



# Old Testament Theology I: Understanding the God Who Reveals Himself

The Old Testament presents us with a profound theological journey—one that begins not with human speculation about the divine, but with God's own self-revelation to humanity. This comprehensive study explores the foundational concepts that shape biblical faith: how we know God, His covenant relationships, His divine nature, and what it means to be human in His image. Through careful examination of Hebrew Scripture, we discover a God who actively engages with His creation, choosing and calling a people to be His own while maintaining His absolute sovereignty over all nations and peoples.

# The Theological Concept of the Knowledge of God

## God's Existence Presupposed

Ancient Israel never defended or attempted to prove God's existence—they simply accepted that God exists and reveals Himself to humanity.

## Universal Knowledge

The knowledge of God as divine reality must be found everywhere. The whole world knows God through nature's proclamation of His power.

## Foundational Truth

Israel's great gift to humanity is simply this: God is. His existence is completely manifest, always presupposed, and never questioned.

## The Absence of Speculation

Remarkably, we find no evidence in the Old Testament of speculation about the origin or evolution of God. While surrounding religions present theogonies as the first step in organizing chaos, the God of the Old Testament is present from the beginning. The fact of God is so foundational that questioning His existence would have seemed absurd to any prophet or Old Testament writer.

The affirmation of God's sovereignty gives the Old Testament its vigor and unity. God is the foundation of all things, and everything that exists does so only by His will. This cosmology was fundamentally religious in character, with all fundamental institutions of society—kingdom, law, culture, and education—based on religious presuppositions.



# Beyond Intellectual Knowledge

The Old Testament not only presupposes that God can be known; it also clearly affirms that He makes Himself known:

"He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel." (Psalm 103:7)

"I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name the Lord I was not known to them." (Exodus 6:3)





## The Hebrew Concept of Knowledge

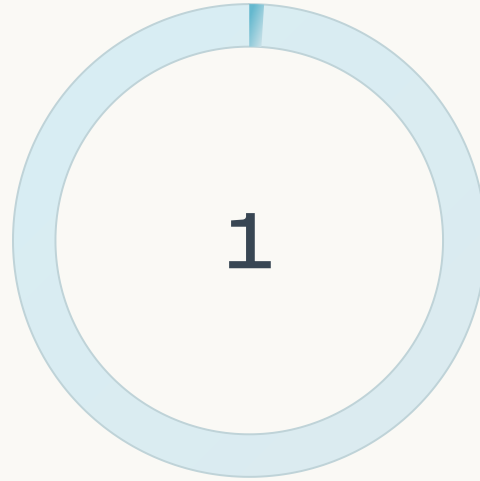
Knowledge in the Old Testament differs significantly from our modern understanding. For us, knowledge implies understanding through reason, analysis, and seeking cause-and-effect relationships. In the Old Testament, knowledge means "communion" and "intimate familiarity with someone or something."

When Amos spoke on behalf of God to Israel, he said: "You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins" (Amos 3:2). This "knowing" implies special relationship and responsibility.



### Dimensions of Knowledge

The Hebrew expression "knowledge of God" carries at least three connotations: intellectual, emotional, and volitional aspects.



### Heart-Centered

The Hebrew word for "mind" is typically "heart"—the seat of intellect, will, and emotions combined.



### Whole Person

Ancient Hebrew psychology didn't separate thinking, feeling, and deciding—all were performed by the person as a whole.

