



Panorama of the Old Testament

Stephen J. Binz

with Little Rock Scripture Study staff




*A ministry of the Diocese of Little Rock
in partnership with Liturgical Press*

Nihil obstat for the commentary text by Stephen J. Binz: Reverend Robert Harren, J.C.L., *Censor deputatis*.
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Cover design by Ann Blattner. Interior art by Ned Bustard.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Binz, Stephen J., 1955– author.
Title: Panorama of the Old Testament / Stephen J. Binz, with Little Rock Scripture Study staff.
Description: Collegeville, Minnesota : Liturgical Press, 2018. | Series: Little Rock Scripture study | “Little Rock Scripture Study, a ministry of the Diocese of Little Rock, in partnership with Liturgical Press.”
Identifiers: LCCN 2018028650 (print) | LCCN 2018047301 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814663974 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814663721
Subjects: LCSH: Bible. Old Testament—Textbooks.
Classification: LCC BS1194 (ebook) | LCC BS1194 .B53 2018 (print) | DDC 221.6—dc23
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018028650>



DIOCESE OF LITTLE ROCK

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Dear Friends,

The Bible is a gift of God to the church, the people gathered around the world throughout the ages in the name of Christ. God uses this sacred writing to continue to speak to us in all times and places.

I encourage you to make it your own by dedicated prayer and study with others and on your own. Little Rock Scripture Study is a ministry of the Catholic Diocese of Little Rock. It provides the tools you need to faithfully understand what you are reading, to appreciate its meaning for you and for our world, and to guide you in a way that will deepen your own ability to respond to God's call.

It is my hope that the Word of God will empower you as Christians to live a life worthy of your call as a child of God.

Sincerely in Christ,

✠ Anthony B. Taylor
Bishop of Little Rock



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Wrap-up lectures are available for each lesson at no charge. The link to these free lectures is



Welcome

The Bible is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. It is the Spirit-inspired word of God for us. It reveals to us the God who created, redeemed, and guides us still. It speaks to us personally and as a church. It forms the basis of our public liturgical life and our private prayer lives. It urges us to live worthily and justly, to love tenderly and wholeheartedly, and to be a part of building God's kingdom here on earth.

Though it was written a long time ago, in the context of a very different culture, the Bible is no relic of the past. Catholic biblical scholarship is among the best in the world, and in our time and place, we have unprecedented access to it. By making use of solid scholarship, we can discover much about the ancient culture and religious practices that shaped those who wrote the various books of the Bible. With these insights, and by praying with the words of Scripture, we allow the words and images to shape us as disciples. By sharing our journey of faithful listening to God's word with others, we have the opportunity to be stretched in our understanding and to form communities of love and learning. Ultimately, studying and praying with God's word deepens our relationship with Christ.


Panorama of the Old Testament

The resource you hold in your hands is divided into four lessons. Each lesson involves personal prayer and study using this book *and* the experience of group prayer, discussion, and wrap-up lecture.

If you are using this resource in the context of a small group, we suggest that you meet four times, discussing one lesson per meeting. Allow about 90 minutes for the small group gathering. Small groups function best with eight to twelve people to ensure good group dynamics and allow all to participate as they wish.

WHAT MATERIALS WILL YOU USE?

The materials in this book include:

- Commentary by Stephen J. Binz, which has also been published separately as *Panorama of the Bible: Old Testament* (Liturgical Press).
- Occasional inserts  highlighting elements of the Old Testament. Some of these appear also in the *Little Rock*

Catholic Study Bible while others are supplied by staff writers.

- Questions for study, reflection, and discussion at the end of each lesson.
- Opening and closing prayers for each lesson, as well as other prayer forms available in the closing pages of the book.

In addition, there are wrap-up lectures available for each lesson. Your group may choose to purchase a DVD containing these lectures or make use of the audio or video lectures online at no charge. The link to these free lectures is:

Of course, if your group has access to qualified speakers, you may choose to have live presentations.

