Introducing the Old Testament

A Lay-Training Course

St. Andrew's Theological Seminary

of the Episcopal Church in the Philippines

Contents

Preface

The Old Testament is sadly neglected by many Christians, yet it records God's dealings with his Chosen People Israel, and his preparation of them for the coming of his Messiah, whose life is documented in the New Testament. Admittedly certain parts of the Old Testament attract us more than others yet there is so much of interest and value in its pages which we ignore to our own great loss. This coursebook is written to provide an easy way into reading and studying the first three-quarters and more of the Bible. It provides an introduction and summary of each book (including the Apocrypha) and some questions for further thought and discussion. As it does not follow the order of the books in English Bibles but rather that of the original Hebrew Bible, you will need to consult the Contents pages to find out where any particular book of the Bible is studied.

This book could be used by individuals making their own private study of the Old Testament or by groups attending a course. To keep such a course to a manageable length I suggest one session should be devoted to each of chapters 1 and 2, and then two sessions to each of chapters 3 to 8, making a course of 14 sessions in all. When past the two introductory chapters, for homework each member of the group could be asked to read the material on just *one* Bible book and to prepare a short summary for the group and share what interests them most in the book. Key Bible passages should be read aloud (not too many!) and this will no doubt provoke discussion. I hope the two maps at the front and the list of key words at the back of this book will also be found helpful.

I should like to thank particularly two of my colleagues at St. Andrew's Theological Seminary: Fr. Edwin Ayabo for giving me a copy of the lecture notes he uses when introducing the Old Testament to 1st Year students at SATS and for reading my completed text and making encouraging comments! And Padi Gloria Mapangdol for finding me two suitable maps. I am grateful too to Mrs. Charitas Cho for drawing on her computer knowledge to enable me to insert these maps into the book.

Outstanding of the published books I have read is the *Old Testament Survey* of William LaSor *et al* (2nd edn, 1996), a copy of which would be most valuable to every group leader and anyone wanting to study the Old Testament at greater depth. Other books I consulted are given in the Select Bibliography at the end. In addition, I found commentaries from the Cambridge Bible Commentaries on the New English Bible and Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries particularly helpful as they are both scholarly and relatively brief.

This coursebook is intended as a springboard for you to read the Scriptures themselves. Do pray before you read them that God will enlighten your mind and stir your heart to hear and obey his word.

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MAP OF CANAAN - TWELVE TRIBE PORTIONS


Hattusas
CAUCASUS
Caspian Sea
HITTITE EMPIRE
ANATOLIA
Carchemish
Haran
Nineveh
Calah
Padan-Aram
Ebla
Assur
PERSIA
Ugarit
Hamath
ASSYRIA
CYPRUS
Byblos
ARAM
Mari
MESOPOTAMIA
IRAN
Sidon
Tyre
Damascus
Mediterranean Sea
Hasor
Susa
AMMON
Babylon
LEVANT
BABYLONIA
SUMER
CANAAN
Jerusalem
Ur
MOAB
Tanis
Raamses
EDOM
ANCIENT NEAR EAST
Memphis
LOWER EGYPT
SINAI
EGYPT
ARABIA
El Amama
Bible History Online

Chapter 1

Introductory

Writing Materials in Antiquity

Stone tablets appear to have been the earliest medium of communication in the ancient Near East and were used for royal or religious texts; clay tablets or flat tiles were inscribed to make records and occasional notes could be written on pieces of broken pottery ('potsherds'). Tablets used by Isaiah (30:8), Habakkuk (2:2) and Zechariah (Lk 1:63) were probably wooden frames coated with wax.

Papyrus was the common writing material in New Testament times. It came from the pith of reeds that grew along the banks of the river Nile in Egypt. The pith was cut into strips and these were overlapped and pressed together to make sheets of 'paper'; then the ends of the sheets were overlapped and pressed together to make scrolls. The New Testament documents were written on such scrolls and many copies of them have survived to this day. Much more expensive and durable was **parchment** made from animal skins scraped smooth. The Dead Sea Scrolls, which include the earliest existing copies of Old Testament books, written between 200 BC and AD 70, are on parchment, cut into sheets and stitched together. In biblical times reeds were cut to a point then split to make a quill pen. Ink was from charcoal mixed with oil or other additives. Writing was in columns and the words were not separated!

In about the 2nd century AD the codex, our normal form of book, began to replace the scroll. It seems likely that it was Christians who started this trend, wanting their sacred documents in a form that allowed quick reference and was easy to carry about. By the 4th century the codex was in general use also outside Christian circles.

Old and New Testaments

Our Bible is divided into Old and New Testaments. The word 'testament' is from the Latin *testamentum* used by Jerome in his Latin version of the Bible[1] to translate the Hebrew word *berith* meaning 'covenant', a binding agreement. Many covenants are mentioned in the Old Testament including God's covenants with Noah (Gen 6:18), Abraham (Gen.15:18) and David (2 Sam.7), but the most important one is the one between God ('Yahweh') and Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai (Ex.24) which forms the basis of the Old Testament. The tragedy was that Israel repeatedly broke the laws they had promised to obey, resorting to idolatry, injustice, and immorality. In the end the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians in the 8th century BC, and the southern kingdom of Judah by the Babylonians in the 6th century. The leading citizens of Judah were exiled to Babylon (in modern-day Iraq). Jeremiah, a prophet during this exile, foretells the establishment of a 'new covenant' in which God's laws will be written on his people's hearts (Jer.31:31-34). It was at the Last Supper that Jesus, while instituting the eucharist, said to his disciples, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" (1

[1] Commonly known as the Vulgate completed in AD 405.

Cor.11:25). His death sealed the promise that everyone who repents and puts their faith in him would have eternal life (Jn.3:16).

