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2017 BY THE REVEREND HELEN GIBSON-WHITE**

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THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Old Testament is the Bible that Jesus read. These are the prayers he prayed, the poems he knew, the songs he sang, the prophecies he pondered, and the stories he would have heard as a child.

The more we comprehend the Old Testament, the more we comprehend Jesus. Martin Luther said, "The Old Testament is a testamental letter of Christ, which he caused to be opened after his death, and read and proclaimed everywhere through the gospel."

Luke tells of Jesus appearing to two disciples on the road to Emmaus and saying to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the prophets he explained to them what was said in all the scriptures concerning himself. The Old Testament tells of God preparing the way.

In the *New International Version Study Bible*, and in the introduction to the Bible book of Genesis, this is said: - "Genesis is foundational to the understanding of the rest of the Bible. Its message is rich and complex, and listing its main elements gives a succinct outline of the biblical message as a whole. It is supremely a book that speaks about relationships, highlighting those between God and his creation, between God and humankind, and between human beings. It is thoroughly monotheistic, taking for granted that there is only one God, and opposing the ideas that there are many gods (polytheism), or that there is no God at all (atheism), or that everything is divine (pantheism). It teaches that God is sovereign over all that exists. It introduces the way God initiates and makes covenants with his chosen people, pledging his love and faithfulness to them and calling them to promise theirs to him. It contains the oldest and most profound statement concerning the significance of faith. 'Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.' (Genesis 15:6). It is the first explicit reference to faith in God's promises, and teaches that God responds to faith by crediting righteousness to one who believes."

There is, therefore, a consistency of purpose which can be discerned in God's revelation of himself in the Old Testament and in the New. God is constant, his character does not change, he always remains faithful.

The Bible Jesus Read is the title of a book written by Philip Yancey, and which at present is circulating around the members of our parish's Wednesday Study Group. Yancey points out that we learn from the Old Testament how God works, and in ways that we might not expect. God moves slowly, unpredictably, and paradoxically. Genesis often describes a series of human failures that call the

creation project into question. To remedy the failures, God establishes one particular family – the Hebrews (later known as the Jews). Yancey calls this “the womb of the Incarnation.” God will bring the earth back to its original design. The Old Testament gives clues to the kind of history God is writing.

The book of Exodus identifies by name the two Hebrew midwives who helped to save Moses’ life but it does not record the name of the Pharaoh ruling Egypt at that time. The First Book of Kings gives a total of only eight verses to King Omri even though secular historians regard him as one of Israel’s most powerful kings. God does not seem impressed by power or size or wealth ... faith is what God wants, and the heroes who emerge are heroes of faith, not of strength or wealth. God’s history focuses on those who keep faithful to him regardless of how things turn out. Empires rise and fall, powerful leaders rise or disappear. The empires of Persia, Greece and Rome – so mighty in their day – become past history. Slowly and painstakingly God writes his history on earth through the deeds of his faithful followers, one by one.

Deuteronomy is the last of the five books of Moses in the Old Testament, and is the account of Moses’ final words to the children of Israel. A reluctant leader who had spent so much of his life as a shepherd, was suddenly called by God to free the Hebrew people from slavery in the most powerful empire in the world. Exodus records this series of protests from Moses about being a national leader ...

“Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” (Exodus 3:11). “I have never been eloquent, neither in the past, nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.” (Exodus 4:10). “Please send someone else. Why would Pharaoh listen to me, since I speak with faltering lips?”

Moses’ encounter with God in the burning bush changed all that, and all through his remarkable life Moses had one theme ... “God did it.”

Moses did as God said, and more. He has become one of the giants of history, whose achievements changed history. (Philip Yancey, *The Bible Jesus Read*, page 76.)

