ESSENTIALS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

An Introduction to the Old Testament

DOUGLAS STUART
Title: Essentials of the Old Testament
Speaker: Dr. Douglas Stuart, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

This guide is intended to be used with the BiblicalTraining.org class, Essentials of the Old Testament, by Dr. Douglas Stuart.

It begins with an introduction to the content and themes of the Old Testament. In the second lecture, Dr. Stuart describes the structure and teachings of the Law. In the third lecture, the historical books are analyzed, including the story of how the Israelites conquered the promised land. In the fourth lecture, the prophetic books are examined, including an analysis of the content and literary style of their messages. Finally, the poetic books and the focus on wisdom are discussed.

GOALS
1. Ability to articulate the themes of the Old Testament.
2. Ability to summarize the content of each book of the Old Testament.
3. Know the major divisions of the Old Testament and which books belong within each division.
4. Understand the concept of wisdom and its practical implications on everyday life.

REQUIREMENTS
1. 5 sessions
2. 2 hours per week (lesson and discussion)

PREREQUISITES
None

FORMAT
Audio
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Broadly evangelical. Our materials are broadly evangelical, governed by our Statement of Faith, and are not tied to any one church, denomination or tradition.

Partners. We provide the content and delivery mechanisms, and our partner organizations provide the community and mentoring.
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Your Speaker

Dr. Douglas Stuart, professor of Old Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Massachusetts.

Professor Stuart is a scholar of the Old Testament, Assyrian and Babylonian languages and literature, and the cultures of the ancient Near East. He works in 14 different languages, both ancient and modern. At Gordon-Conwell his courses include areas such as biblical and ancient oriental languages, exegesis and interpretation; Old Testament survey; exegesis of legal texts; and the historical, prophetical and poetical books. His books have been translated into over thirty different languages, the best known being *How to Read the Bible for All It’s Worth* (co-authored with Gordon Fee).

In addition to pastoring several churches in Massachusetts and New Hampshire, Professor Stuart has preached and taught widely. He has made many short-term mission trips, and has often ministered to Gypsies in Eastern Europe. He has appeared as a guest on radio and television talk shows, and the national series *Mysteries of the Bible* as well as *Christianity: The First Thousand Years*.

**EDUCATION**

PhD, Harvard University
Postgraduate study, Yale Divinity School
BA, Harvard University
We are pleased that you have chosen to use materials from BiblicalTraining.org. We trust that you will find them to be of the highest quality and truly helpful in your own spiritual growth and that of your church. Please read through the following guidelines; they will help you make the best use of this guide.

**WEEKLY SCHEDULE**

**Listen or watch the lesson.** The lesson for each chapter is designed to be listened to outside of your meeting. Each lesson lasts for an hour. This is a crucial step. If the meeting time with your fellow students is going to be productive and encouraging, everyone in the group needs to have listened to and wrestled with the lesson.

**Take notes.** This guide has the outline for each lesson with a summary of the teaching for each major point. If you are unable to take notes while listening to the lesson, please work through the guide at some point before your meeting.

**Questions.** Each chapter closes with a series of questions. Some of the questions are data based, confirming that you understand the information. Other questions are more reflective, helping you move beyond the important accumulation of knowledge to challenging you to think through what you are learning about God, yourself and others, and finally to application. Our encouragement is to think through your answers before your meeting and then use the meeting to share your thoughts and interact with others.

**Meeting.** Meet together with your group.
MEETING TOGETHER

While some people may have to study on their own, we strongly recommend finding a group with which you can study.

A group provides encouragement to finish the class.

Interacting with others, their understanding and insight, is the most effective way to sharpen your own thoughts and beliefs.

Just as you will need the help of others from time to time, so also they will need your help.
If you are leading the group or mentoring an individual, here are some suggestions that should help you.

**Your role is to facilitate.** This is not an opportunity for you to teach. In fact, the less visible role you take, the better. Your role is to listen and bring out the best in the other people.

**Preparation.** Be sure to have done your homework thoroughly. Have listened to the lesson and think carefully through the questions. Have an answer for each question that will get the conversation going. A great question is, “What is the Lord teaching you this week?”