The individual books of the Old Testament we shall study later (and those of the New Testament in a separate course), but how is it they are divided into chapters and verses? Our modern chapter divisions were the brainchild of Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury c.1150-1228. Numbered verses for the Old Testament were first worked out by a Jewish Rabbi, Isaac Nathan, c.1440, and for the New Testament by Robert Stephanus in 1551. Though some of these divisions break up the natural flow of thought, generally their usefulness far outweighs this.

Inspiration

Why is it that the Bible remains a 'best seller' today, so long after it was written? Not because of its fine literary style, for much of it has no great literary merit, but because of its subject matter. When the Old Testament prophets cry out, "Thus says the Lord…" they indicate the message they are proclaiming is from God. 'No prophetic message ever came just from the will of man, but men were under the control of the Holy Spirit as they spoke the message that came from God' (2 Pet.1:21, GNB). The word 'inspire' comes from the Latin *inspiro* meaning 'I breathe into'. And so we hear in 2 Timothy 3:16-17: 'All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting faults, and giving instruction for right living, so that the person who serves God may be fully qualified and equipped to do every kind of good deed' (GNB). This inspiration explains why we can read the Bible time and time again and still find it spiritually uplifting – though some passages attract us more than others! But often if we feel bored when we read this is because of the sluggish spiritual state of our own minds! Before reading it is always good to pray a simple prayer such as, "Lord, open your Word to my heart and my heart to your Word."

But honesty demands we must also recognize a *human* element in the Bible. The different writers all have their own styles. Where there is parallel material, such as in the gospels, there are often differences in detail. Sometimes the writers' very human feelings are evident, such as in the psalmist's cry for vengeance on those who have harmed Israel (e.g. Ps.137:7-9). And they are bounded, at least to some extent, by the state of knowledge of their time – which explains why they do not give us modern scientific theories about the origin of the world and humankind. This does not negate the Bible's divine inspiration but it does make it hard to maintain that Scripture is infallible. God took a risk in entrusting the writing of its contents to humans rather than angels – but the result is still an enduring masterpiece, which is indeed 'the light of our lives and the lantern of our feet' (cf. Ps.119:105) and 'contains all things necessary for salvation' (Article 6).

Archeology

Archeology may be defined as 'the study of the remains of ancient civilizations uncovered through excavations'. As a discipline it is quite modern, starting only in the mid-19th century.

Many 19th and 20th-century New Testament scholars, particularly in Germany, cast doubt on the reliability of the historical narratives of the Bible, but the archeological discoveries of W.F.

Albright, Sir William Ramsay and others suggest otherwise. To mention just a few points: there are ancient Babylonian counterparts of the Bible's creation and flood stories. Excavations at Ur, the city of Abraham, have revealed there was an advanced civilization in the 3rd millennium BC and have uncovered the remains of a tower (ziggurat) surmounted by a temple to the moon god (cf. the Tower of Babel, Gen.11:1-9). Clay tablets from the royal palace at Mari on the Euphrates show names like Abraham were current early in the second millennium. Texts from the Syrian coastal site of Ugarit feature Canaanite deities including Baal. Hundreds of decorated ivory fragments have been found at Samaria where Ahab had an ivory house (1 Ki.22:39). The 'Cyrus cylinder' confirms the policy of repatriation of exiled communities of Cyrus I of Persia mentioned in Ezra 1:2-4.

These are some of the many interesting discoveries by which our knowledge of the biblical world and biblical narrative have been enhanced through the labors of archeologists. More is being discovered all the time. Many interesting finds have also been made relevant to the New Testament.

Which parts of the Bible do you find most inspiring? Which do you find hardest to read?

What is the value of archeological finds in the Middle East? Are there limits to what they can tell us?

Chapter 2

The Old Testament

The Contents

The Old Testament is a collection of thirty-nine sacred books originally written in Hebrew[2] that the Christian Church shares with Palestinian Judaism. This Hebrew Bible was divided into three parts: The Law (Hebrew *Torah*), the Prophets and the Writings.

- The Law consists of the first five books of the Bible, often referred to by biblical scholars as the Pentateuch (Gk. *penta* 'five', *teuchos* 'book').
- The Prophets consists of the 'Former Prophets' (the historical books: Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings), and the 'Latter Prophets' (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the twelve minor prophets).
- The Writings constitute the rest of the Old Testament.

The books of the Law were accepted as authoritative at least by the 5th century BC (perhaps considerably earlier) and those of the Prophets, it seems, by the 3rd century BC. Traditionally the list of books that make up the Writings was thought to have been settled by a rabbinic council at Jamnia in Galilee (c.AD 90) after some debate about the rightness of including Ecclesiastes (so skeptical!), the Song of Songs (a passionate expression of love) and Esther (which never mentions God). It is likely the exact list of books was not settled until the next century.

The Canon of Scripture

The list of books in the Old (and New) Testament is known as the 'canon' of Scripture from the Greek word *kanon* meaning a rod used to test the straightness of something. Applied to Scripture it means the list of books acknowledged to have divine authority; the rabbis spoke of them as the books that 'defiled the hands' – holiness is powerful! A number of factors contributed to this assessment: traditional ascription to Moses, connection with an acknowledged prophet or other great figure of Jewish history, the evident spiritual authority of the books themselves, the fact that some had been laid up in the temple, and the opinion of religious leaders.

The Validity of the Old Testament for Christians

Christians see the Old Testament as of continuing authority for them since it points to the coming of Christ, the giver of eternal life. It also reveals much about God's nature and his will for humankind. The stories of its heroes and villains provide examples for us to follow and warnings to heed. Much material is clearly inspiring. But, as Article 7 points out, we are bound by its *moral* laws but not by its ceremonial or civil ones. We need no longer offer animal sacrifices when we have the eternally valid sacrifice of Christ (Heb.9:24-6, 10:11-12). Civil statutes such as the establishment of 'cities of refuge' for those who have accidentally killed people (Num.35:9-15, Deut.19:1-10) were important for ancient Israel, but are not relevant to us.

[2] Certain parts of Ezra and Daniel were written in Aramaic.