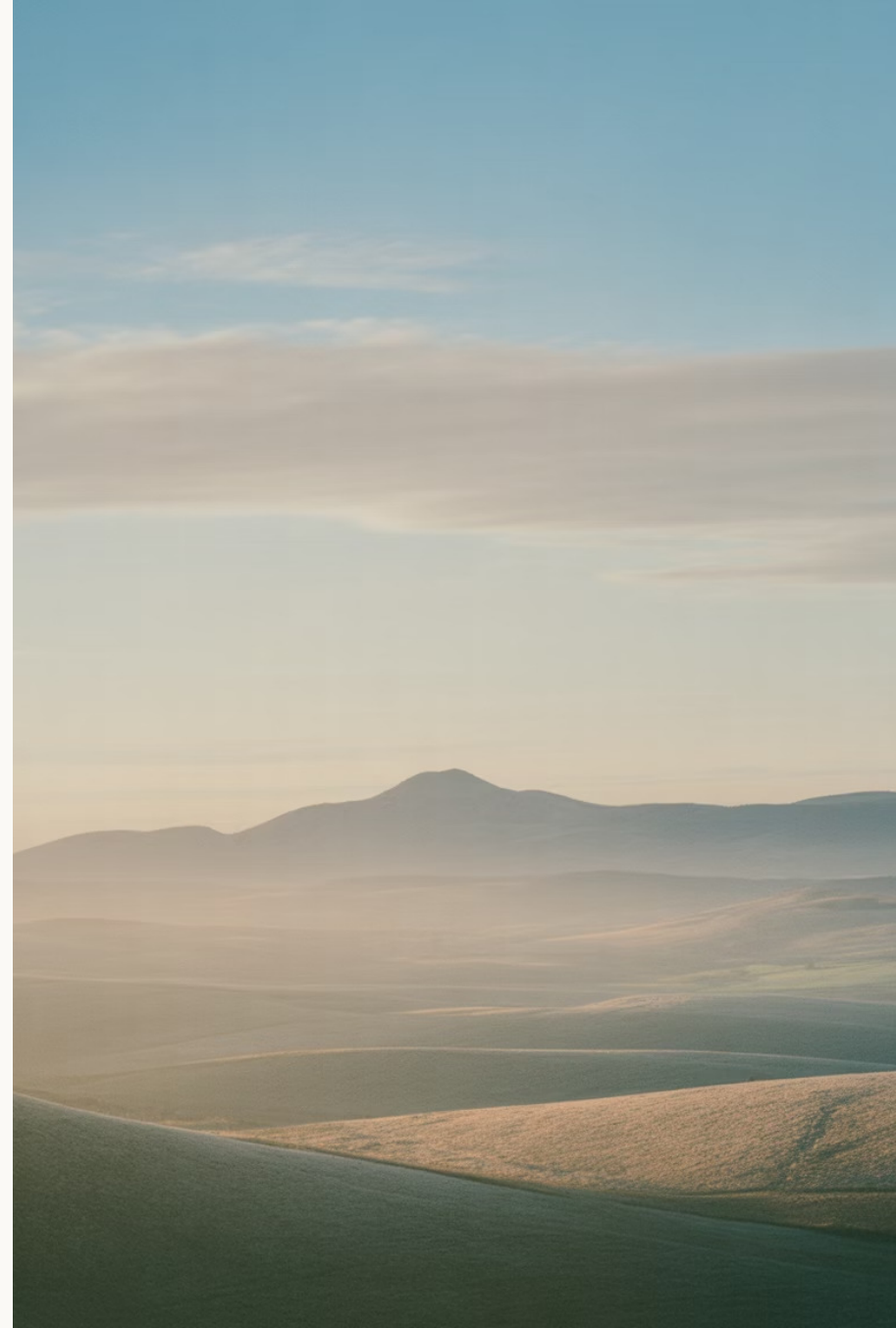
True knowledge of God in the Old Testament is more than mere intellectual knowledge; it concerns human life as a whole. It is essentially communion with God and is also faith—a knowledge of the heart that demands human love and requires that one act according to God's will and walk humbly in the Lord's ways (Micah 6:8).

# The Hidden God

Although the Old Testament recognizes that the whole world is aware of the divine or "sacred," it frequently refers to the God who hides Himself. Job believed in God but could not find Him:

"If he comes along, I cannot see him; if he moves on, I do not perceive him." (Job 9:11)

The exile prophet declared: "Truly you are a God who hides himself, the God and Savior of Israel" (Isaiah 45:15).



God is never fully visible or completely known in the Old Testament. If God were completely known, He would be limited by human capacity for understanding and would not be God at all. Only a handful of ancestors, prophets, and poets truly perceived God's nearness, and even then, God's unveiling was mediated.

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### Times Hidden

The Old Testament states 26 times that God hides His face from His people

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### Divine Mystery

God's substance remains forever hidden—He is never a prisoner of human thoughts

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### Dual Nature

Both God's substance and His purposes are known only partially in Scripture



## Why Does God Hide?

When the Old Testament speaks of God hiding, it primarily refers to His inactivity on behalf of His worshipers and His apparent failure to respond to their prayers. Many expressions of God hiding His face appear in laments, where Israel had been defeated and God had not rescued them as He had on other occasions.

