was that God is the Judge of humanity, of all nations and people, because He is the God of justice. This message lay at the heart of God's revelation and gave a profound paradigm to their thinking because next to the fundamental proclamation that God is the Creator (Gen 1–2), the Lord is presented as the Judge: in the Garden of Eden there is the first reference to a trial judgment (Gen 3:8–24).¹⁹ Thus, from the very beginning of divine revelation, God is repeatedly presented in that capacity (Gen 3; 4; 6–9; 11; 18–19; etc.), and judgment is understood as an integral part of His nature, His divine prerogative, and His very fundamental characteristic.²⁰ News about divine judgment saturates biblical revelation (Pss 7:8–9; 76:8–9; Isa 35:4–5; Ezek 7:3–4; 9:1–11; 18:30; Dan 7:22,26). Abraham calls God “the Judge of all the earth” (Gen 18:25). Two biblical books

¹⁸ There is no clear distinction made in the Old Testament between the first and second coming of the Messiah. Both pictures merge together, and the reader needs to pay close attention to the context and hints in the text as to where to put its timing. It is like the distance of stars in constellations. For example, it seems to human eyes that in the constellation of Orion all stars are on an equal level and the same distance from the earth. However, in reality we know with the help of telescopes that each star is a different distance, some relatively close and others much farther away. The depth is different for each star, but to us all of Orion's stars seem like they are hanging on the same level. Similarly, to the Old Testament people, the first and second Advents were seen as one future event (see, for example, Isa 52:13–15; Zech 9:9–13; 12–14). Only later revelation provided precise insight into this time related matter.

¹⁹ Claus Westerman, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Ausbur, 1984), 254: “The purpose of the trial scene is to make clear to the man and the woman what they have done.” In this judgment the grace and justice of God are intermingled. Grace was demonstrated because the first couple did not die on the day when they ate the forbidden fruit as was stated by God (Gen 2:16–17; 3:9; compare with Rev 13:8), and the proto-Gospel with the promise of the Seed and victory over the serpent was given (Gen 3:15). Justice was exhibited because they were expelled from the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:24) and later they died (Gen 5:5).”

The very first question of God: “Where are you?” was manifold in purpose. It was an invitation of grace to a dialogue, then a help to materialize where they were in their relationship with God (instead of enjoying His presence they were afraid of Him and hiding), and finally it was also a call to responsibility for past sinful action.

²⁰ For details of the judgment theme in the Bible, see my article, “Toward a Biblical Theology of God's Judgment: A Celebration of the Cross in Seven Phases of Divine Universal Judgment (An Overview of a Theocentric-Christocentric Approach),” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 15/1 (2004): 138–165.

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carry the concept of judgment in their titles: the book of Judges and the book of Daniel.²¹ Prophets, as servants of the covenant, speak eloquently about God's impending and eschatological judgments (e.g., Joel 3:12; Jonah 3:4; Hos 1:8; 2:23; Amos 5:18–20; Isa 6:1–13; 26:9–11; Jer 11:20; Ezek 7:3–4; 9:1–11; 18:30). Additionally, wisdom literature paints a judgment picture (e.g., Job 19:25,29; Pss 50:6; 96:13; Eccl 12:13–14).

Thus, humans are accountable to God, and they are responsible for their work. The message of God's people is to call all to repentance, to come back to God, to respect, love and obey Him, and do what is right and good (Deut 10:12–12; 30:6; Isa 58:6–12; Joel 2:12–14; Jonah 3:2–9; Mic 6:8). To understand His judgments means to know God better and comprehend His values and priorities. God actually invites us to apprehend His judgments in order to be able to deliberately declare that He is the God of love and justice (Pss 34:8; 51:4; compare with Rom 3:4; Phil 2:10–11), because His word and character were challenged and ridiculed from the beginning (Gen 3:1–5; Ezek 28:16 [the Hebrew root *rakal* can also mean “go around to gossip or slander”²²]; Isa 14:12–15; Job 1:6–12).²³

II. How Was the Message of the Old Testament People Conveyed?

There are at least four main ways the message was carried by the Old Testament people to each successive generation and those who were interested to learn about the true God, His truth, and the plan of salvation:

1. Through Words: Stories, Teaching, and Preaching. The Old Testament people of God recounted God's mighty acts, His instructions,

²¹ The book of Judges is called in Hebrew *shophtim*, derived from the root *shapat*, “to judge.” The Hebrew name “Daniel” means “God is my Judge.” In a sense we all bear the symbolic name Daniel, because God is Judge of all of us. In the book of Revelation, the last, seventh church is named “Laodicea” (Rev 3:14–22), which means “people of judgment.” See also the following studies on judgment: Eric Alan Mitchell, *A Literary Examination of the Function of Satire in the mišpaṭ hammeleḵ of 1 Samuel 8* (Lewiston: Mellen Biblical, 2007); Temba L. J. Mafico, *Yahweh's Emergence as “Judge” Among the Gods: A Study of the Hebrew Root špt* (Lewiston: Mellen Biblical, 2007).