**Creativity.** What works to help one person understand may not help another. So listen to the conversation and pray that the Lord help you bring out the greatest interaction among all the people.

**Correct error.** This is difficult. If someone says something that isn’t right, you don’t want to come down on them, telling them they are wrong and shutting down their participation. On the other hand, if you let an obvious error pass, the rest of the group may think you agree and what was said was correct. So look for gracious ways to suggest that perhaps the person’s comment was incorrect.

**Focus.** Stay focused on Jesus and the Bible, not on church or religious traditions.

**Lead the discussion.** People don’t want to listen to a sharing of common ignorance. Lead by asking questions that will prompt others to think.

**Silence.** Don’t be afraid of silence. It may mean nothing more than people are thinking. But if the conversation lags, then ask thought-provoking questions to get the discussion started, and then step out of the way.
Discipleship. Be acutely aware of how you can mentor the people in the group. Meet with them for coffee. Share some life with them. Jesus’ Great Commission is to teach people to obey, and the only way this happens is in relationship.

Men and women. Be aware that men and women tend to learn differently. Don’t ask the men to become women in how they answer.

Privacy. All discussions are private, not to be shared outside the group unless otherwise specified.

Goal. The goal of this study is not just increased knowledge; it is transformation. Don’t be content with people getting the “right” answers. The Pharisees got the “right” answer, and many of them never made it to heaven (Matt 5:20).

Relationships. Share everyone’s name, email and phone number so people can communicate during the week and follow up on prayer requests. You may want to set up a way to share throughout the week using Slack or WhatsApp.

Finish well. Encourage the people to make the necessary commitment to do the work, think reflectively over the questions, and complete the class.

Prayer. Begin and end every meeting with prayer. Please don’t do the quick “one-prayer-covers-all” approach. Manage the time so all of you can pray over what you have learned and with what you have been challenged. Pray regularly for each individual in the meeting.
Overview of the Old Testament

LESSON OVERVIEW

Introduction to the content and themes of the Old Testament.

OVERVIEW OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

1. **Essential reading for the New Testament believer**

   Making up a little more than seventy-six percent of the bible, the Old Testament provides the background to the New Testament and leads up to Christ.
2. The plan of God

In the Old Testament the plan of God in its broad overview is revealed.

A. Creation

The Old Testament speaks of creation throughout, from the original creation of Genesis 1, the ongoing creation of God creating a people for himself, and the promised new creation.

B. The Fall

Two great human dilemmas come into play.

1) We are mortal

One of the great features of the human dilemma is that we are born knowing that our bodies are going to get old and die; that it is only a matter of decades until we cannot keep living physically anymore.
2) Gap between moral and intellectual skill

Our intellectual knowledge outruns our moral ability to handle it, therefore we use our knowledge for evil.

C. Redemption

The Bible is God's story about redeeming us and providing an opportunity for us to be his people and to enjoy him and his blessings forever.

D. Consummation

Israel's history is one where God starts out providing blessings for them, gathers them as a people, brings them to himself, initiates his covenant with them, teaches them how to live, blesses their lives, takes care of them, but they eventually end their history as a subjugated people.
GENESIS 1–EXODUS 19

1. Overview of human history

Genesis 1-11 serves as a brief overview of world history and creation.

2. The story of God’s people

In Genesis 1 through Exodus 19 we find the story of creation, the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph and his brothers, and the Israelites leaving Egypt, culminating in the arrival of the Israelites at Mount Sinai ready to listen to God tell them how to be his people.

QUESTIONS

1. Why does Dr. Stuart say that the Old Testament is essential reading for the New Testament believer?
2. Identify two allusions to the OT that you have seen in the New Testament that help you understand Christ’s nature and/or ministry. How do they make a difference in your understanding of who Jesus is and how you live out your life as his follower?

3. What are the four major elements of God’s plan?

4. How does Dr. Stuart describe the two facets of creation in the Old Testament? How has your relationship to God and your understanding of your purpose in life changed since you have become a follower of Jesus? Give a recent example of how you have acted differently as a result of being a new creation.
5. What are the two great human dilemmas caused by the fall? What are common responses people have when they consider their mortality? Why does the resurrection of Christ give you hope? How does it change the way you live?