The Apocrypha

The Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches include in their Old Testaments seven extra books (Tobit, Judith, 1 & 2 Maccabees, the Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach and Baruch) and five additions to existing books (Esther, the Letter of Jeremiah, the Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men, Susanna, and Bel and the Dragon) which were particularly revered by Alexandrian Jews and therefore included along with the books of the Hebrew Bible in the Greek translation known as the Septuagint (LXX). Since the time of Jerome (late 4th C AD) these books have often been known as the 'Apocrypha' meaning 'hidden things'. Most were written in Greek and those that were written in Hebrew were composed long after the time of Ezra (5th C BC) when it was believed prophecy had ceased. Later 2 Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh were added to Jerome's Latin translation, the Vulgate. Article 6 of our Articles of Religion declares, 'The Church doth read (the books of the Apocrypha) for example of life and instruction of manners; but yet doth it not apply them to establish any doctrine.' But the *order* of books in our Old Testament reflects that of the Septuagint excluding the books of the Apocrypha. We shall look briefly at the books of the Apocrypha in the final chapter of this coursebook.

The Dead Sea Scrolls

Since 1947 hundreds of scrolls, written in Hebrew and Aramaic, have been discovered in caves in cliffs at Qumran near the NW corner of the Dead Sea. They date from 250 BC – AD 70 and appear to be the library of the Jewish (Essene) community, whose ruined buildings remain on the shore nearby, stored away for safe-keeping from the Roman armies. The *Damascus Covenant* document found there tells of the community's foundation, and there are several copies of its *Manual of Discipline*.

With the exception of Esther, fragments of all the books of our Old Testament have been found there, written in Aramaic or Hebrew, and several books of the Apocrypha are also represented. Particularly impressive is a complete copy of Isaiah. It predates the Hebrew Masoretic text from which our Old Testament was translated by some 1,000 years and modern translators make some use of it as it differs in various details from the Masoretic text. The Isaiah scroll is now beautifully displayed in the Shrine of the Book in Jerusalem, and may be seen by tourists.

The Approach of this Course Book

Following the arrangement of the Hebrew Bible we shall look in turn at the Law (Pentateuch), the Historical Books ('Former Prophets'), Prophetic Books ('Latter Prophets'), Poetic Books (Job, Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes), and the other Writings, and much more briefly at the Apocrypha. It is desirable that students on this course should read the chapter to be studied *before* coming to their class to enable them to enter fully into class discussions.

Explore further the point made by Article 7 that some parts of the Old Testament are not binding on Christians.

Who are your favorite Old Testament Bible characters? Why?

Chapter 3

The Law

Genesis recounts the creation of the world and sketches early history up to Joseph, favorite son of the patriarch Jacob. The books Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy are all concerned with the life of Moses. All five books are traditionally ascribed to him. For Jews they are the most sacred part of the Hebrew Bible, embodying the covenant between Yahweh ('the Lord' in most English versions) and Israel. Our word 'law' translates the Hebrew *torah* which means rather 'instruction' or 'guidance'. The lives of the Patriarchs (Gen.12-50) can be seen as that, while Exodus to Deuteronomy actually contain a lot of laws. Bible scholars often refer to these five books as the Pentateuch (Gk. *pentateuchos,* 'five-fold (book)'). Our titles of the books are from the Greek Septuagint and reflect the contents of the books.

Whilst Moses may have been responsible for writing some of the most ancient parts of the Law (Ex.20-23, 24:3-8, Num.33 etc) most biblical scholarship today believes these books to be the result of joining together a number of different sources of material stemming from different periods. The classic 'four source' theory, formulated by the German scholar Julius Wellhausen in the 19th century called the oldest source 'J' because it calls God by the personal name 'Jehovah' (now believed to be more correctly written 'Yahweh') which came from the southern kingdom of Judah in the 9th century BC. The next source he detected he called 'E' because it refers to God as 'Elohim', the common Hebrew word for God. This he suggested came from the northern kingdom of Israel and was composed in the 8th century. These two sources he thought were combined in the 7th century. The third source 'D' was the book of Deuteronomy, discovered in the temple in Jerusalem in 621 BC. The fourth he termed 'P' and was, he believed, the work of a post-exilic priestly writer who composed Gen.1, the cultic material (Leviticus etc) and some narratives of the Pentateuch in the 5th century. Today scholars who favor this approach tend to date the sources earlier, placing J in the 10th century and P, the latest source, during the exile itself in the 6th century.

Other scholars increasingly disown Wellhausen's theory, pointing out that the 'sources' J and E do not exclusively use 'Yahweh' and 'Elohim' for God. Moreover the Ugaritic texts from Syria contain cultic material parallel to that of P dating from before Israel's conquest of Canaan. Perhaps then it is best to let the biblical texts speak for themselves and face up to any inconsistencies or duplications of material when we find them. Let's now look at each of the five books of the Pentateuch in turn.

The Pentateuch presents itself as a history in which the events it narrates, from the creation of the world to the death of Moses, are arranged in chronological order. Genesis is a self-contained entity; Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers are not so clearly separated from each other, but Deuteronomy is independent from the rest.

Genesis

'Genesis' means 'beginning'. The book consists of two major sections:

- Primeval[3] history: the Creation, the Fall, the Flood, the Tower of Babel.
- The lives of the Patriarchs[4] Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and then Joseph.

Primeval History

Genesis 1-11 answers important questions asked by early humans: How and why was the world made? Where did the first man and woman come from? Why do people experience pain? What was the origin of the rainbow? Why do the peoples of the earth speak different languages? The answers are given in story form and relate to the dawn of humankind.

The two stories of creation have different emphases. The second (2:4-25), generally thought to be the earlier, focuses on the creation of man and woman; the first (1:1-2:3) focuses on the creation of the world. There are Babylonian counterparts to our creation story but they are polytheistic, contrasting with the majestic narrative in Genesis 1 which tells of the work of one God of absolute power; they depict humankind as created as an afterthought, which the gods later regretted, in contrast to our account which presents humans as the crown of God's creation.