²² Richard M. Davidson, “Satan's Celestial Slander,” *Perspective Digest* 1/1 (1996): 31–34.

²³ See also Jose M. Bertoluci, “The Son of the Morning and the Guardian Cherub in the Context of the Controversy Between Good and Evil” (Ph.D. diss., Andrews University, 1985). It is important to notice that all five principal thoughts of the Old Testament Church (God is the Creator; belief in the Messiah Jesus; hope in the establishment of God's kingdom; salvation as God's gift; and God as Judge) are capsuled in the Three Angels' Message of Revelation 14:6–13.

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and His law to their children and other families (Deut 6:6–9; Ps 145:4–7). They retold the stories of the Hebrew Scriptures—the accounts of Creation, Flood, patriarchs, Exodus, judges, kings, etc. (i.e., the plan of salvation in the form of stories). According to Exod 12, parents had to provide appropriate answers to the inquiring questions of their children (12:26–27).

Another way believers in the Old Testament times proclaimed the truth about God was their usage of different designations for God—His different names and titles. There are nuances of meaning associated with the names of the Deity. For example, *Yahweh* (Gen 2:4) is a personal, immanent, close God, the God of the covenant and His people; *Elohim* (Gen 1:1) is a transcendent God of all human beings, the powerful Creator; and *El Shadday* (Gen 17:1) is an omnipotent powerful God.²⁴ The people of God also praised the Lord by stressing His attributes in different actions. They described the true God as being holy (Lev 11:44; 19:2; Isa 6:3), loving (Deut 6:5; Ps 103:10–11; Isa 63:8), gracious (Joel 2:12), compassionate (Ps 103:13), patient (Ps 103:8), faithful (Deut 7:9; Ps 33:4; Isa 49:7; Lam 3:23), kind (Jer 9:24); good (Exod 33:19; Pss 23:6; 34:8), knowing the end from the beginning (Isa 46:9–10), true (Jer 10:10), just (Gen 18:25), truthful (Pss 31:5; 40:10), forgiving (Exod 34:6; Ps 32:1–2), merciful (Deut 4:31; Neh 9:31), jealous (Exod 20:5; Exod 34:14), powerful (Ps 29:4; Jer 32:18), caring (Exod 19:4), etc. The psalmists very often praised God’s goodness, steadfast love, and faithfulness (Pss 100; 117; 137).

2. Through the Sanctuary Services. The spiritual life of the Old Testament people was concentrated around the sanctuary/temple where God’s presence resided (Exod 25:8; 40:34–35; 2 Chr 7:1–3; Isa 6:1–4). All services in the sanctuary were an object lesson of God’s plan of redemption.²⁵ There God explained how He dealt with sin and revealed how He saved people. Sacrifices foretold the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus.

²⁴ For a detailed discussion on this point, see Umberto Cassuto, *The Documentary Hypothesis and the Composition of the Pentateuch: Eight Lectures* (Jerusalem: Magnes, The Hebrew University, 1983); and Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. Arthur W. Heathcote and Philip J. Allcock (New York: Harper, 1958).

²⁵ See Roy E. Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004); Frank B. Holbrook, *The Atoning Priesthood of Jesus Christ* (Berrien Springs: Adventist Theological Society Publications, 1996); Edward Heppinstall, *Our High Priest: Jesus Christ in the Heavenly Sanctuary* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1972); Arnold V. Wallenkampf and W. Richard Leshner, eds., *The Sanctuary and*

3. Through Celebrating Festivals. The religious calendar of God's people during the Old Testament time commemorated the most important events from the story of redemption, pointed to divine interventions in human history, and thus facilitated a better understanding of God and His plans. The liturgical anchors were incorporated into the yearly cycle around the spring and fall festivals (Lev 23; Num 28–29), where three feasts were dominant and each Israelite had to attend them: the Passover, the Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles (Exod 23:14–17). The message in rituals helped people to become familiar with God's instructions, because repetition of religious activities in celebration of different festivals year after year was a powerful way to experience the message. Faith had to be lived tangibly and not only confessed.²⁶

4. Through Legislation. Divine law, especially the Decalogue, is an expression of God's character because His law reveals who is God. The Legislator's imprint is seen in the different laws, codes, and precepts. God's law was a warrant of life, therefore it was a joy for the Old Testament people to meditate on God's instructions day and night (Pss 1:2; 119; Prov 3–4). By keeping the law of God, people proclaimed in tangible, everyday life the message of their God (Deut 4:5–10).