Each person will need a current translation of the Bible. We recommend the *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible*, which makes use of the New American Bible, Revised Edition. Other translations, such as the New Jerusalem Bible or the New Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition, would also work well.

HOW WILL YOU USE THESE MATERIALS?

Prepare in advance

Using Lesson One as an example:

- Begin with a simple prayer like the one found on page 11.
- Read the assigned material in the printed book for Lesson One (pages 12–13) so that you are prepared for the weekly small group session. You may do this assignment by reading a portion over a period of several days (effective and manageable) or by preparing all at once (more challenging).
- Answer the questions, Exploring Lesson One, found at the end of the assigned reading, pages 32–34.
- Use the Closing Prayer on page 35 when you complete your study. This prayer may be used again when you meet with the group.

Meet with your small group

- After introductions and greetings, allow time for prayer (about 5 minutes) as you begin the group session. You may use the prayer found on page 11 (also used by

individuals in their preparation) or use a prayer of your choosing.

- Spend about 45–50 minutes discussing the responses to the questions that were prepared in advance. You may also develop your discussion further by responding to questions and interests that arise during the discussion and faith-sharing itself.
- Close the discussion and faith-sharing with prayer, about 5–10 minutes. You may use the Closing Prayer at the end of each lesson or one of your choosing at the end of the book. It is important to allow people to pray for personal and community needs and to give thanks for how God is moving in your lives.
- Listen to or view the wrap-up lecture associated with each lesson (15–20 minutes). You may watch the lecture online, use a DVD, or provide a live lecture by a qualified local speaker. This lecture provides a common focus for the group and reinforces insights from each lesson. You may view the lecture together at the end of the session or, if your group runs out of time, you may invite group members to watch the lecture on their own time after the discussion.

Above all, be aware that the Holy Spirit is moving within and among you.

Panorama of the Old Testament

LESSON ONE

The Pentateuch

Begin your personal study and group discussion with a simple and sincere prayer such as:

Prayer

Loving God, you liberated your people and led them to the Promised Land. Liberate our minds and hearts as we study your word, that we may live joyfully as your faithful people.

Read the Preface on pages 12–13, and pages 14–31, Lesson One.

Respond to the questions on pages 32–34, Exploring Lesson One.

The Closing Prayer on page 35 is for your personal use and may be used at the end of group discussion.

PREFACE

People in every culture seem to tell their story around the table. One of my fond memories of childhood is Sunday dinner at my grandparent's house. Our whole family—aunts, uncles, and cousins—would gather at the table for the meal, and my grandparents would tell stories of the past. Looking back on that experience helps me to realize that the narratives they told around the table are an important part of who I am. At the family dinner I realized how our family came to be, where I fit into the story, and I learned the family traditions that I would continue and reshape in my own life.

The family of God tells our story at the table, too. For ancient Israelites, the Passover meal was one way they passed on the narrative of salvation: how they were slaves and how God delivered them, led them through the trials of the wilderness, and brought them into a land where they could live as a free people. For disciples of Jesus, the Eucharist is that sacred meal where the past is narrated and where we join our lives to that story of salvation around the table.

Every time we pick up the Bible and read, we are either preparing ourselves for the family meal or savoring our memories of the table. The Bible is like our family album, like a chest containing old family treasures. It is the literature of the people of God, the book of the church. When we reflect on the words of Scripture, either with others or in quiet solitude, we learn who we are, where we come from, and where we are going. We discover the truths that keep our family of faith together, and we learn what it means to live as a member of that family.

We open the Bible to hear our story. The history of salvation includes what God has done in the past, as well as what God is doing for us now, and what God will do in the future. But sometimes we miss the big picture. We often know individual characters and events in the great narrative of God and humanity, but we fail to comprehend how the whole Bible fits together. Focusing exclusively on parts of

the story, we miss the overall plot and how the various narrative threads intertwine to tie together God's wondrous plan.