The psalmist asks: "Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?" (Psalm 44:24). This was the mystery—why did God seem to act differently on some occasions than He had on others?

# Divine Freedom and Repentance

God's repentance in the Old Testament is anchored in the concept of His freedom. The pagan gods of Israel's neighboring nations lacked this freedom. Once they spoke or issued a decree, they were powerless to alter what was done. It was different with Israel's God—He always remained Lord of His own purposes.

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:8-9)

The prophets never presumed to know precisely what God was about to do. They avoided saying exactly what God would or would not do, recognizing His sovereign freedom.

# Means of Revelation

How does God reveal Himself in the Old Testament? In many and various ways. Israel experienced His presence and activity and heard His voice in their national history, in nature, in personal experience, in worship, in theophanies, in hearing and proclaiming the prophetic word, in moral conscience, in law, and in their institutions and ordinances.



## Theophanies

Direct divine appearances like the burning bush, Mount Sinai's trembling, and prophetic visions of God's glory



## Divine Words

God's dynamic, powerful word that "occurs" or comes upon someone—never dissociated from divine acts



## Historical Acts

God's primary revelation through redemptive acts in Israel's particular history and experiences



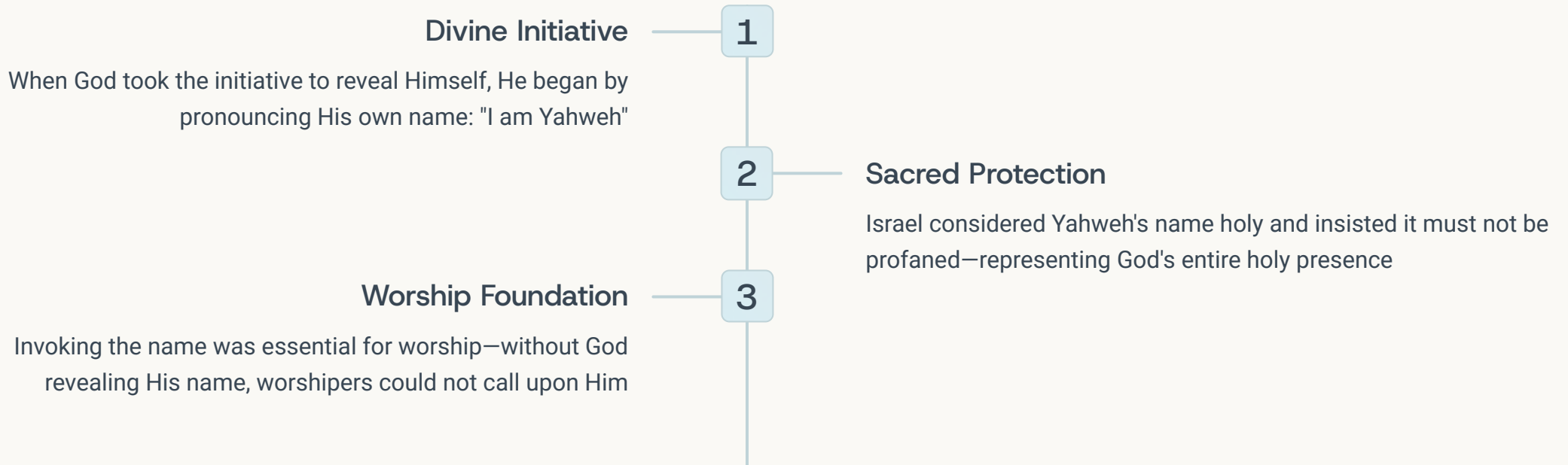
## The Power of God's Word

The Hebrew word for "word" is *dabar*, which can mean "to be behind and push forward." A word is therefore the projection of what is behind—that which transposes into action what is in the heart. In the Old Testament, the word is dynamic, powerful, a force that "occurs" or comes upon someone.

God's word is described as a destroying fire (Jeremiah 5:14) and endures forever (Isaiah 40:8). The Ten Commandments are called the "ten words" (Exodus 20:1), containing the authority of God Himself, so that no true prophet ever dreamed of questioning their authority.

# The Revelation of God's Name

Among ancient peoples and throughout the ancient Near East, the name denotes the essence of something. To call something by name is to know it and therefore possess power over it. The Israelites were no exception to this general rule—they assumed that the total essence of a person was concentrated in their name.