In addition, the practical message of the Old Testament people of God was also carried through songs, prayers, sign-actions (e.g., Prophet Ezekiel performed twelve symbolic acts), re-establishments of the covenant, and recitation of confessions of faith like the *Shema* (Deut 6:4–9), the Decalogue (Exod 20:1–17; Deut 5:6–21), or the Exodus story (Exod 12:25–27; Deut 26:5–11) because these practices revealed the theology of God's people and their value system. Thus, truth became a part of their everyday lifestyle.

III. The Main Characteristics of the Message of the Old Testament People

The basic question is, what are the main characteristics of the Old Testament message? The message's content and how it was conveyed

the Atonement: Biblical, Historical, and Theological Studies (Washington: Review and Herald, 1981).

²⁶ Activities of the Church religious calendar should be centered on God's salvific events and not primarily focused on anthropocentric programs scheduled on special days during the year. We need to rethink our practices and learn from the liturgical calendar of the Old Testament people in order that our yearly cycle be theocentric, oriented vertically on the main events in the plan of salvation, and celebrate God's work for humanity, which will help to create a right attitude and joyful service.

nanced the characteristics of the truth which the people of God presented during Old Testament times.

1. Revelational. The message of the Old Testament people is revelational; this means that it is revealed by the Lord to human instruments who transmit the message (Jer 1:2; Ezek 1:3; Hos 1:1; Joel 1:1; compare with 1 Thess 3:16–17; 2 Pet 1:20–21). The message is thus not of human invention, and in reality it is a self-revelation of God stated sometimes directly (Exod 20:1–17; 34:6–7), but mainly indirectly (for example, the prophetic formula: “Thus says the Lord”; Exod 4:22; 5:1; Isa 7:7; 37:6; 48:17; Jer 2:2,5,27; 5:14; Ezek 2:4; 3:11,27, etc.). In other words, the message of the Hebrew Scriptures comes from above, from an outside source. One can know the God of the Old Testament only on the basis of God’s revelation (Amos 3:7; Deut 29:29). The people of God can know God because He has made Himself known to them! Revelation is a verb (*gālāh*, “to reveal”) and is used in the passive forms (when it is employed with the idea of revelation; i.e., “it was revealed”; “it has been uncovered”) in order to demonstrate the dynamics of the process of revelation that is given by God to prophets or other writers.²⁷

Old Testament people lived by what God said about Himself, from what He revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exod 34:6–7; Deut 8:3).²⁸ This self-revelation of God is the backbone of the biblical message and theology; it is the golden thread of the Old Testament, and the rest of the Old Testament explains what it means and is a commentary on it (see, for example, Num 14:18; Neh 9:17; Ps 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2).

2. Theological. The message of the Old Testament people is theological in nature. The Hebrew Scriptures are not only coming from God, but it is primarily a message about God. The nature of God’s revelation is to present the right picture of God and genuinely testify about the character of the true living God and who He is. It means that the message of the Old Testament people is theocentric and must be presented from

²⁷ See Ralph L. Smith, *Old Testament Theology: Its History, Method, and Message* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 98–101. Smith reports: “Hebrew does not have a noun for revelation” (99).

²⁸ This highest description of the goodness of God (see Exod 33:18–19) is repeated by Moses (Num 14:17–19; Deut 4:31), David (Pss 103:8; 145:8), and many prophets and Bible writers (Neh 9:17; Joel 2:13; Nah 1:2–3; Mic 7:18; Jonah when he wanted to excuse his disobedience [4:2]).

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that perspective; the message is Messiah-centered (see John 5:39–40; Luke 24:27, 44; 1 Cor 10:1–4).²⁹

3. Historical. The message of the Old Testament people is historical in nature. God speaks in time and space. Salvation history is factual, real, and is presented with a linear understanding of time, in contrast to a cyclical pagan understanding of time. In other words, the Old Testament message is rooted in history and actually happens (including Gen 1–11). This is in sharp contrast with philosophical Greek platonic or gnostic thinking in which only the world of ideas is good, but not actual physical events in history. Kerygma is good, but so is history.³⁰