Human free-will, and its misuse in the face of temptation to disobey God, form the subject of Genesis 3. Interestingly, the story is pictured on certain ancient Near Eastern seals. Banishment from the garden of delight and God's direct presence followed Adam and Eve's sin, with consequent pain, jealousy and murder (ch.4). After a genealogy from Adam to Noah (ch.5), the story of the Flood is graphically told (chs.6-9).[5] Close examination of these chapters reveals certain unevenness: Noah is told to take *pairs* of all animals into the ark (6:20) yet later it is *seven pairs* of clean animals (7:2); the waters prevail on the earth for 40 days (7:17) but later for 150 days (8:3) – suggesting two different versions of the story (from J and E?) have been put together. But the overall message of the story is clear: humankind was so sinful that a holy God had to destroy it, saving just the righteous few. An ancient parallel has been found in the Epic of Gilgamesh from Nineveh, c.1600 BC. But there are many differences in detail between it and our biblical story, e.g. the Babylonian gods cower before the unleashed flood, unable to control it. It could be that our biblical writer consciously wanted to correct the erroneous polytheistic story he knew.

After a chapter on Noah's descendents (ch.10) there comes the story of the tower of Babel (11:1-9). It focuses on human pride, God's omnipotence, and the diversity of human languages (seen as a punishment). Interestingly, multi-storey buildings surmounted by a pagan temple have been excavated in several places in Mesopotamia[6] including the cities of Babylon and Ur. They are called ziggurats and may represent human attempts to reach up to the realm of the gods.

How, in an age of science, are we to view these ancient stories? In the 19th century and, in some places right to this day, people felt they must choose here between Christianity and science, the two being incompatible. But the Bible was not written as a text-book of science; it provided explanations about the origin of the world and humankind for a pre-scientific age. Today we are

[3] History of the first age of the world.
[4] From Latin *pater*, 'father'.
[5] How movingly it is retold in the cycles of Medieval mystery plays in York and other ancient centers in England!
[6] The land between the great rivers Tigris and Euphrates in modern-day Iraq.

not rejecting the historical value of the rest of Scripture if we accept the view put forward by the 19th-century biblical scholar F.J.A. Hort that the stories of this first part of Genesis are Old Testament parables, designed to teach us important truths[7] but not to provide literal history. It has been suggested that the story of Adam and Eve is the story of every human being faced with temptation. *How do you react to this suggestion?*

The Patriarchs

Genesis 12 – 50, besides being of fundamental importance to the history of Israel, and hence to Christianity, is a wonderful source of character studies of people and their response to God and to each other and is thus a preacher's gift, but also fascinating to any reader. Divine calls and promises occupy a central place in the narratives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the concept of covenant is important. These stories date, it appears, from the early second millennium BC.

With Abraham we emerge from pre-history on to the stage of human history. The Mari tablets from a royal palace on the Euphrates in his era confirm the existence of similar names to those found in his genealogy (Gen.11:10-26). Customs such as a barren woman giving her slave girl to her husband to produce children (cf. Gen.16:1-14) are mentioned in the Nuzi tablets from the 15th century BC. Of course the biblical stories of the Patriarchs must have been passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth for a long time before they were eventually written down, but they appear in essence historical not novelistic.

Abraham is above all the man of faith, who believed God even when his promises seemed so slow to be fulfilled. He thus provided St. Paul with the ideal model of one who is justified by faith not works (Gal.3:6-9, Rom.4). Isaac appears in contrast a rather colorless character, under the shadow of his father and duped in old age by his wife and younger son (Gen 27). It is Jacob the schemer, who lived by his brain rather than brawn, who later became a man of God. God promised him blessing (28:10-17) and he later wrestled with God and prevailed (32:24-32). The Joseph saga (Gen.37-50) is a polished piece of literary work with lots of color, plots and sub-plots. Above all we see here that God can bring success out of the most adverse conditions for his servants.

Chose one of these Bible characters and go through his story looking for good examples to follow, errors to avoid, and commands and promises from God that you might apply to yourself.

Exodus

'Exodus' means 'going out'. The book consists of five parts:

1) God's great act of deliverance (chs.1-14)
2) Song of praise for deliverance (15)
3) God's provisions in the desert (16-18)
4) The giving of the laws (19-31)
5) Transgression and renewal (32-40)

[7] That God is the originator of this world, that humans are special in creation, and that pain and separation from God result from human disobedience to him.

Section one opens with the birth and early life of Moses, probably the greatest figure of Jewish history. He was an Israelite of the tribe of Levi but, due surely to amazing acts of God's providence, he was brought up as a prince of a Pharaoh, king of Egypt. But he sacrifices this for the sake of helping one of his own people. Fleeing from Egypt he takes refuge with Jethro, a priest of the nomadic Midianites (ch.2). There in the desert of Sinai Moses encounters God through a bush which, though burning, is not consumed. God calls to him from the bush, declaring he is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He has heard the cries of his people enslaved in Egypt and wants to deliver them and bring them to live in a fertile land of their own, at present inhabited by the Canaanites and other tribes. He commissions a reluctant Moses to go to Pharaoh and ask for the release of Israel. Asked about his identity God tells Moses he is 'I am' or 'Yahweh'[8] (connected with the Hebrew verb 'to be'). Ex.3 which recounts this must rank as one of the most important chapters in the Bible. Moses still needs further assurance that God can work miraculous signs through him, and he is allowed to take his more eloquent brother Aaron with him to Pharoah (ch.4). Ex.7-12 recount an amazing sequence of ten plagues by which an unwilling Pharaoh is eventually persuaded to release Israel.