6. Why did God forbid Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil? What is God’s answer to the gap we have between our knowledge and our moral skill to handle that knowledge? Give a recent example of how you relied on God’s Spirit to know how he wanted you to love and serve someone.
7. How did God begin the process of redemption after the Fall? How is the death of Jesus similar to the animal sacrifices in the Old Testament? How is it different?

8. What does the sacrificial system and the death of Jesus teach you about God’s love for you? How does that truth affect how you act toward others?
9. As you consider the events of creation, God’s relationship and guidance of Abraham and the events surrounding God’s creation and preservation of Israel, what does it teach you about God’s power?

10. What does it teach you about God’s desire for relationship with humans? What does it teach you about God’s desire for relationship with you? How does it affect the way you explain and proclaim God to other people?
Old Testament Law

LESSON OVERVIEW

Description of the structure and teachings of the Old Testament Law.

COVENANT

A formal, legal contract between two parties.

1. Types

   Parity covenant vs. Suzerainty covenant
2. **A suzerainty covenant**

A covenant between a Great Sovereign (God), the Suzerain, and his subordinates or vassals (the Israelites)

God promises to be to the people of Israel a protector, a deliver, a savior, a benefactor, and to give blessing; the Israelites promise to be obedient in return.

Exodus 20

3. **Elements of a covenant**

Six basic elements of a covenant: preamble, prologue, stipulations, sanctions, witnesses, and a documentation clause.
HIERARCHY OF OLD TESTAMENT LAW

1. Two great commandments

   Love God with your whole heart and love your neighbor as yourself.

   Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18

2. Ten Commandments

   The first four of the Ten Commandments relate to loving God and the final six laws relate to love of neighbor

3. 601 Additional Laws

   All subcategories in one way or another of one or more of the Ten Commandments; by obeying those laws one shows that one wants to be part of God’s people.
OLD TESTAMENT LAW IS PARADIGMATIC

The laws of the Old Testament are not exhaustive or comprehensive, they just give you a sample about a topic and from these you are expected to extrapolate.

1. **Exodus 21:26-27**

   Instruction about injuring a servant’s eye or tooth to be extrapolated to mean employers simply do not have the right to harm their employees.

2. **Exodus 23:19**

   “Do not cook a young goat in its mother’s milk” to be extrapolated to mean the Israelites could not engage in any pagan religious activity.

3. **Numbers 18:12**

   Giving of the finest oil, wine, and grain to be understood as instruction to give the best ten percent off the top of your occupation or produce.
TWO KINDS OF LAW

1. Apodictic laws
   
   Apodictic laws are all-purpose, general, overall laws that a person is supposed to obey.

2. Casuistic laws
   
   Laws that deal with specific circumstances.

A SECOND LAW

Each separate individual, each new generation has to make its own commitment to God, thus Deuteronomy serves as a restating and expanding of the first law to remind the new generation that they must choose to obey.
QUESTIONS

1. Why does God establish a covenant with Israel? What does God promise in the covenant that he initiates in Exodus? What does the nation of Israel promise? What are the 6 elements of this covenant? What does it teach you about the character of God to know that he established a covenant and what the content of the covenant is?

2. What are the two great commandments? What about the content of these two commandments makes them the greatest?
3. What are the ten commandments? How are the Ten Commandments similar to the two greatest commandments?

4. Describe the difference between apodictic and casuistic laws and give an example of each.

5. What is the purpose of Deuteronomy? What are some specific ways that you explain who God is and what it means to live in relationship to him to young people at various developmental stages in their lives?
The story of how the Israelites conquer the promised land and begin to live there. God gives the Israelites victory and prosperity, they forget God and disobey his law, God punishes them, they repent, and God raises up a “judge” to deliver them, and they become prosperous. The cycle is repeated.

JOSHUA

God picks Joshua to succeed Moses; Joshua leads the Israelites into the Promised Land.
1. **Two parts**

First, Joshua describes the conquest of the Promised Land; secondly, the division of the land.

2. **Holy war**

Requirements: Had to be ordered by God; was only for the purpose of taking the Promised Land; required soldiers to be volunteers; could come only at the announcement of a prophet; demanded complete compliance.