4. Relational. The message of the Old Testament people is relational. The relationship with God is a **faith relationship** based on trust (Gen 15:6; Isa 53:1). God's desire to build a personal relationship with His people is well explained in Exod 19:4: "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and *brought you to myself*." True religion is about a personal, intimate, and close relationship with God that is then manifested in right relationships with others (Lev 19:18)! The stress on relationship with God is attested to in different parts of the Hebrew Scriptures (Num 15:41; Deut 10:12; 2 Chr 30:9; Neh 1:9; Jer 24:7; Lam 3:40; 5:21; Hos 6:1; 12:6; 14:1; Joel 2:12; Amos 5:4, 6; Zech 1:3). God is always in search of humanity; He takes the first step. When Adam and Eve sinned, they tried to hide from God,

²⁹ See especially, Brian Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994). The celebration of the Passover (Exod 12) was an integral part of the religious cycle of God's people. In this celebration, the symbolism of the blood played a very significant role. Theologically speaking, the blood of the lamb was a sign of protection, salvation, and life (Exod 12:13) and pointed to the blood of Jesus (Rom 3:25; 1 Cor 5:7; 1 Pet 1:18–19; Heb 9:11–28).

³⁰ The relationship between message and history is a very significant hermeneutical problem in modern scholarship. The issue is how one understands history. Can we really have a true message without being rooted in history? Salvation history is real history (see Paul's underlining the factuality of the physical resurrection of Jesus—1 Cor 15:12–20).

Separating faith and history is like neo-Docetism or neo-Platonism. These models of interpreting the historicity of events do not match with biblical realism because they dissect the physical and spiritual realms. To try to find only a historical core in the biblical narratives and reject the rest can be compared to an "onion" effect. You peel off different layers of the onion in order to get to the core, but after taking off all the layers, you discover that there is no core because an onion is only composed of various layers. To build theology only on kerygma or abstract faith is a very dangerous enterprise; it may be that at the end nothing will be left. It is like making out of theology a philosophy that is built on appealing ideas that have no relevance to time and space.

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but He was looking after them, calling them back (Gen 3:9). This is the pattern of God's love for human beings.

The message of the Old Testament stresses a **love relationship**. Not only that God is love (Isa 63:9), but also the human's response to God needs to be motivated by love. The first and greatest commandment underlines this fact: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deut 6:5; see also Deut 10:12; 30:6).

This relationship is built on a **covenant relationship**. The covenant formula, "I will be your God and you will be my people" (Exod 6:7; Lev 26:12; Deut 26:17–18; Jer 7:23; 11:4; 31:33; Ezek 11:20; 14:11; 34:30; 36:26–28; compare with Exod 19:5–6; Isa 51:16; Hos 1:9; Zech 8:8), is the heart of His covenantal promise and speaks eloquently about the close relationship God wants to build with His followers.³¹ A covenant, a legal establishment of a relationship, is a means by which God expresses His faithfulness and care for His children and demonstrates His lasting will. He wants His people to maintain an exclusive and meaningful relationship with Him. Thus, the message of the Old Testament people was carried also by the re-establishments of the covenant of grace in which fundamental stipulations were incorporated in order that the people might maintain the right relationship with the Lord (Gen 6; 9; 12; 15; 17; Josh 24; 2 Sam 7; Jer 31:31–34; Ezek 11:19–20; 18:31; 36:26–27).

This relationship leads to a concrete **community of faith**. Individuals need to make their decisions for God (Ezek 14:14; 18:4,21,32; Hab 2:4), but they need to be integrated into the fellowship of faith in order to participate in the life of this community and holy congregation (Josh 2; Ruth 1:15–16; Lev 23:3; Lev 17–18). The Old Testament Church is a result of God's activity for humanity. The community of faith forms people who are called by God to follow Him in faith and obedience.³²

³¹ Rolf Rendtorff, *The Covenant Formula: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998); Gerhard F. Hasel, *Covenant in Blood* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1982); O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980); John H. Walton, *Covenant: God's Purpose, God's Plan* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); D. J. McCarty, *Old Testament Covenant: A Survey of Current Opinions* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1972).

³² In the biblical flood story only eight people were saved; they were the only ones left from the rest of the antediluvian world that was destroyed (see the key word *sha'ar* "to be left" or "remain" used in 7:23). Thus, the idea of the faithful remnant is introduced in this account.

5. Monotheistic. The message of the Old Testament people is monotheistic. The basic confession of faith of the people of the Old Testament, “*Shema Yisrael, Adonay Elohenu, Adonay ‘echad*” (“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one”; Deut 6:4),³³ was their straightforward, fundamental, and unequivocal proclamation of monotheism. Any form of polytheism, pantheism, or henotheism was rejected. In a polytheistic society, this Hebrew monotheistic belief was a striking declaration. God is one, ultimate, and He is above all. The idea of the uniqueness of God is stressed several times in the Old Testament because He alone is the true God Creator and besides Him there is none (Exod 15:11; Deut 4:35,39; 32:39; 1 Kgs 8:60; Neh 9:6; Ps 86:10; Isa 44:6–24; 45:5–18; 45:22–24; 46:1–4; Zech 14:9).