## The Meaning of Yahweh

The name Yahweh appears to come from an imperfect form of the Hebrew verb *hayah*, "to be" or "to become." Scholars have proposed various meanings:

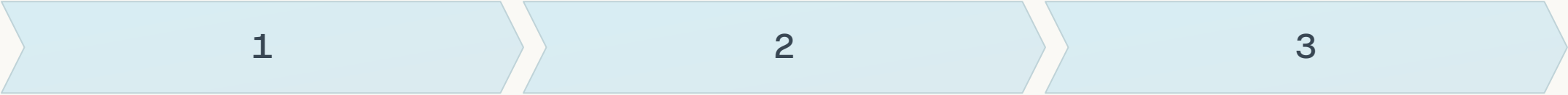
- Albright: "He who causes existence" or "the creator"
- Freedman: "He creates"
- Cross: Originally a cultic name of El meaning "El who creates"
- Brownlee: "He who makes things happen"
- Jacob and von Rad: "Presence"—"I will be with you"

The most likely meaning centers on God's promise of presence. When God revealed His name Yahweh—"I AM" or "I WILL BE"—He was promising His presence to Moses and Israel. God would be with them.



# The Theological Concept of Election and Covenant

Election is one of the primary keys to understanding Israel and Old Testament faith. The Bible traces this history of election back to Abraham, but it was in the exodus event that Israel saw its true beginning as a people. Throughout the Old Testament, we find the stubborn conviction that Yahweh, in His sovereign grace, called Israel to Himself, delivered them from slavery, gave them the promised land, and that Israel therefore occupies a special position among the nations as His chosen people.



**1**

### **Divine Initiative**

Election is always God's action, flowing from His grace, containing a mission for humanity

**2**

### **Universal Purpose**

God chose Israel to serve Him and other nations—through Israel, God sought the world

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### **Service Orientation**

Election is never an end in itself but always aims toward a purpose—being a light to the nations

In Israel, God was attacking the world. Israel was God's point of attack on the world. When Israel deduced special certainty from knowing it was God's people and considered itself superior to other nations, the prophets had to contradict this and call the people back to the living God.

# The Purpose of Election

Why did God choose Israel? Some parts of the Old Testament seem to leave this question in the realm of mystery. The first part of the question (why is this one chosen?) can be answered: God chose this one because He loved him. Some parts of the Old Testament answer that Israel was chosen to be a blessing to the nations.

"I will also give you as a light to the Gentiles, that you should be My salvation to the ends of the earth." (Isaiah 49:6)

The Old Testament warns Israel that it was not chosen for its goodness or greatness (Deuteronomy 7:7-8; 9:4-6). The doctrine of election creates an unreal drama: if God chooses the worthy, then His grace is questioned; if He chooses the unworthy, then His justice is questioned.

# Understanding Covenant (Berit)

The term covenant is used unevenly in the Old Testament. Some parts make extensive use of the term, while pre-exilic prophets and Wisdom Literature use it rarely. However, the importance of this concept doesn't depend on where and how often the term berit is used.



## Central Theme

Walther Eichrodt was first to write an Old Testament theology centered on covenant as the organizing principle



## Treaty Parallels

Biblical covenant follows patterns of ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaties, especially Hittite forms



## Relationship Foundation

Covenant expresses Israel's consciousness of a singular relationship with God, whether explicit or implicit

# The Meaning of Berit

The word berit is used in the Old Testament in secular contexts for agreements between individuals, between states, between kings and subjects, and between husband and wife. It's also used figuratively for covenants between people and animals, and between a person and death.

Berit carried the idea of guarantee from the stronger to the weaker party. The covenant between God and Israel was never understood on legal or contractual bases. No obligation was ever imposed on Israel except to renounce the worship of other gods—this was a "moral obligation," not a law.

Scholar Ernst Kutsch concluded that the basic meaning of berit was "obligation"—never relationship or union, but always an obligation that could be assumed voluntarily or imposed upon another.