The Bible is a magnificent library of seventy-three books. But, more important, this wonderful variety of books forms one tradition and is one story of salvation. This one Bible, the essential library of the descendants of Abraham, is the book of the church. Although the Bible consists of many books and a variety of different types of literature, the whole Bible is the narrative of God's redemption of the world. Patriarchs and matriarchs, prophets, judges, kings, priests, apostles, and evangelists belong to this inspired book of life.

This biblical account of redemption encompasses the whole world and offers us God's intentions and desires, which give cohesion, meaning, and purpose to human life. It is the grand narrative that explains for us the way things are, how they came to be so, and what they will ultimately be. It begins with creation and ends with the renewal of all things in the new creation for which we are destined. And in between, it offers us an interpretation of the whole of human history. Learning to take a panoramic view of the Bible enables us to live in the narrative and discover the real story of which each of our lives is a part.

So this panorama of the Bible, presented in two volumes—one on the Old Testament and one on the New Testament—offers a bird's-eye view of the Bible. Like looking at a map before setting out on a journey, we will survey the Scriptures so that later in other studies we can explore the riches in each book of the Bible. There is not a book in the Bible that can be interpreted satisfactorily in isolation from the rest. The central themes that run throughout the whole of Scripture offer us the big picture through which we can appreciate the details more clearly.

These two volumes belong together. Together they express one unfolding drama. As St. Augustine wrote, "The New Testament lies hidden in the Old, and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New" (*On the Spirit and the Letter* 15.27). The Scriptures of Israel and the writ-

ings of the early church are both necessary for a full understanding of God's saving plan. They are both important for Christian readers because together they are the word of the Lord.

When we understand that the Bible is our literature, we can enter into the story personally and view our lives as participants in the grand narrative of salvation. So, as we review this panorama of the Bible, it will be the responsibility of each reader to continually ask

the personal questions: How do I fit into this great story of God and humanity? How do I enter this narrative of salvation today? How is my life being shaped by this inspired literature and molded into the person I was created to be? The more we can understand the whole drama as one grand narrative of salvation and then find ourselves within that story, the better we will embody Scripture and become participants in the mission of God.

ISRAEL’S BEGINNINGS

The Pentateuch is the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. “Pentateuch” comes from the Greek meaning “five scrolls.” In Hebrew, these books are known as the Torah, best translated as “teaching” or “instruction.” The Torah forms the founding charter of Israel as a nation and as a religion. It contains many different forms of writing: poetry, legend, genealogy, law, and the epic history of the nation.

These books are attributed to Moses, which means that he is the central figure and the authority behind these books. In fact he appears in almost every chapter of the last four books. But the first book, that of Genesis, doesn’t mention him at all. Rather it forms a preparation and preview of the central events to follow.

The Bible begins by setting the story of Israel’s past within the framework of the wider context of the whole world. The first eleven chapters of Genesis attempt to answer some of life’s most basic questions about the origins of the world, the meaning of good and evil, and God’s plan for humanity.

God’s Desire for Creation

The whole sweep of the Bible—from its first book, Genesis, to its last book, Revelation—expresses God’s desire to offer the fullness of life to the world. The opening two chapters narrate that God, “in the beginning,” created “the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1–2). And the final two chapters relate that God is establishing “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev 21–22). These chapters frame the entire biblical narrative of the world’s salvation. The process that God desired from the beginning is fulfilled as all creation is perfected and glorified according to God’s plan.

The opening chapters of Genesis present us with God’s intended design for the earth. In the initial creation account of Genesis 1, God is pictured as creating all that exists. The ac-



count is organized like a typical week for the Hebrews—six days of work followed by the Sabbath of rest. The world is shown to be the work of the great artisan, working with creative skill, then relaxing to enjoy the work.