6. The Great Controversy/Spiritual Warfare Framework. The message of the Old Testament people is framed by the great controversy imagery. God is love, but His enemy Satan discredits Him and fights against Him (Job 1:6–12; Gen 3:1–6, 15). Thus, the message of the Old Testament people explains the enmity between God and Satan, good and

It is worthwhile to note that reformers have made a distinction between the visible and the invisible church, but this terminology reminds of the platonic categories of “ideal” and “real.” However, in the Pentateuch, the followers of God always formed a visible community. The church as a gathering of the believers in God cannot be hidden. The Pentateuch made a clear distinction between the true followers of God (remnant) and the others who somehow relate to Him by name but not in a genuine way (Num 13–14; 16; Deut 10:16; 30:16). Later on, the prophets would vividly reinforce the concept of the remnant (especially Isa 11:11; Jer 23:3; Zech 8:12), and the same is true for Paul when he stresses that not all from ethnic Israel belong to the true Israel (Rom 9:6; compare with Rom 2:28–29; 1 Cor 10:32; Gal 3:26–29; 6:16). About the concept of the remnant, see Gerhard F. Hasel, *The Remnant: The History and Theology of the Remnant Idea from Genesis to Isaiah*, Andrews University Monographs Studies in Religion, vol. 5 (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 1974), who differentiates between historical, faithful, and eschatological remnant.

It is accurate to stress that Seventh-day Adventist ecclesiology is clustered around the concept of the remnant, or to state it differently, Adventist ecclesiology is principally a remnant theology.

³³ For the discussion on the *Shema*, see Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 6A (Dallas: Word, 1991), 142; Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 168; S. H. Gordon, “Yahweh is our God, is ‘One,’” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 29 (1970): 198; S. D. McBride, “Our God is Yahweh, Yahweh Alone,” *Interpretation* 27 (1973): 274; Dwight A. Pryor, “One God and Lord,” a paper presented at A Consultation on Christianity’s Hebrew Foundations with the Hebraic Heritage Christian School of Theology, Association of Jewish and Christian Believers, and Restoration Foundation, Kingwood, TX, 23–24 April 2004.

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evil, truth and lie, light and darkness, and points to God's victory, because the death of the *Ebed Yahweh* (the Suffering Servant) will be a victorious death (Isa 53). The results of this spiritual warfare will be decisive and lasting, because God fights only with moral power (and not physical strength), i.e., with a pure arsenal of love, truth, justice, and freedom. For deeper insights into the cosmic conflict or spiritual warfare from an Old Testament perspective, one needs to study passages like Job 1–2; Gen 1–3; Isa 14:12–15; and Ezek 28:11–19.³⁴ God will prevail, He is the Victor, and He will establish His kingdom at the end of human history (Isa 24:23; Dan 2:44; 7:27).

7. Eschatological. The message of the Old Testament people is eschatological in scope. The eschatological nature of the message of the Old Testament time believers is well attested because the hope in the coming of the Promised Seed, the Messiah, is introduced in the midst of the darkness of the first apostasy of Adam and Eve: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Gen 3:15). This text is rightly called a protoevangelium.³⁵ This eschatological hope permeates the Old Testament from the Pentateuch to the end.³⁶ The Old Testament Church was an eschatological community: the Messiah was expected and with Him also God's kingdom (Isa 24–27; 65–66).

³⁴ See Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1950); idem, *The Story of Redemption* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1947); Bertolucci, “The Son of the Morning and the Guardian Cherub in the Context of the Controversy Between Good and Evil”; Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997); idem, *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001); Jiří Moskala, “Issues in the Cosmic Controversy Between God and Satan According to the Prologue of the Book of Job,” in *The Cosmic Battle for Planet Earth: Essays in Honor of Norman R. Gulley*, ed. Ron du Preez and Jiří Moskala (Berrien Springs: Old Testament Department, SDA Theological Seminary, Andrews University, 2003), 47–67; Tremper Longman III and Daniel G. Reid, *God is a Warrior*. Studies in Old Testament Biblical Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

³⁵ Kaiser, *The Messiah*, 37; see also Ojewole, 4.