The subsequent deliverance of Israel from Egypt under his leadership (ch.14), the giving of God's commandments, and the making of the covenant between God and Israel at Mount Sinai (chs.20-24), are pivotal events in the life of Israel. More references are made to them in the Old Testament than to any other episode in the nation's history. Time and again in later biblical literature and subsequent history the exodus from Egypt has been seen as a type of later events: the return of the exiles from Babylon in the 6th century BC (Is 51:10); the Essene community as seen in the Dead Sea Scrolls; and Christ's death and resurrection (Lk 9:31). Paul used the exodus story to teach the Corinthian church that God's blessing does not exempt people who subsequently sin from punishment (1 Cor 10). Present-day Liberation Theology takes the exodus as its guiding biblical motif.

Scholars tend to see the stories of Exodus as multi-layered, the result of repeated editing. In Ex.14 the naturalistic explanation of the strong east wind driving back the waters (v.21) is succeeded by a picture of the waters forming walls on either side of Israel's escape route through the sea (v.22), dramatically captured in the 20th-century film 'The Ten Commandments'. The 'sea of reeds' referred to in the Hebrew of Exodus 10:19 (perhaps now part of the Suez Canal), was changed in the Septuagint to the Red Sea, a far greater challenge to cross! The Song of the Sea (Ex.15) is generally recognized to be one of the oldest parts of the book.

While some would place the exodus in the 15th century BC, most scholars today would date it in the mid-13th century. No Pharaoh is named in the biblical narrative and there are no references to Joseph, Moses or the Hebrews in the Egyptian records, but scholars are inclined to identify Moses' opponent with Rameses II (1290-1213).

[8] The Hebrew alphabet does not have vowels and in Ex.3:15 its consonants here are equivalent to JHWH or YHWH. Scholars used to think this should be vocalized 'Jehovah' but now agree it should be 'Yahweh'. The Jerusalem Bible Old Testament consistently translates it so, but most other English versions simply replace it with the respectful 'the Lord' which is how the Jews read this Hebrew word feeling God's holy name is too sacred to pronounce. In this introductory coursebook we shall use 'the Lord' and 'Yahweh' interchangeably and sometimes simply say 'God'.

Ex.16-17 reveal the hardships of a nation travelling through the desert, its all too human complaints, and God's provision for its needs. Ex.18 shows Moses in the role of prophet and judge for Israel, given some practical advice by his father-in-law Jethro to lessen his load. In 19:16-25 God reveals his awesome presence[9] on Mount Sinai. Then in 20:1-17 he gives the centerpiece of his Law: the Ten Commandments (Decalogue[10]) for which there was no close counterpart among the other nations of the ancient Near East. It is followed by what is usually known as 'The Book of the Covenant' (Ex.21-23), which consists of detailed laws relating to the daily life of Israel. Perhaps it was a handbook of legal rulings to assist judges and elders in their administration of justice in the community.

Then in Ex.24 comes the making of the **covenant** between Yahweh and Israel. The people promise to keep God's commandments (vv.3, 7), then Moses throws half the blood of the sacrificial animals against the altar to show God is one party to the agreement, and the other half over the people to seal them as the other party. Then Moses, his assistants and seventy elders of Israel are privileged to share in a sacred meal in God's presence (vv.9-11) before Moses goes up the mountain to commune with Yahweh. There he stays 'forty days and forty nights', a phrase meaning a *long* time. In Ex.25-31 he is given by God detailed instructions about the making of the tabernacle (tent-temple), its furnishings, the priests' clothing and their consecration. There is a great emphasis on costliness and beauty, nothing less than the best being worthy of worship of such a great God. Then, incredibly, impatient Israel lapses into idolatry in the well-known incident of the golden calf (Ex.32). There follows punishment, then God graciously renews the covenant (33-34). Finally there is the actual making of the tabernacle, its furnishings and the priestly vestments (35-40).

What a dramatic book Exodus is! It is of central importance to Israel's understanding of itself as the Chosen People of their God, Yahweh. Briefly share with your group how God revealed himself and what he did for Israel. How did the Israelites fall short of what he expected of them and why? Do we similarly fall short as Christians today?!

Leviticus

Whilst to Western Christians today Leviticus appears a very foreign and irrelevant book, to those whose tribal culture has until recent times involved ritual animal sacrifices it is of particular interest.

Whilst the title 'Leviticus' implies it is a book for Levites, much of it reads like a manual for **priests** (chs.1-7 etc), though indeed some of it is addressed to the whole people of Israel (11:1, 12:1, 15:1). So it seems priests and Levites may have been virtually equated in pre-exilic times.[11] Leviticus forms part of the continuous section of regulations running from Ex.25:1 - Num.10:10, given by God to Moses for Israel at Mount Sinai. The last chapters of Exodus tell of the constructing of the tabernacle and Leviticus begins with details of the sacrificial offerings to be made there. In terms of Wellhausen's four-document theory[12] Leviticus belongs to 'P'. It is

[9] The technical term for this is 'theophany' – God's showing himself.
[10] From the Greek *deka logoi*, 'ten words'. A slightly different version of them is given in Deut.5:6-21.
[11] The only mention of Levites in this book is in 25:32-34, which may have been a later addition to the book.
[12] Above p.17.

generally agreed that, in its present form it was produced within priestly circles that survived and regrouped after the fall of Jerusalem and the deportation of its leading citizens to Babylon in the early 6th century BC. The priest(s) edited collections of much earlier laws, putting them together. William S. LaSor sums up the nature of the book in these terms:

> Leviticus is a picture window into ancient Israel's worship. From it we learn about the holiness of God. It unfolds the relationship between holiness and ethics, and even more it provides background for grasping the significance of Christ's sacrificial death.[13]

The material of the book falls into six sections:

1) Laws for sacrifices (chs.1-7)
2) Consecration of the priests (8-10)
3) Laws relating to ritual purity (11-15)
4) The Day of Atonement (16)
5) The Holiness Code (17-26)
6) Gifts and tithes (27)

Let us look at each section in turn.