The first three days are depicted as days of separation: the light from the darkness, the sky from the water, and the water from the land. The next three days are shown as days of population: the sun, moon, and stars, the birds of the sky and the fish of the sea, and the animals and people to populate the land. Compared to the creation of a temple, we can say that the divine builder spends three days constructing the holy place and then three days furnishing it. And on the seventh day, God rests and honors this “very good” creation, blessing the seventh day and making it holy.



Six Days of Creation

Day	Domain	Creatures	Day
1	Day & Night	Sun, Moon & Stars	4
2	Sky & Water	Birds & Fishes	5
3	Dry Land	Animals & Humans	6

All of the attention in this creation narrative is on God, the one uncreated reality. God alone is divine and eternal, so powerful that only the divine will causes creation to spring into being. God's word of command, the repeated "Let there be . . ." brings forth a world characterized by order and harmony. Only this God, the cause and source of all things, is worthy of worship.

The seven-day framework for God's creation, the formation of man and woman in the divine image, God's walking with them in the garden, and the forbidden tree of knowledge are all figurative expressions of what God most deeply desires for creation. God does not distance himself from creation, but rules over it in a deeply personal way. God makes the garden the place of divine dwelling with man and woman, and as they continue to multiply and fill the earth, God wishes the whole earth to be that divine dwelling place.

To read these stories as if they were simply historical information would diminish the richness of meaning and depth of truth contained within them. The writers are not writing as journalists, scientists, or historians would write. The stories presume the primitive worldview of the ancient Middle East. The earth they understood was a flat surface covered by a dome called the firmament, which let in the

rain and the snow. The earth was elevated above the sea and the waters beneath the earth.

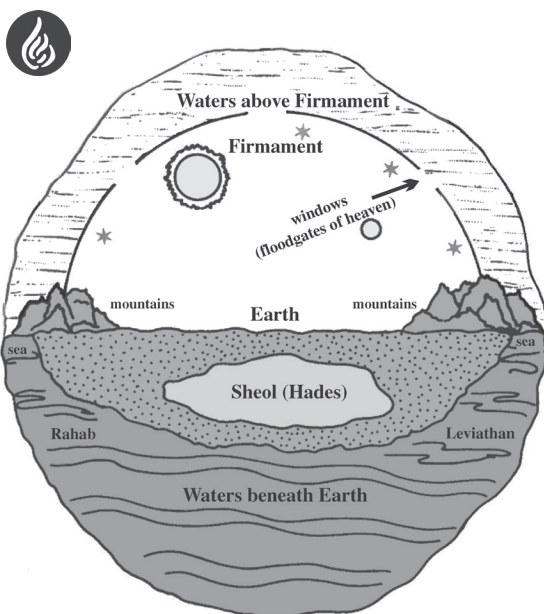
The Garden of Eden is described as a divine sanctuary where God is at home and lives in harmony with creation. Like ancient temples, it is entered through its east side where it is guarded by cherubim. God's command that the human being (Hebrew: *ʾadam*) "serve and care for" the garden are the same verbs used in later passages to describe the duties of Israel's priests in the tabernacle. So, human beings were designed by God to serve as priests in this garden-sanctuary with direct access to God.

Similarly, God's creation of man and woman in the "image of God" confers regal status upon them. In the ancient world of other cultures, the divine image was linked to kings. The royal ruler was believed to be the living image of the divine sovereign. In Israel, this regal status is confirmed as God gives the man and woman dominion over every living thing, appointing them to rule with divine care and justice over God's creation. As man and woman are fruitful and their descendants spread throughout the earth, they are to extend the reign of God throughout creation. So, God's original design for human beings is that they be royal rulers throughout the earth and a kingdom of priests.

Clearly, the creation accounts do not so much address the question of "how" the world came to be, as the more important question of "why" the world was created. They are a profound meditation on the meaning of creation. The ancient authors choose to pass on the truths that they have come to know in the form of stories, and these stories of creation are very successful attempts to express the essential truths about existence and life.

These stories have been honored for thousands of years because people have understood that they address some of the most profound and important questions of human life: What is our purpose? What is God like? What does God want us to be like?