About to enter the Promised Land, he prepares to address the people. Few of them have survived the desert wanderings, and those who have ... the young people born during those forty years ... have no memory of the glories of Egypt, of the pyramids, the palaces, the chariots, the wealth. They know only the desert, the snakes and scorpions, blazing heat and freezing nights, sandstorms and the never-ending search for food and water. They had heard stories from their parents about how Moses’ leadership had dominated their lives. The stories of the plagues, so dramatic at the time, may even have become the butt of jokes ... frogs jumping through the palace, gnats and flies swarming over the soldiers. Their parents used to speak longingly about the cool palm trees, the busy streets with chariots, donkeys and camel trains. But this generation had no memory of these. They had no memory of their history, no personal understanding of how

Egypt and its gods stood in array against the invisible God of the Hebrews. How were they to know what God had done? How were they to know and come to an understanding and appreciation of these past events that made them a nation ... God's people? How important it was that they did know and could, in turn, pass it on to generations to come. How important it is for us and future generations to know our history, the history of both our nation and of our families.

To the Egyptians the idea of one invisible God seemed ridiculous. They worshipped an array of gods represented in statues and hieroglyphics carved in stone. How good was a god you could not see or represent?

Yet one by one the Egyptian gods fell to the plagues unleashed by Moses' God. The Nile river god turned to blood, the sacred fly became a swarming pest, Ra the sun god disappeared and the bull god no longer protected his livestock, until finally, the Pharaoh and every Egyptian lost their firstborn, and the Pharaoh admitted the invisible God had won. Moses played the role God gave him and reinforced that fact every year at the Passover, when Pharaoh changed his mind and set out after the Hebrew tribes. It was God who used the exodus as a way of describing himself. "I am the God who brought you out of Egypt."

Philip Yancey wrote of the younger generation of Israelites, "Every last one of their parents lay buried in the Sinai sand, and soon Moses would join them, a shabby end to his life of service. He had known few joys and surely they had not made it easy, bringing him their long lists of problems and complaints every day. They had gossiped about him, mistrusted him, envied him ... and he must have known it."

The main message in Moses' speech to the people can be summarized in one word ... remember. Yancey continues, "With the speeches in Deuteronomy, Moses established the great tradition of historical memory, a tradition his people, who became known as the Jews have cherished ever since. "Never forget."

We can never undo the past, but we must honour it by bearing witness to the good and by remembering the bad so as not to allow it to be repeated. One would think that in view of all that had happened, the people would not need a reminder. How could they ever forget or doubt God? Yet Moses knew that the act of remembering would require daily acts of concentration.

Be careful you do not forget the Lord your God ... brought you out of slavery, led you through the dreadful desert, gave you water and manna. When it all goes well with you, you may say it was your power that has produced your wealth; but remember it was God who confirms the covenant which he swore to your forefathers. Impress this on your children, talk about this history at home and when you're walking along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Be careful you do not forget it was the Lord God who brought you out of slavery.

Yancey points out that what is most applicable to us is Moses' discovery of God's grace, that God loves him despite his failures with a pure, stubborn, everlasting love. And this is how God loves us.

Moses had given up trying to work out what God saw in him, or in the people for that matter. We may feel the same. What does God see in me? But as Moses did, so may we accept it and give thanks for God's love and faithfulness. Moses anticipated a question that we may be asked by children, grandchildren and friends. In Moses' day it was, "What is the meaning of the decrees and laws the Lord our God commanded you?" In our case it may be, "What is the meaning of your faith?" Moses told the story. May we tell our story so that our generations may remember.

There is a sad postscript after Moses' death. The people grew strong and they did forget. The nation split into two parts ... invaders came ... Jerusalem fell ... the people suffered terribly.

King Josiah's time, well after Moses, saw the repairing of the Temple that Solomon had built. The Temple then featured idols and objects dedicated to their worship. While rummaging through the rubble they found "The book of the Covenant" – which is believed to be a part of Deuteronomy. A spiritual revival followed. Moses' law was restored and the whole nation again celebrated the Passover.

Moses did not make it to the Promised Land himself, but his spirit lived on, bringing hope, renewal and literally salvation to the descendants of those he had led to its border. Philip Yancey made a point we may not have seen before, that at Jesus' transfiguration, Moses appeared in conversation with Jesus. At that moment Moses finally realised his life's dream. He stood on the mountain top, smack in the middle of the Promised Land.

God remembers the meekest and the greatest. May we also remember.