# The Covenants in the Old Testament

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## Covenant with Noah

An unconditional, eternal promise never to destroy all flesh by flood, with the rainbow as a sign of God's grace

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## Covenant with Abraham

Promises of great name, great nation, land inheritance, and blessing to all families of the earth

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## Covenant at Sinai

Extension of Abrahamic covenant with law, establishing Israel as God's kingdom of priests

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## Covenant with David

Promise of eternal dynasty and Jerusalem as God's dwelling place forever

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## New Covenant

Jeremiah's promise of forgiveness and law written on hearts, fulfilled in Christ

# The Covenant with Abraham

Three different accounts of this covenant appear in Genesis 12, 15, and 17. Genesis 12 contains God's call to Abram to leave Ur, with promises that his name would be great, that he would become a great nation, that Canaan would belong to his descendants, and that through him all families of the earth would be blessed.

Genesis 15:18 uses the word "covenant" and repeats promises of land and great posterity. Although Abram responded in faith to God's promise (15:6), no specific conditions are attached to the covenant in this chapter. The covenant ritual involving divided sacrificial animals is described, appearing only one other place in the Old Testament (Jeremiah 34:17-20).





## The Sinai Covenant

The covenant God made with Israel at Sinai is presented as an extension or fulfillment of the covenant made with Abraham. The main account is in Exodus 19-24, one of the most important passages in the Old Testament—a matchless description of an encounter between God and humanity.

According to this passage, Israel arrived at Sinai in the third month after leaving Egypt. God offered a covenant to Israel, which the people agreed to accept. Moses served as mediator. The people prepared for God's manifestation, and on the third morning, God descended upon Sinai in fire, smoke, clouds, thunder, and earthquake. Then Yahweh proclaimed the Ten Commandments of the covenant.

# Two Covenant Traditions

The Sinai covenant, in contrast to the Abrahamic covenant, seems to emphasize human obligation to keep laws and ordinances so that it could continue in force. Thus two covenant traditions developed in Israel:

## Unconditional Covenants

- Connected to Noah, Abraham, and David
- Based on God's promises and grace
- Permanent regardless of human response
- Emphasized God's faithfulness

## Conditional Covenants

- Connected to Sinai events
- Emphasized human obligation
- Required obedience for continuation
- Formed basis for tribal confederation

Both patterns continued in the New Testament, joined in Christ and proclaimed fulfilled. The church, like Israel, lives under both covenant patterns in creative tension between grace and obligation.

# The New Covenant

Future hope for Israel took the form of a promise of a new covenant. Jeremiah asked: How can there be a new covenant? Israel had no power, merit, or basis to claim a new one, but God initiated the first covenant and would initiate a new one.

"The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah... I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people." (Jeremiah 31:31-33)

This new covenant would remedy the problem of the old—God would forgive past sins and write the law of His covenant on the heart (mind and will) of His people, giving them the desire and capacity to obey it and live as His people.

# The Theological Concept of God

When Moses and Aaron commanded in Yahweh's name that Israel be released, Pharaoh asked: "Who is the Lord, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and I will not let Israel go" (Exodus 5:2). Pharaoh didn't know who Yahweh was and refused to release Israel. His refusal resulted in the plagues of Egypt.

By the end of the plagues, everyone in Egypt, including Pharaoh and the Israelites, knew who Yahweh was. Yahweh revealed who He was through what He did. With His mighty hand and outstretched arm, He delivered a group of slaves from bondage, proving to be a God of compassion, power, and purpose.



# The Incomparable God

The Old Testament frequently affirms that Yahweh is incomparable. In the Song of the Sea, the question is raised: "Who among the gods is like you, Lord? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?" (Exodus 15:11).

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"Your ways, God, are holy. What god is as great as our God? You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples" (Psalm 77:13-15)

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"For who in the skies above can compare with the Lord? Who is like the Lord among the heavenly beings?" (Psalm 89:6)

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"Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance?" (Micah 7:18)

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These rhetorical questions declare that no god is as great, powerful, majestic, wonderful, inspiring, and gracious as Yahweh. He is described with countless terms throughout the Old Testament—a God of wrath, jealousy, judgment, and vengeance, yet also good, loving, merciful, and compassionate.