Some of the essential truths taught by the creation account of Genesis 1 are these:



- There is one supreme God, unlike the multiple gods of other nations.
- God is the primary cause of all that exists.
- The sun and moon are not gods, as other religions believed, but part of God's creation.
- All creation is good, and people are the peak of that good creation.
- Men and women are equally made in the image of a loving God.
- Men and women are cocreators with God and stewards of the earth.

God's Design Disrupted by Human Sin

A second creation story, which includes the story of sin, follows the first creation account. The editor of Genesis decided to include both of these creation stories because both had long been treasured within the community as expressing the truth about God and humanity.

In this second account of Genesis 2, God forms *ʾadam* from the ground (*ʾadama*), and breathes the divine breath into his nostrils to make him live. God then plants the Garden of Eden and places the man there. When God forms birds and animals from the ground, God presents them to the man for naming. But when none of them prove to be a suitable companion for the man, God builds a woman from the side of the man. When she is brought to the man, he recognizes that she is not from the ground like the animals but from his very self: "bone of my bones / and flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2:23). And like children, they feel no shame in their nakedness.

In both creation accounts, we see that human beings are made for God, for one another, and for the created world. As God's royal stewards and priests, we are responsible for developing the world in such a way that all creation gives God glory. But as the narrative continues, God's design is disrupted by the refusal of man and woman to

live according to God's desire for creation. The cunning serpent, one of God's creatures, deceptively distorts God's words and undermines God's plan, and man and woman choose to listen to the serpent's instructions rather than those of God.

By failing to exercise their dominion over the serpent, they destroy the trusting harmony God desires within the garden. By betraying God, man and woman are sent forth from the dwelling God prepared for them. Their God-given dominion over the creatures of the earth turns to domination. God's authority is overturned, and harmony begins to revert to the chaos that existed before God formed the world. As the stories of the early chapters of Genesis reveal, the hallmark of sinful humanity becomes violence toward other creatures, both human and animal, and toward God's good creation.

This account in Genesis 3 focuses on the human condition: our desire for happiness and the reality of pain, sin, and death. The storytellers of Israel's wisdom tradition saw how the world is deeply wounded and wondered how human suffering is compatible with belief in a powerful and loving God. With colorful language and the symbols of the garden, the author paints a picture of God's desire for our happiness, yet also of God's desire to create us free, capable of personally choosing God's will for our lives. The human will turned against God's plan, and the result is the suffering and death that comes from sin. The storyteller shows us how it has been *from the beginning* by painting a story of life *in the beginning*.

The symbolic tree, whose forbidden fruit the couple eats, represents the temptation to be autonomous and to live apart from God's reign. Human beings are alive and free to enjoy creation as long as they live out their freedom under God's rule and will for human life. The temptation they face through the serpent is to become a law unto themselves, to walk according to their own path rather than the way of their Creator.

The result of this human choice for autonomy apart from God's way is the destruction of the harmony that God placed within

creation. The human relationship with God is distorted. From walking comfortably with God in the garden, man and woman now hide from God's presence in fear and shame. The relationship of man and woman to each other is damaged. They become morbidly self-conscious, quickly covering their nakedness and blaming one another.

Yet, God's purposes are not defeated. Although an uncertain and perilous world faces the couple, God does not abandon them. They will still bear the divine image in the world. Although God punishes by cursing the serpent and putting enmity between the offspring of the serpent and that of the woman, God also offers hope by promising that the offspring of the woman will strike and crush the head of the serpent (Gen 3:15). That is, a descendant of Eve will destroy the powers of evil that the man and woman have unleashed through their disobedience.

Some of the essential truths taught by this account of Adam and Eve are these:

- Human beings are created by God with the ability to choose or reject God's will.
- The root cause of human suffering is sin, the human choice to disobey God.
- Sin disrupts human relationships and brings about shame and blame.
- Suffering is not a punishment inflicted by God, but a consequence of sin.
- Human beings suffer on account of our own sin and the sin of others.
- God doesn't abandon the human race but promises them a future in which to hope.