1) Laws of Sacrifices (1-7)

The offering of sacrifices was characteristic of all religions in the ancient world. In our biblical narrative the cloud of God's presence descends on the newly made tabernacle or 'tent of meeting' (Ex.40:34) and from there God addresses Moses regarding the nature of the Israel's sacrifice: the burnt offering (ch.1), grain offering (2), peace or well-being offering (3), sin offering (4:1-5:13), guilt offering (5:14-6:7), and further elaboration of these (6:8-7:38). A few general points may be made:

- The animals offered must be 'without blemish' and the grain of 'choice flour' – nothing second-rate was acceptable to Yahweh.
- In all animal sacrifices the one offering the animal laid his hand on its head. This seems to be a sign of identification with the animal, and perhaps also, at that moment, (particularly in the case of the sin and guilt offerings) the one who offered it confessed his sins, symbolically transferring them to the animal which then died in his place (cf. 16:21).
- The blood was never to be consumed by Israelites for in it was the life of the body which came from God and belonged to him alone (Gen.9:4, Lev.7:26-27). It had to be drained out and was used in the rituals of atonement ('at-one-ment') restoring unity between the offender and God (Lev.4:5-7, 17:10-16).
- The fat and entrails of the sacrificial body were also regarded as the Lord's portion and were always to be burnt on the altar (3:3-5, 14-17, 4:8-10…). The fat seems also to have been regarded as also connected with the body's life-force, and the burning of the entrails prevented the pagan practice of reading people's fortunes from them.

The burnt offering and the grain offering were primarily viewed as gifts to God. The sin and guilt offerings were intended to remove *unintentional* sins (4:2, 13, 5:15…), the guilt offerings requiring also an element of compensation (5:16, 6:4-5); but clearly some intentional sins, later repented of, could also be atoned for in this way (6:1-7). For flagrant and defiant sins against the

[13] *Old Testament Survey*, 2nd edn, p.91.

laws of God, however, there was no such remedy only the death penalty (cf. 18:6-23). Although ch.3 does not make this clear, the peace or well-being offerings were thought of as thank-offerings for something God had done and some of the animal appears to have been returned to the worshipper to become the basis of a celebration meal for his family.[14] Even a blemished offering could be used in this case (22:23).

2) Consecration of the Priests (8-10)

Ch.8 is the account of Moses' consecration of Aaron and his sons as priests. It appears to be a direct continuation from Ex.40:38, with the laws of the sacrifices (Lev.1-7) inserted in between. In Ex.40:9-15 Moses is told by God to consecrate the tabernacle, its furnishings and its priests, and this he does in Lev.8:10-13 after vesting Aaron and his sons.[15] The sacrifices conducted by Moses for Aaron and his sons (8:14-36) and then by Aaron for Israel (9:1-22) follow the methods prescribed in chs.1-7. The culmination lies in Aaron (and Moses) blessing the people (9:22-23) and God's acceptance of the sacrifices by consuming them by fire (v.24). In ch.10 misdeeds of Aaron's sons meet with tragic consequences; the 'unholy fire' (v.1) may indicate the use of a pagan practice.

3) Laws relating to Ritual Purity (11-15)

This is a collection of laws relating to matters that might make people unclean:

- 'Clean' and 'unclean' animals (11). In part the distinction may relate to hygiene, but it also seems relate to what was believed to be the completeness or perfection of creatures. Animals displaying characteristics deemed to belong to another species were 'unclean'.[16]
- Childbearing (12). The idea behind this appears to be that any bodily discharge brings imperfection and hence uncleanness.
- Skin diseases far wider than leprosy (13-14). Even mould growth on clothing (13:47-59) and in housing (14:33-53) are covered. It is priests not doctors who inspect and pronounce a verdict.
- Other bodily discharges (15).

4) The Day of Atonement (16)

The annual Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*), observed to this day, seeks the pardoning of the sins of the entire nation of Israel. It is to be observed perpetually as a Sabbath of rest (v.31). The rituals prescribed consist of burnt offerings and sin offerings. Of the two goats offered as sin offerings on behalf of Israel, one is treated as a normal sin offering (vv.15-19); on the other the priest (at the beginning Aaron) lays his hands, confessing the sins of Israel over it, then sending it away into the wilderness. It is 'for azazel' (v.8). This Hebrew term may mean 'for the precipice' as in the New English Bible; there is a similar Arabic word meaning 'rough ground' and, in later times, the goat was pushed over a cliff a few miles from Jerusalem to its

[14] LaSor, p.85.

[15] The details of the priestly vestments are given in Ex.28. The ephod is engraved with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel which the high priest bears before the Lord; the breastpiece had a pouch in which were placed the urim and thummim, sacred stones for casting as lots to give messages from God.

[16] See J.R. Porter, *Leviticus*, (Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible), p.84.

death. By inter-testamental times Azazel is the name of a demon, but it is by no means certain that this was the word's original meaning.[17]

5) The Holiness Code (17-26)

This section of Leviticus has been called the 'Holiness Code' because of its repeated references to the need for holiness. 'Holy' means 'set apart'. God addresses his people: 'You shall be holy to me; for I the Lord am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine' (20:26). It is stressed that Israel's sacrifices must *only* be offered at the tabernacle (ch.17). Deviant sexual relations practiced by other nations are forbidden (18). In chs.19-20 there are miscellaneous laws motivated by justice and love. Special standards for the lives of priests are set down in chs.21-22. Then there is an annual calendar of festivals and special days to be observed by all Israel (23),[18] and special regulations for seventh (Sabbath) and fiftieth (Jubilee) years (25), though the Sabbath year seems to have only been observed sporadically and there is no evidence the Jubilee year was ever observed. Finally, ch.26 tells of blessing resulting from keeping God's commandments, and warns of punishments for disobeying them.

6) Gifts and Tithes (27)

This last chapter deals with matters relating to gifts and tithes for the Lord. So ends this book that lays down the way of life expected of the Chosen People of God.