**JUDGES**

Judges is the story of God raising up leaders to drive out or drive away enemies that had subjugated the Israelites.

1. **God raises up leaders**

Rather than appointing a king to lead the people of Israel, God raises up twelve individuals as judges to give leadership for a period of time.
2. Deuteronomic cycle

Resembling the pattern found in Deuteronomy: faithful and free; sin and idolatry; painful consequence; cry for deliverance; God responds in mercy and delivers.

3. Anarchy

The book of Judges ends in anarchy—no particularly stable form of government—because every was doing what was right in their own eyes.

RUTH

Ruth, a Moabite woman, converts to the faith of Israel, marries a prominent man in Bethlehem, and David and Jesus are ultimately born from her line, reminding us a true Israelite is an Israelite by faith, not by birth.
1 SAMUEL

God gives Israel a king; The story of 1 Samuel is in considerable degree the story of the decline of Saul and the rise of David.

2 SAMUEL

Promises of an eternal reign of the lineage of David and an emphasis on the city of Jerusalem

1 AND 2 KINGS

1. **Solomon builds the temple**

   The temple became the central place of worship that fulfilled the expectations of Deuteronomy 12.

2. **Division of Israel**

   Because Solomon introduces idolatry, sets up shrines to pagan gods, and marries foreign wives, God hands down punishment on Israel by dividing it into northern (Israel) and southern (Judah) kingdoms.
3. **Elijah and Elisha**

Both were faithful to God, preached his word, lived for him, and helped keep some people righteous, pure, and orthodox.

4. **Exile**

The Babylonians exiled the people of Israel in its remainder state Judah.

**1 & 2 CHRONICLES**

Recounts same events as Samuel and Kings with emphasis on Judah, the Davidic lineage, the temple, and the city of Jerusalem while highlighting the positive details.
EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

1. Return and rebuilding

Construction on the second temple begins in 516 B.C.; Ezra returns in 458 B.C. and Nehemiah returns in 444 B.C.; both are integral to the rebuilding of Israel’s faith and return to orthodoxy.

2. Intermarriage

The Bible never forbids ethnic intermarriage, but does forbid religious intermarriage, which is an innate risk in ethnic intermarriage, therefore Ezra and Nehemiah opposed the practice of marrying foreigners.

3. Attractions of idolatry

Idolatry gave a sense of the presence of a god; everyone was engaged in idolatry so they were the only ones forsaking the practice; there was a feeling of sway over the gods; temple prostitution was encouraged in the idol culture.
ESTHER

Esther answers the question, “what about the Jews who did not return to Judah and Jerusalem? Who stayed in Babylon?” We find that they are paganized Jews, not keeping the covenant with God, and only a minority remain faithful.

QUESTIONS

1. What are the characteristics of holy war in the context of the culture in Old Testament times?

2. According to Dr. Stuart, what does charismatic leadership mean? Give an example of how the leadership of one of the judges was charismatic. Give an example of how God’s spirit has empowered you to provide leadership in a situation in your sphere of influence.
3. Why did Ruth’s background make it unlikely that she would move to Israel and follow God? Who can you think of in your sphere of influence that would be unlikely to follow God, that God wants you to pray for and serve?

4. What is one lesson you can learn from the decline of Saul and the rise of David?

5. What is the Davidic covenant? What city did David choose as the capital city and the city for the center of worship?
6. What was the indication that Solomon degenerated spiritually? What was the punishment as a result of his disobedience? How did God keep his promise to David in spite of Solomon’s disobedience?

7. Who are the two prophets who are an exception to the pagan influence during this time?

8. What is the theme of Chronicles? What was the difference between how the good kings led the nation and how the bad kings led the nation?
9. What was the difference between Ezra’s and Nehemiah’s ministries? What is an experience you have had where God has given you a vision that stretches you and for which you have experienced opposition from others? How have you changed in the process of being faithful to that vision?

10. What is the attraction of the Israelites to idolatry? How are we similar in our attraction to idolatry?

11. In what ways is Esther an “accommodationist” Jew? Has God asked you to take an unpopular stand for him in a creative way?
LESSON OVERVIEW

Historical setting of each of the prophets, and analysis of the content and literary style of their messages.