# A God Who Saves

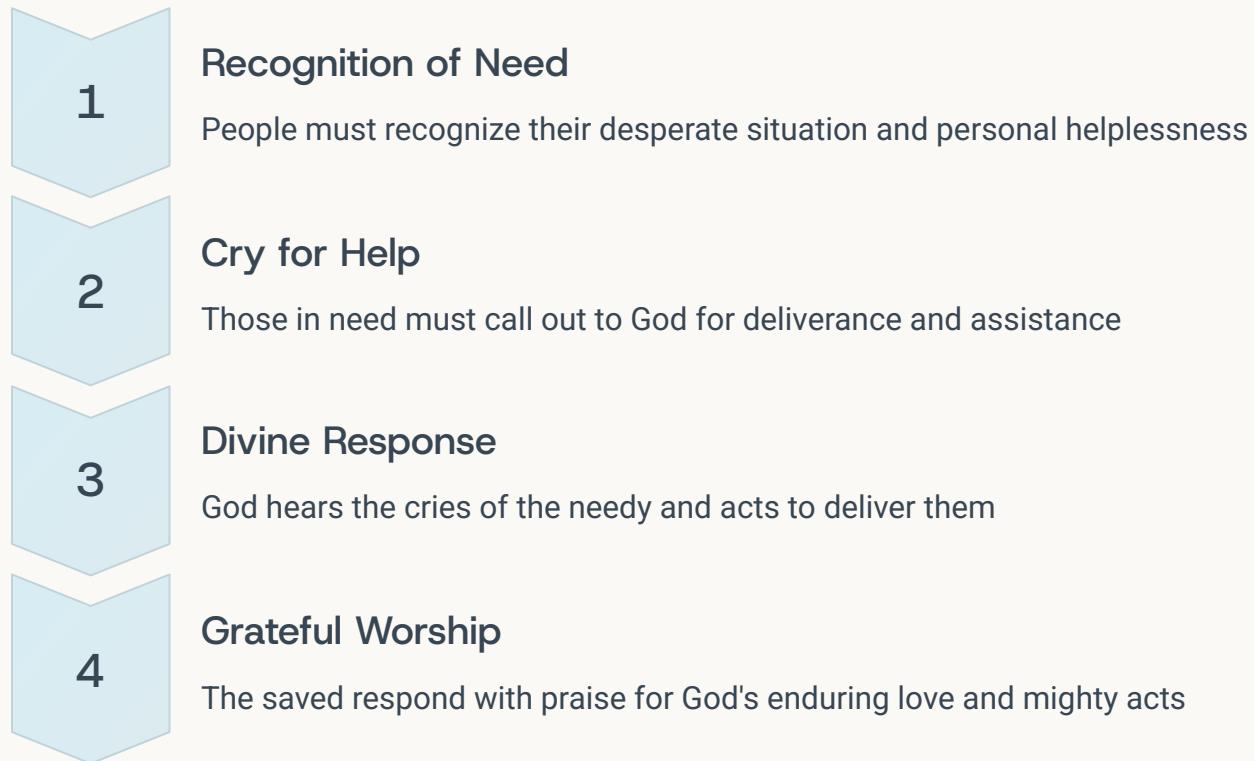
We begin with the theme of God who saves because Israel knew God as savior before knowing Him as Lord. The exodus (salvation) precedes the covenant between Yahweh and Israel at Sinai (law). Israel also knew Yahweh as savior before knowing Him as creator.

"Yet I have been the Lord your God ever since you came out of Egypt. You shall acknowledge no God but me, no Savior except me." (Hosea 13:4)

Salvation has a vast range of meanings in Hebrew, with the basic meaning of "to be wide," "to become spacious," "to have much space." It can refer to being saved from enemies, disease, sin, destruction, and/or death, used in reference to past, present, and future deliverances.

# The Process of Salvation

The basic structure of God's salvation process in the Old Testament follows this pattern:



The Old Testament proclaims: "From the Lord comes deliverance" (Psalm 3:8; Jonah 2:9). This salvation extends beyond Israel to include individuals and nations, as God's redemptive purposes encompass all peoples.

# A God Who Blesses

The concept of blessing appears throughout the Old Testament with varying meanings depending on source and literary form. The broadest concept appears in the first creation narrative (Genesis 1:1-2:3), where the Creator God grants to all humanity and every living creature the blessing of fertility, space, and food. Humans received the special blessing of dominion.

God also blessed the seventh day and made it holy because He rested from His work of creation. In this first biblical reference, "blessing" is something God gives to all people, all living beings, and to the Sabbath day—universal in scope and continuing in effects.