Why is it that Christians no longer need to offer sacrifices to ensure God's good will? (See Heb.9 & 10)
Are there any parts of Leviticus that can still help us as we try to live the Christian life? (See especially Lev.19)

Numbers

The book of Numbers scarcely makes attractive reading. It is amorphous in character, a mixture of laws and narrative and, in the narrative, people frequently appear complaining and rebelling against Moses (and Aaron), so much so that, on two occasions, God is said to wish to obliterate Israel and this is only avoided by the prayers of Moses and the action of Aaron. Despite all that the book ends with Israel camped to the east of Canaan, poised for conquest. Scholars say that, in its present form, Numbers comes from the hand of a priestly writer in the period after the exile (6th C BC) but incorporates much older material. The title 'Numbers' reflects the two censuses of Israel recorded in chs.1 and 26. Comparing Num.1:1 with Deut.1:3 it is evident that Numbers covers some 38 years and 9 months, roughly speaking '40 years' (cf. Ps.95:10). These 'wilderness wandering' are usually dated to the 13th century BC.

There are some attractive parts of Numbers.

- In 6:22-27 we find the Aaronic or priests' blessing:

[17] Porter, *Leviticus*, p.127, though LaSor, *Old Testament Survey*, p.88 favours the meaning 'desert demon'. However, only in exilic and later times did Israel focus much on the reality of demons. The LXX simply translates *azazel* 'being sent away'.
[18] LaSor, pp.92-93 provides a useful chart.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

It was part of the priests' function to bless the people (Lev.9:22), but this blessing is so fine it has been taken into general use in the Christian Church, and is in our BCP.

- The Lord's presence with his people is signified by the **cloud** that rested on the tabernacle, glowing at night, which indicated when Israel should move and where it should set up a new camp (9:15-23). No matter how bad the people had been (for which they were punished) God remained with his people.
- In the main, **Moses** provides a good role model for his people and for us. He is described as the humblest man on earth (12:3). When confronted with hostility he appeals to Yahweh. Time and again he is then vindicated and his opponents punished. While prophets receive dreams and visions from God Moses is said to speak to God 'face to face' and is privileged to see the very form of God (12:6-8). Such intimacy explains how he could come down from Mount Sinai with the tablets of the law in his hands and with his face shining (Ex.34:29-35), yet he was never allowed to see the full glory of God (Ex.33:18-23). On one occasion when God is said to wish to obliterate rebellious Israel Moses intercedes for them effectively (Num.14:13-20), on another he instructs Aaron to use his censer to make atonement between God and the people (16:45-50). It seems a harsh penalty then that when in impatience he strikes a rock twice instead of once to bring forth water for Israel, he is told that he and Aaron will not enter the Promised Land (20:7-13), but leadership for that task perhaps needed a younger man.

Numbers may perhaps best be considered in three parts:

1) Israel at Mount Sinai (1:1-10:10)
2) Rebellion in the wilderness (10:11-21:35)
3) In the plains of Moab (22:1-36:13)

(1) <u>Israel at Mount Sinai</u> (1:1-10:10)

This section consists of instructions or laws given to Israel through Moses (and Aaron – 4:1).
1:1-2:34 speaks of the census to be taken by tribe of all Israelites aged 20 and upwards – a tally of fighting men. The total comes to 603,550. But this suggests the total population of Israel at that time would have been some 2.5 million. How could the wilderness sustain such a company together with their livestock? Some suggest this census figure and that of the second census (601,730 - ch.26) are artificially large reflecting post-exilic Israel's pride in its past.
Ch.2 gives the geography of the camp of Israel grouped by tribe around the tabernacle.
Ch.3 designates Aaron's family to provide permanently the priesthood of Israel, with the Levites as their permanent assistants in the affairs of the tabernacle. God now accepts their service instead of that of the first-born of every family of Israel (cf. Ex.13:2). Ch.4 distributes the various duties connected with the tabernacle and its furnishings among the three clans of Levi.
Ch.5 contains laws relating to uncleanness and unfaithfulness.
Ch.6 speaks of Nazirites, separated for God's service; vv.22-7 give the Aaronic blessing.
Ch.7 instructs that identical gifts of silver and gold vessels be given by the chief of each tribe for the service of the tabernacle; in v.89 we hear that God's voice spoke to Moses from the Ark's cover.

8:1-4 tells of the golden lampstand with its seven lights. In later times the seven-branched candlestick became one of the distinctive symbols of Judaism. 8:5-26 relates the consecration of the Levites. 9:1-14 gives some instructions about the Passover and in vv.15-23 we hear of the cloud of Yahweh's presence with his people (cf. Ex.40:34-8). Finally 10:1-10 orders the making of two silver trumpets which will be blown by the priests to assemble the people, warn of war, and be used at festivals.

(2) Rebellion in the Wilderness (10:11-21:35)

This section is very largely narrative. Israel sets off from the wilderness of Sinai, tribe by tribe, with the dismantled tabernacle and its furnishings carried by the Levites, the cloud being with them. When the Ark of the Covenant sets out Moses says, "Arise, O Lord, let your enemies by scattered, and your foes flee before you," and when it comes to rest again he says, "Rest, Lord of the countless thousands of Israel."[19] (Num.10:35-36) Later the Ark was sometimes carried into battle (cf. 1 Sam.4). So Israel was conscious of Yahweh's presence with them.

At the exodus certain Egyptians had left Egypt with Israel, thinking they would try their luck with the conquerors of Pharaoh (Ex.12:38). It is these who start the complaint against the desert fare of manna, manna and yet more manna! (Num.11:4) But others take up the complaint and Moses cries to the Lord for helpers to lead such a discontented people. He is allowed to share leadership with seventy elders of the people, God's Spirit being given to empower them for this task (11:24-5). And for a dietary variation God sends quails (cf. Ex.16:13); apparently these birds migrate across the Sinai peninsula in large numbers a meter or two above the ground. But then, it is said, God showed his anger against his discontented people by striking them with plague (Num.11:31-4). Not long afterwards Miriam, Moses' sister, and Aaron criticize Moses because of his Cushite (black Ethiopian or Sudanese?) wife; in consequence Miriam becomes leprous for a week (12:1-15).