MAJOR PROPHETS

Prophets that have more material in them in terms of sheer number of chapters and words.

1. Isaiah

Divided into two parts, Isaiah seeks to call God’s people to live according to God’s covenant. Isaiah addresses
current events in the first section, and God’s forthcoming judgment, blessing and God’s coming servant in the second.

2. Jeremiah

Jeremiah, a seventh century prophet, warns the Jewish people that God’s judgment for their sin is forthcoming through the Babylonians who will conquer the people of Judah and send them into exile.

3. Lamentations

Traditionally thought to be authored by Jeremiah, Lamentations is a poetic dirge over the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.
4. **Ezekiel**

   Concerned with the glory of God, the first twenty-four chapters serve as a warning of the forthcoming fall of Jerusalem and the latter half Ezekiel tells of the good news of the end of the exile and the new relationship with God that will be unlike that which they have had before.

5. **Daniel**

   Daniel contains elaborate apocalyptic literature—literature that describes by symbols and codes and visions the plan of God for history—as well as prophesy concerning the resurrection and stories about great faithfulness in the midst of trial.

**MINOR PROPHETS**

Prophets that have less material in them in terms of sheer number of chapters and words.
1. Hosea

Often called the most passionate of the prophets, Hosea speaks about God’s love and serves as a plea for God’s people to return to him.

2. Joel

Joel describes an invasion of locusts (perhaps a symbol for the Babylonians) and exhorts his audience to reliance upon God while emphasizing the power of God’s Spirit.

3. Amos

Characterized by deep concern for social justice saying get right with God and your sense of what justice needs to be will come with that
4. **Obadiah**

Written after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., Obadiah condemns the Edomites who were looting the land and warns that they will suffer the consequences of what they had done to God’s people.

5. **Jonah**

Called to go preach to the Assyrians, Jonah tries to flee from God, but after almost drowning and being rescued by a big fish Jonah relents and the Assyrians are spared for a time. Throughout, Jonah remains reluctant and self-centered, yet God is always an evangelist and his plans are not thwarted.

6. **Micah**

Organized into three cycles of woe and weal, Micah shows us the balance between God’s warnings about the consequences of our sin and God’s invitation to us that if we will turn to him he will indeed forgive us and accept us.
7. **Nahum**

Nahum prophesies about the fall of the Assyrian empire, especially the city of Nineveh.

8. **Habakkuk**

In the midst of the Babylonians’ rise to power, and the fear they were striking in the nations, God gives Habakkuk the message that despite the conditions of the world around us, we can still be faithful to and trust in God.

9. **Zephaniah**

Speaking into the corruption of Judah and Jerusalem during the days of King Josiah, Zephaniah calls the people to be pure: in attitude, in speech, and of heart.
10. Haggai & Zechariah

Returning from exile, the people of Israel begin to be consumed with rebuilding their homes and farms, therefore Haggai and Zechariah remind the people of Israel that God’s purposes are paramount and nothing can be more important.

11. Malachi

Malachi calls the people to account for not trusting in God that he will deliver them from their enemies and not keeping the covenant and then places a decision before them as to whether or not they will obey God and accept the coming Messiah.

QUESTIONS

1. When God tells Isaiah that the people of Israel that they, “have ears, but they can’t hear and have eyes but they can’t see,” how is this an allusion to the idols they are worshiping?
2. Isaiah predicts the exile that is coming as God’s punishment for their disobedience and then prophesies the blessings that will come when the exile is over and that they can look forward to a glorious future of blessing. What does that tell you about God’s character? What does it teach you about your relationship to God and his faithfulness?

3. In chapters 40-60, how does Isaiah describe the Messiah? Since we as God’s people function as Christ’s body on earth, how does that affect your priorities in life and how you act toward other people?
4. Jeremiah shows that the will of God is often contrary to what is politically popular. Jeremiah proclaimed what God told him to, even though it was not popular and people around him criticized and persecuted him for it. How is God prompting you to communicate with others in your sphere of influence the seriousness and consequences of choosing to sin?