# Blessing in the Patriarchal Promises

The idea of blessing changes in the patriarchal stories (Genesis 12-36), becoming allied with the Abrahamic promise. In Genesis 12:1-3, the word barak ("blessing") occurs five times as part of God's apparently unconditional promise:

"I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (Genesis 12:2-3)

This blessing implies a great name and great nation for Abraham, extending to all families of the earth. The patriarchal covenant thus becomes a channel of God's universal blessing through His chosen people.

# The Priestly Blessing

One of the most beautiful expressions of God's blessing appears in the priestly benediction, given shortly after the institution of worship at Sinai:

"The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace. So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them." (Numbers 6:24-27)

This blessing provides a concise and beautiful expression that Israel owes everything to Yahweh, who protects His people from all evil and supplies everything necessary for their welfare, including peace. The rabbis emphasized that it was Yahweh, not the priests, who blessed the people.



# The God Who Creates

In the Old Testament, the God who saves and blesses is also the God who creates. Many scholars affirm that Israel knew God as savior (in the exodus experience) before knowing Him as creator. The relationship with the Lord-Creator, committed and obedient, implied a personal relationship between humans and their Lord much deeper than was common in the religious world.



## Creation by Making

God "makes" or "forms" something through divine activity and craftsmanship



## Creation by Battle

God defeats chaotic forces represented by sea, waters, Rahab, or Leviathan



## Creation by Word

God speaks creation into existence, showing absolute absence of effort in divine activity

Beyond these common ancient Near Eastern types, Israel used a special word for creation—bara—unknown in the ancient world outside Israel. This word appears 48 times in the Old Testament, always with God as subject.

# The Creation Accounts

The Old Testament begins with two unique and profound accounts of the creation of the universe and humanity (Genesis 1:1-2:4a; 2:4b-25). Genesis 1 is one of the masterpieces of world literature, affirming that God created the entire universe and everything in it without effort.

The first verse should be understood as a succinct statement of everything described in the following verses—an independent sentence, not a subordinate introductory clause. Genesis 1:2 speaks of the earth's primeval condition before its final form in a seven-day period.

The six days of creation systematically organize the cosmos: light and darkness (day 1), sky and waters (day 2), land and vegetation (day 3), celestial bodies (day 4), sea and air creatures (day 5), land animals and humans (day 6), followed by God's rest on the seventh day.

# The Second Creation Account

The second creation account (Genesis 2:4b-25) supplements and expands the first account's picture. While the first begins with the universe's creation and makes humanity the pyramid's apex, the second begins with humanity as creation's center and goal.

Humanity is made by God from dust, with life resulting from God's breath. This divine breath belongs to no other creature. God hadn't completed humanity after that initial creative act—He provided pleasant space (Eden), food (garden trees), work (cultivate and keep), community (man and woman), and language.

God also gave them one command: complete freedom in all things except one forbidden tree. Their choice to disobey brought pain, suffering, and ultimately death, showing that God's order was better.

# A Holy God

Holiness is an intimately divine word dealing with the very nature of divinity more than any other. It's the most typical quality of faith in God in the Old Testament. Of all qualities attributed to divine nature, holiness occupies a position of singular importance due to both frequency and emphasis of use.

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." (Isaiah 6:3)