The Effect of Sin in the World

The stories of Genesis 3–11 show how the effects of sin multiply and destroy human relationships with God, with other people, and with the created world. After the sin, Adam hides from God; he blames Eve, and he is ex-

pelled from the harmony of the garden and made to work for food with hard labor. When Eve gives birth to Cain and Abel, rivalry grows between them. Out of jealousy, Cain murders his brother Abel and must wander alone upon the earth. The family that God desires to be a place of support and companionship becomes a breeding ground for envy, resentment, rage, and vengeance.

Accounts of family rivalry lead up to the story of Noah and the catastrophic flood. Sin has spread throughout the whole earth, and violence and corruption have so filled the world that God regrets making human beings on the earth. In God's desire to remake the world, he saves Noah and his family as well as a remnant of every species upon the earth. God manifests his commitment to creation despite the destructive effects of human beings in the world. Following the flood, God establishes a covenant with every living creature with the rainbow as its sign (Gen 9:8-17).

The final story of sin's expansion is the account of the tower of Babel. Even though the growth of cities and cultural progress can demonstrate human achievement, it is doomed to failure when it demonstrates human autonomy apart from God. The huge tower becomes the symbol of humans' arrogance because of their attempts to go it alone in defiance of the Creator (Gen 11:4). God condemns the human pride that has inspired it and judges the people by confusing their language and scattering them abroad.

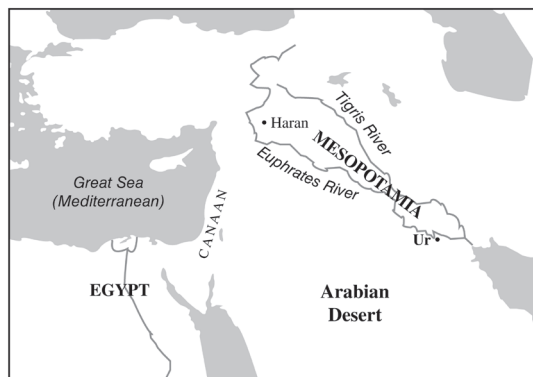
These stories describe tendencies that move deep within every person. Men and women are inclined to act in ways that lead to estrangement and blame each other for it. Siblings tend to fight with one another and grow apart. Human beings think they have the power and wisdom of God, and they suffer in their sinful choices. Men and women are good, yet flawed and fallen. Although God passionately wills life and blessing for his creatures, all of these blessings begin to be destroyed because of sin. The power of death gets increasingly stronger and the world begins to return to the chaos from which it came.

Against the background of these early chapters of Genesis, the rest of the Bible narrates the history of salvation. The remainder of Scripture demonstrates how God desires the world to become a dwelling shared by God, humanity, and the creatures of the earth. God's people must be rescued from the control of sin and receive the royal and priestly dignity that God wishes to bestow upon them. The kingdom of God must be established throughout the earth so that God may dwell with his royal and priestly people.

God Initiates a Saving Plan

Although the stories of Genesis 1–11 show humanity moving away from God, Genesis 12 introduces a different kind of narrative. Against the darkness of human sinfulness, the light of God's saving will begins to shine in the person of Abraham. Beginning with his call, we see Israel looking deep into its own ancient history to recover accounts of its ancestors. These accounts of the origins of Israel go back to the ancient traditions passed on through many generations. The type of writing we see in these narratives can be described as folk history, an ancient history that has been handed down through oral tradition. Though rooted in history, the accounts contain imaginative, symbolic, and legendary material. They have a timeless quality and they teach us powerful lessons about God and faith.