5. Describe the genre and purpose of Apocalyptic literature. Daniel includes stories of how God is faithful to his people in times of trial who live in a culture that is hostile to their beliefs. Describe a situation in your life that God is asking you to step out in faith to say or do something that is contrary to the culture.
6. Describe the message that God gives Hosea.

7. Describe the message that God gave Joel.

8. Describe the message that God gave Amos. What is a situation where you see someone is being treated unfairly? What does God want you personally to do about it?
9. Think of someone you know that is hostile to Christianity. Are you able to pray that they would repent and that God would bless them? Would you be willing to talk to them about a relationship with God if you had the opportunity?

10. The theme of Zephaniah is purity. What does God want you to do to be pure in speech, pure in attitude and/or pure in heart?
11. The message of Haggai and Zechariah is putting God first and that his purposes take priority. At this time in your life, what is God calling you to do to indicate that you are putting his purposes first in your life?

12. Malachi asks the people of Israel who they are going to serve. What’s something you have said or done recently to indicate that you are choosing to serve God?
Poetic Books

LESSON OVERVIEW

Wisdom is the ability to make right choices in life. Different types of poetry in these books have a central theme that wisdom comes from God.

CHOKMAH - WISDOM

The ability to make the right, godly choices in life
JOB

1. God tricks Satan

Satan, being subservient to God, is granted permission and given power to try and make Job curse God.

2. Dialogue with friends

Job’s friends are under the persuasion that you get what you deserve in this life, thus Job must has sinned in some way. Throughout the dialogue Job laments and maintains his innocence in the situation.

3. God speaks

God says in effect, “I do what I choose to do, and isn’t that enough for you to know?” In response, Job repents and apologizes for questioning God.
4. **Faithfulness honors God.**

Throughout the triumphs and trials of life, our continued faithfulness brings God honor, therefore rather than question God in our trials we ought to ask for grace to appreciate that he knows what he is doing.

**PSALMS**

There are ten different types of Psalms including: wisdom, lament, thanksgiving, hymns, and Torah psalms.

**PROVERBS**

Composed of hundreds of brief statements, some very specific and others very general, that teach us about the significance of making choices that God wants us to make.
ECCLESIASTES

Ecclesiastes forces us to ask the question, what meaning does life have without God? The book concludes that, in fact, there is no meaning if God is not involved, therefore we ought to fear God and keep his commandments, for we will all one day face his judgment.

SONG OF SONGS

A combination of poems that depicts God’s desire for his people is to have a marriage that continues with real affection, real romance, real tenderness, real joy of being together so the couple is something better than what just each individual would be.
QUESTIONS

1. What is the essential meaning of the Hebrew word translated into English as, “wisdom?” What is one item of wisdom that you have learned from the Bible that has made a difference in your life recently?

2. If you experienced the hardships that Job did, would you curse God? What is a situation in your life that has caused you pain and/or suffering that you saw God redeem it and bring something good out of it? How has that affected your view of God and your ability to trust him when you face difficulties in the future? How do you explain to non-believers how your relationship with God helps you handle situations in your life that are difficult?
3. When God shows up, he tells Job that he is in control and does things according to his purposes. How does Job respond? When you or others experience hardship, do you believe that God is good and he is in control? Why or why not?

4. In Psalm 1, which behaviors does the wise person reject? Which behaviors does the wise person choose? Give a recent example of how you chose wisely. How did that choice affect one of your relationships?
5. Almost half the Psalms can be described as Lament Psalms. What do they teach us about how to approach God during times of difficulty? What is a Lament Psalm that is meaningful to you?

6. Psalms praise God for the Law he gave us so we know specifically how he wants us to live. What is a specific verse or group of verses in Psalm 119 that is meaningful to you? What does it teach you about your relationship to God? How does it make a difference in how you love and serve others?
7. The Proverbs teach us how to make wise choices in specific situations. What is a Proverb that has been helpful to you? How has it made a difference in your relationship with God? How has it affected choices that you make?

8. Ecclesiastes responds to the question of whether life has meaning or not by asking the question, “What meaning does life have without God?”. What is the concluding thought of Ecclesiastes? How does that affect the choices you are making today?
9. What is the importance of romance in a sexual relationship?