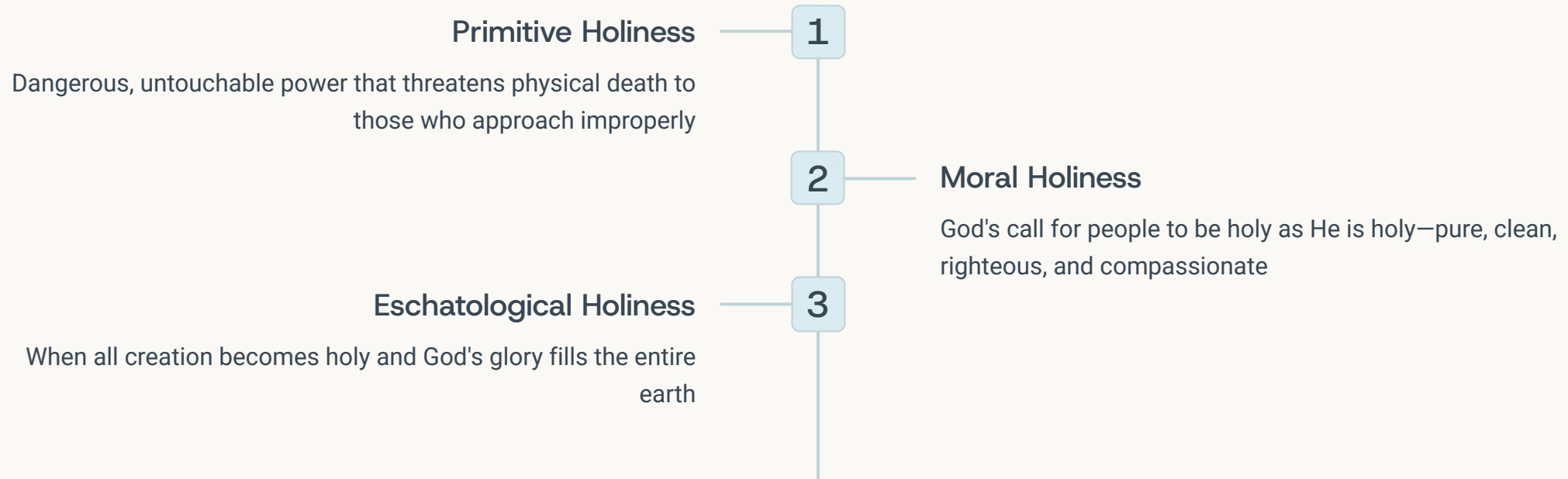
God is not a creature; consequently, He is holy. The "attribute" of holiness refers to that mystery of divine being that distinguishes Him as God. Creatures and objects have holiness only in a derived sense when designated by God to serve a special function.



# The Nature of Holiness

The etymology of qodesh isn't clear, but usage suggests the basic sense of "being marked" or "separated from common use." The antonym of qodesh is hol, meaning "common" or "profane." We're dealing with basic human reactions to mystery.

The most ancient concept of holiness embraced primitive and negative connotations—a mysterious power that was dangerous, inaccessible, and fearful. Objects belonging to God were holy and threatened death to anyone who touched them. This primitive understanding evolved into spiritual concepts of moral purity, righteousness, and compassion.





## A God of Love

Is the God of the Old Testament a God of love, or was Marcion right in saying the New Testament God was loving while the Old Testament God was wrathful? Marcion claimed the Old Testament God was "judicial, harsh, mighty in war, severe, and cruel," while Christ's God was "mild, calm, simply good, and loving."

This misrepresents the Old Testament. While wrath is one side of God's portrait, love is the other. Several Hebrew words express various aspects of love, each revealing different dimensions of divine affection and commitment.

# Hebrew Words for Love

## **'Ahab – "Love"**

The most common word for love, used over 200 times. Refers to God's love 32 times, expressing both marital and parental love.

## **Hesed – "Covenant Love"**

Steadfast love, mercy, faithfulness. Contains both strength/loyalty and kindness/grace elements.

## **Hanan – "Grace"**

Unmerited favor from superior to inferior. Only used with God as subject when meaning "forgive."

## **Rahamim – "Compassion"**

From "womb," describing mother's love for her child. God's tender, sacrificial love that acts in truth.

# Hosea: The Prophet of God's Love

Perhaps the greatest chapter on God's love in the Old Testament is Hosea 11, which approaches the New Testament concept of God's nature. It can be outlined as: love that chooses (v.1), love rejected (v.2), love that protects (v.3-4), love that disciplines (v.5-7), love that suffers (v.8-9), and love that redeems (v.10-11).

"How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I devastate Ephraim again. For I am God, and not a man—the Holy One among you." (Hosea 11:8-9)

Here Hosea appeals to all language resources in attempting to reach the incomprehensible depth of God's holy love—love that includes both judgment and mercy.

# The Theological Concept of Humanity

When we contemplate your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? (Psalm 8:3-4). Three times the Old Testament directs this question to God: "What is humanity?" This question reflects the perception that God is attentive to people despite their relative smallness compared to the universe's vastness and God's sovereignty.

The fact that people ask about their nature isn't obvious. When people begin questioning, they can no longer simply accept things. A mysterious movement has begun that leads to self-reflection—the strangest thing about humans is their ability to question who they are.

The Old Testament frames this question within God's context. These aren't questions to formulate human nature definitions but questions about human life's value and uniqueness, directed to the only source with potential to answer. Though the Old Testament doesn't provide a systematic organized answer, we can construct responses from its abundant data about humanity's divine image, social nature, and unified being.