Out of all the scattered nations of the earth, God chooses one family. God called Abraham and Sarah to leave their homeland and go to a new, unknown land—to leave their former identity and find their identity in God. They migrate from Ur of the Chaldeans (in present-day Iraq), up the Euphrates river valley, to Haran in Mesopotamia (a city near the present border of Turkey and Syria). Then, they travel with their whole household to the land of Canaan, which would become the land of Israel many centuries later.



The opening verses of Abraham's call (Gen 12:1-3) preview the covenant God will make with him in the form of three promises. First, God will give Abraham a new land, a land to which God is leading him. Second, God will give Abraham numerous descendants—too many to count—who will form a great nation. And third, God assures Abraham that through him "all the families of the earth will find blessing."

In other words, God doesn't call Abraham just for his own sake, or for his own family, or even for the future people of Israel. Rather, God calls Abraham and enters into covenant with him so that, ultimately, all the people of the world will be blessed. The stories of Abraham demonstrate how God begins to fulfill these promises; the remainder of the Torah shows their partial fulfillment; and the rest of the Bible shows how God fulfills those promises completely.

For all later generations, Abraham becomes the father of faith. Asked to leave his autonomy and security—family, tribe, home, country—he travels a long journey to an uncertain destination, following where God leads him. His faith is marked by his constant relationship with God—a faith that consists of belief in God, trust that God will fulfill the promises, and obedience to God's will.

God is at work, through Abraham, to reverse the curses that sin has brought upon the world. God desires to restore his original bless-

EXPLORING LESSON ONE

1. The stories found at the beginning of Scripture are stories of spiritual, religious truth rather than historic, scientific fact. After reading about the stories found in Genesis 1–11, what are some of the central truths about God and human beings that are taught here?

2. In the covenant with Abraham, God promises land, numerous descendants, and the assurance that through Abraham, “all the families of the earth will find blessing.” Many centuries later, the Gospels of Matthew and Luke trace Jesus’ genealogy back to Abraham (Matt 1:1-2 and Luke 3:34). What connection can you make here? How is Jesus the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham about “all the families of the earth”?

3. The story of Joseph and his jealous brothers (Gen 37) develops into an account of Joseph’s rise to favor in the house of Pharaoh and his reunion with his family in Egypt (Gen 42–47). When has God done something unexpected in your life, leading to an improvement or a reunion?

4. What name does God give when Moses asks God to identify his divine name (Exod 3:13-14), and what does this name convey? How is this name usually written in English versions of the Bible?

5. What is the primary event of salvation for the Israelites? What does this event tell them about their God?

6. Exodus 6:2-8 can be read as a kind of summary of much of the Pentateuch (also known as the Torah). Summarize the promises God makes to his people in these verses from Exodus.

7. a) Read Exodus 16, which tells the story of the LORD feeding his people with manna in the desert. How does this story illustrate God's relationship with his people?

b) How can we apply this story to our lives as Christians? How has God nourished the church? How has God nourished you?

8. How would you describe the covenant relationship between God and Israel? How did Israel experience and live the covenant? (In other words, was the covenant a burden for Israel? Were the laws considered restrictive?)

Lesson One

9. a) What is the biblical understanding of “holiness” (Lev 11:44; 19:2)? How did Israel live this holiness in concrete ways?

- b) How are you being invited to live “holiness” in a biblical sense?

10. What were the two main temptations the Israelites faced as they travelled through the desert toward the Promised Land? Do you face either of these temptations in your life?

11. This lesson ends with the following insight: “The more God’s people understand who God is, the more they will know who they are.” What have the Israelites learned about God? What does this tell them (and us) about how they (and we) are to live?

CLOSING PRAYER

Prayer

The LORD bless you and keep you!

*The LORD let his face shine upon you, and be
gracious to you!*

*The LORD look upon you kindly and give
you peace! (Num 6:24-26)*

O God, we ask this priestly blessing of Israel upon all your people, and especially upon those who gather to share in the blessings of your word. May our faces shine with your light and graciousness, and may we bring your kindness and peace to those most in need in our world. Today we pray especially for . . .