³⁶ For the eschatological focus of the Pentateuch, see, Gerald Klingbeil, “Studying the Eschatological Concepts in the Pentateuch,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 11 (2000): 174–187; for the eschatological scope of the Old Testament, see Richard M. Davidson, “The Eschatological Literary Structure of the Old Testament,” in *Creation, Life, and Hope: Essays in Honor of Jacques B. Doukhan*, ed. Jiří Moskala (Berrien Springs: Old Testament Department, SDA Theological Seminary, Andrews University, 2000), 349–366. See also, Geerhardus Vos, *The Eschatology of the Old Testament*, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg: P & R, 2001).

8. Worship Oriented. The message of the Old Testament people was worship oriented.³⁷ True knowledge of God leads to gratitude and worship, which is a response to received grace and mercy, and about re-establishing a genuine relationship with and attitude toward God. Abram built altars and called on the name of the Lord as His witness (Gen 12:8; 13:4,18), and the worship of the Old Testament people was centered around the sanctuary, which was to be “a house of prayer for all nations” (Isa 56:7).

On the basis of the story about Abel's and Cain's worship (Gen 4:2–9), God's people provided a very significant insight into true and false worship and taught what are the crucial elements of a genuine approach to God. In order to know the answer to this issue, one needs to ask, Why did God accept the sacrifice of Abel but reject the worship of Cain? There are at least five hints in Gen 4:3–9 that give insight into the characteristics of authentic worship:

A. The Kind of Sacrifice. Abel's sacrifice was a bloody sacrifice, but Cain offered only vegetation.³⁸ Thus, true worship must always be theocentric, in view of the coming Messiah, the Savior (the symbolism of blood in an animal sacrifice plays a key role).

B. The Nature of Sacrifice. Cain only brought something from the products of the land (“some of the fruits of the soil”; v. 3), but Abel offered the best of the best (“fat portions from some of the firstborn [animals]”; v. 4). True worship must be our best response to God's love—a submission of our entire life to Him, and not only a portion of it. Gratitude for His grace and goodness leads us to give the best—i.e., ourselves—to Him.

C. Genuine Motivations. Verses 4b and 5a underline that God looked first upon the persons (Cain and Abel) and then upon their sacrifices. God's interest is in people and not only upon what they are doing! He looks first upon our heart in worship. True worship must be done from

³⁷ For the understanding of worship from the Adventist position, see Raymond C. Holmes, *Sing a New Song: Worship Renewal for Adventists Today* (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 1984). See also Robert E. Webber, *Worship Old and New*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

³⁸ It reminds the reader of the Genesis situation after sin (Gen 3:7,21), when Adam and Eve made for themselves garments out of fig leaves (vegetation), but God then provided skin garments (the sacrifice of an animal is thus anticipated). The first couple could not cover their nakedness (i.e., guilt) by their own works; they needed God's solution to their alienation from God and their sin. Human self-righteousness is pitted against the righteousness of God that can only be received as a precious gift and needs to be put on!

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the unselfish heart, from true motives. Acceptable worship must always be authentic, sincere, and honest.

D. Willingness to Obey. Cain played with God; he wanted to manipulate Him through his sacrifice. This is indicated by God's statement to Cain: "If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?" (Gen 4:7a). Cain wanted to do things in his own way without obedience, to manipulate God, to appease Him, but Abel was willing to listen and follow God's instructions. True worship must be connected with a willingness to obey. The pagan principle in worship can be summarized by the Latin phrase "*do ut des*" (I give in order that you give).

E. Humble Attitude. The whole story teaches that we can come to God as we are but not in any manner—only with a contrite spirit and humble heart (Isa 57:15). A right attitude toward God and consequently toward humans is the key factor in worship.³⁹

9. Ethical. The message of the Old Testament people was ethical, calling for response. Their message was not philosophical and was not given in the form of a sophisticated tractate; it was an ethical call for right decisions and obedience. The God of the Old Testament people is a God of action. He expects His followers to act similarly and out of gratitude for His mighty acts to live according to His will. God's gracious salvific activity leads to obedience (Gen 2:16–17; Exod 20:1–2; Deut 6:5–9; Mic 6:8). God called His people out of Egypt, intervened on their behalf, and then gave them the gift of the law. The Sabbath is a special sign of that unique relationship between God and His people (Exod 31:12–13; Ezek 20:12,20). In this way, God's people call others to obey His voice and follow Him. The Prophet Isaiah predicted that people from other nations would come to the temple to learn about the true God and keep the Sabbath day holy (Isa 56:2–8).

³⁹ Cain wanted to dismiss the "cause" of his trouble without repentance, without changing his offensive attitude toward life. According to his view, God "favored" Abel, and Cain envisioned that he needed to get rid of Abel in order to receive God's favor and blessing, so he killed his brother. He wanted to force God in order to secure God's acceptance.

Note that the first murder was done in connection with worship. Worship is a matter of life and death; and in the dramatic story of Cain and Abel, not only the false and true systems of worship are introduced, but also presented are the differences between true and false worshipers. There are two different attitudes toward God, and the Old Testament Church needed to cultivate a wholehearted connection with God in truth, because it is not enough to perform religious acts, claim God's presence, and pray.

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer eloquently explains: "In the Bible 'rest' really means more than 'having a rest.' It means . . . turning our eyes absolutely upon God's being God and toward worshipping him."⁴⁰ God is entering into His rest, and He makes it possible for humans to rest. John Walton correctly states: "The divine Sabbath is seen as the cause of the human Sabbath."⁴¹ When we pause, we participate in divine rest; we rest in Him. "God does the work, human beings enjoy the results."⁴² Karl Barth explains it precisely by pointing out that God's rest day is man's first full day, that man rests before he works—man's life therefore begins with the gospel, grace, and not the law, in freedom to celebrate with joy the seventh day and not with an obligation to work.⁴³ The Sabbath is thus the actual start for life. First must come a relationship with God and then work and service for others. First humans need to be charged with energy and then they can work! Sabbath in this sense becomes a starting point of life, because it is a cultivation of His presence in life. The Sabbath teaches us to enjoy fellowship and not performance. A relationship is what matters and not achievements. The Sabbath is a deep lesson teaching us that we as humans need to be God-oriented and people-oriented beings and not thing oriented or work oriented. The Sabbath helps us to start every week refreshed, to start anew.

The message of God's people underlined that obedience is the result of God's re-creative work in them. It is a matter of a new heart (capitulation, dedication, and a new orientation in life) and accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit. Joshua aptly stated: "You are not able to serve the Lord. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins" (Josh 24:19). The prophet Ezekiel profoundly

⁴⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Interpretation of Genesis 1–3* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 40.

⁴¹ John H. Walton, *Genesis*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 153.

⁴² Gregory P. Nelson, *A Touch of Heaven: Finding New Meaning in Sabbath Rest* (Nampa: Pacific Press, 1999), 30. Samuel Bacchiocchi, *Divine Rest for Human Restlessness* (Berrien Springs: Biblical Perspectives, 1988), 69: "Thus on and through the Sabbath, God invites us to view our work in the light of His accomplishments."

⁴³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III.4:52: "It is only by participation in God's celebrating that he [man] can and may and shall also celebrate on this seventh day, which is his first day. But this is just what he is commanded to do. Hence his history under the command of God really begins with the Gospel and not with the Law, with an accorded celebration and not a required task, with a prepared rejoicing and not with care and toil, with a freedom given to him and not an imposed obligation, with a rest and not with an activity."

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explains that obedience is possible only through God's intervention in our lives: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow [cause you to obey] my decrees and be careful to keep my laws" (Ezek 36:26–27).

10. Mission Oriented. The message of the Old Testament people was mission and service oriented. The followers of God are called to be His witnesses. The Old Testament Church was a witnessing and serving community (Exod 18:9–11; Josh 2:8–11).⁴⁴

Conclusion

The people of the Old Testament (or it might be better to say "Older Testament," "First Testament," "Hebrew Scriptures," or "Scriptures of Jesus and the Apostles"⁴⁵) are called to embrace a divine, authoritative revelation and announce the truth about God, His character, and His plan of salvation, which presents God as the Creator, Redeemer, and Judge. Thus, the message of the Old Testament Church was primarily about God. They boldly proclaimed that He is the Creator and humans are His children created in His image and that they are accountable to Him. It is also a message about humanity, our sinfulness, alienation from God, and lostness. Humans have no solution to the problem of sin; only God can resolve this enigma. This is why the hope of the people of God in the Old Testament gravitates and centers around the Promised Seed, the Messiah, because forgiveness, salvation, and restoration comes uniquely from the Lord. He will come to establish His eternal kingdom. To declare and live this message was the mission of the people of God in the Old Testament.

The first task of the Old Testament people was to paint a correct picture of God before the people because it had been distorted by Satan from the very beginning (Gen 3:1). The community of believers began with the first couple (Adam and Eve) and continued in the line of families that wanted to build a right relationship with God and to serve others (like Seth, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses). This community of faith believed in One God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth. One family witnessed to another family about the mighty acts of God (Ps 145:4).

⁴⁴ For details, see my follow-up article "The Mission of God's People in the Old Testament" (forthcoming).

⁴⁵ See Philip Yancey, *The Bible Jesus Read* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999).

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After the Exodus from Egypt, Israel was formed as a nation and a church at the same time in order to be a living witness for God in the world.⁴⁶ The people of God worshiped the Lord God who made a covenant with His people (Exod 19:4–6), were gathered together for a holy assembly on Sabbaths (Lev 23:3), and came to the tabernacle to learn more about God, His will, the plan of salvation, and how to follow Him. Robert Reymond rightly states: “The church of God in Old Testament times, rooted initially and prophetically in the *protoevangelium* (Gen 3:15) and covenantally in Genesis patriarchs (Rom 11:28), blossomed mainly within the nation of Israel.”⁴⁷

The Old Testament people of God constitutes people who are called by God to form a community of believers in the Lord (*Yahweh*) and His promised Messiah.⁴⁸ These people of God are called to be His witnesses for the expectation of the Messiah, establishment of His kingdom, His truth, and unselfishly serve others in order that they can also know the true God, His message, and become His disciples. Worship is an integral part of this community, but not its goal per se, because the reason for their existence is in accomplishing its mission for others by serving them and teaching them the true worship. Genuine worship is a response to God's love and is built on His Presence and on a true respect of His word/law.

In the Old Testament, the community of God's people is never called to be the kingdom of God. Its members are not building the kingdom of God on earth, but they are expecting the kingdom of God that comes from above as a result of His activity. The people of God in the Old Testament should live in a loving, dependant, and responsible covenant relationship with their Creator in order to worship Him, witness about His goodness, and serve others in need. The Old Testament prophets, as servants of the covenant, called people to the original intent of the covenant, to renew a right attitude toward God and accomplish its mission (Jer 31:31–33; Ezek 36:22–32).

⁴⁶ Robert L. Reymond correctly explains: “The true covenant community of God was then, as it has ever been, the remnant *within* the external community of the nation (Isa 10:22; Rom 9:27)” (*A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* [Nashville, T: Thomas Nelson, 1998], 806).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 806.

⁴⁸ Reymond gives an insightful definition of the church: “The church in Scripture is composed of all the redeemed in every age who are saved by grace through personal faith in the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ, ‘the seed of the woman’ (Gen 3:15) and suffering Messiah (Isa 53:5–10)” (Reymond, 805).

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The message that was proclaimed in Old Testament times is the same in principle that we are commissioned to preach. The eternal Gospel has to be preached to our contemporary world (Rev 14:6), and this message needs to be interpreted theocentricly, otherwise it is not an eternal Gospel. We need to be on guard against falling into Marcionic tendencies in the interpretation of the Gospel by creating a gap between the Old and New Testaments or speaking about two systems of salvation.⁴⁹ Our emphasis in presenting truth may be different because we are not expecting the first but the second coming of the Messiah; however, presenting God as the Creator, Re-Creator, and Judge was and is an integral part of the Gospel.⁵⁰

I conclude that the message of the Old Testament people was about love, faith, and hope! A relationship of love was always the most essential constituent of the true religion because our God is a God of love and of relationships. Their message was the Gospel; it was good news about our God, Creator, Redeemer, Judge, King, and Lord, and His purposes for this world and beyond. This message started with the Gospel according to Moses, was developed throughout the whole Old Testament, was centered on the Promised Seed (the coming of the Messiah), and culminated with the message about the resurrection and the kingdom of God that would be established by God through His intervention in our history. This kingdom would be an everlasting kingdom. The Old Testament community of faith was a witnessing community with a worldwide mission.

“God is love”; “God with us”; “God cares”; and “God rules” are the capstones of the message of the Old Testament people. In order to summarize in a few words the purpose of their message and mission, I want

⁴⁹ The New Testament Church is the basic continuation of the Old Testament Church (not a break from it, or its replacement, called as supersession). The New Testament Church is the remnant Old Testament Church and its enlargement, where the original intent of God is to be maintained and accomplished, where true followers of a living God are gathered from all nations, tribes, peoples, and languages, and where the original mission of service to the whole world is cultivated (Rom 2:28–29; Gal 3:6–9,26–29; Eph 3:6–12; 1 Pet 2:9–10).

⁵⁰ Compare with Rev 14:7: “Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water.”

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to paraphrase the prayer of Richard of Chichester: "To know God more clearly, to love Him more dearly, and to follow Him more nearly."⁵¹

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⁵¹ See the general introduction written by John C. L. Gibson in Peter C. Craigie, *Ezekiel*, The Daily Study Bible Series (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1983), v.