Israel moves on to the wilderness of Paran and from there Moses sends twelve men to spy out Canaan. They all return declaring what a fruitful land it is, but the majority are daunted by the sheer size of its inhabitants and the strength of their fortifications and feel Israel would have no chance in battle against them. Only Caleb thinks Israel can succeed and should proceed at once to occupy the land (13:30). But the majority opinion prevails and the community of Israel berates Moses and Aaron for bringing them on such a hopeless quest. In response God declares *none* of that adult generation except Caleb and Joshua shall enter the Promised Land but will die in the wilderness (14:22-35). So, much of the forty years of wandering in the wilderness is attributed to Israel's *lack of faith in God*. In ch.16 we hear of further rebellion against Moses and Aaron. Careful reading of the passage suggests two different stories have been merged: one telling of Korah and 250 Levites wanting to be priests, the other of Dathan and Abiram of the tribe of Reuben simply rebelling against Moses' authority. When they are punished with death the whole congregation rebels and in response God sends a plague among them, stayed only by action taken by Aaron with his censer; even so 14,700 people die. In the next chapter Aaron is exalted when his staff alone blooms and produces almonds.

[19] Quoting here from the New English Bible.

In ch.15 there are instructions about various sacrificial offerings but the point is made that, while sin-offerings can atone for unintentional sins, flagrant sins will meet with the death penalty (vv.27-31) – and that is immediately demonstrated in the case of a Sabbath breaker (vv.32-6). Ch.18 specifies duties and dues of priests and Levites, and in the next chapter a procedure is provided for cleansing those who have touched corpses. Ch.20 tells of the deaths of Miriam and Aaron (the latter being succeeded as senior priest by his son Eleazar), and of Moses' condemnation for impatiently striking the rock. Further, in vv.14-21, the king of Edom stubbornly refuses to let Israel pass through his land and remains unchastised, but in the following chapter similar hostility from the Canaanite king of Arad (21:1-3), Sihon, king of the Amorites (vv.21-26) and Og, king of Bashan (vv.33-35) meet with ruthless military defeat. Once more in this chapter there are complaints against God and Moses about lack of good food and water, and Yahweh is said to send poisonous snakes among the people as a punishment. They are only saved when they look at a bronze snake that Moses has set on a pole (vv.4-9). Jesus likens this to his future death on the cross (Jn.3:14-15).

(3) <u>In the Plains of Moab</u> (22:1-36:13)

This section begins with the intriguing story of Balak, king of Moab, terrified by the vast company of Israel encamped on the edge of his territory, summoning from the region of the Euphrates the prophet Balaam, son of Beor, to curse Israel. The plan backfires when Balaam, declares he can only say what God puts in his mouth, and then consistently *blesses* Israel. The story includes the incident, beloved by children (and not a few adults!), of Balaam's donkey talking (22:22-35). Scholars say that Balaam's prophecies are written in an ancient form of Hebrew, suggesting they date from the 10th century BC or even earlier. But Balaam is *not* an Israelite and he is later blamed for causing an incident in which Israelite men are drawn to have sex with Moabite women and engage in pagan worship at the shrine of the Baal of Peor, for which he is later killed by Israelite forces (25:1-5, 18, 31:8, 16).

Israel is now well positioned to launch an attack on Canaan from the east, so Yahweh instructs Moses and Eleazar to take another census (Num.26). As Moses will not himself enter the Promised Land Joshua is commissioned as his successor (27:12-23). The remaining chapters of Numbers contain laws about sacrifices (28-29), vows (30), and a record of a victory by Israel over Midian (31). Then the tribes of Reuben, Gad and half of Manasseh are settled east of the Jordan (32). In 33:1-49 Moses reviews the wilderness wanderings, and gives strict instructions that Israel must ruthlessly drive out the Canaanites and destroy their gods and shrines (vv.50-56) - or clearly Israel's future worship would be contaminated by Canaanite religious practices. In ch.34 the area to be conquered is mapped out, and in the next chapter God instructs Moses to set aside 48 towns for the Levites, including six cities of refuge for all those who have caused death accidentally. In the final chapter it is insisted that tribal land should be kept within a tribe even if its women marry members of other tribes.

What leads people to challenge the leadership of Moses and Aaron? How is it dealt with? Can you think of any similar situations today?

What lessons can we learn from the Balak/Balaam stories (Num.22-24)?

Deuteronomy

The title of this book is from the Greek *deuteros nomos* meaning 'second law'. Indeed here we find again the Ten Commandments (ch.5). Deuteronomy consists almost entirely of three speeches by Moses to all Israel: 1:6-4:40, 4:44-28:68, 29:1-30:20. Its style is noticeably different from that of Genesis–Numbers indicating it was composed separately. Indeed its affinity with Joshua-2 Kings suggests it was once part of a larger work with these books, making what scholars now refer to as the 'Deuteronomic history'. Later Deuteronomy appears to have been added to Genesis-Numbers to make up the Torah (Law) by a priestly writer after the exile.

Deuteronomy is commonly thought to be 'the book of the law' discovered during repairs to the Temple in 621 BC, which then became the basis of reforms by king Josiah (2 Ki.22-23). Scholars say our present book is the product of a long process of updating and modification, but some of its contents are very old. The blessing of Moses (Deut.33) is clearly from a time when the twelve tribes of Israel had separate identities and it may stem from the period of the judges (or indeed Moses). It has been noticed that the structure of Deuteronomy reflects ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaties (treaties between an overlord and a subject people), well-known in the second millennium BC. These treatises generally include: (1) a preamble, (2) a historical prologue, (3) a statement of general principles, (4) detailed obligations imposed on the subject people, (5) an order to deposit the treaty in a safe place and have it read publicly periodically, (6) a list of gods who witness the treaty, and (7) curses and blessings. All except (6) can be found in Deuteronomy. This suggests the original form of the book may indeed stem from the time of Moses (c.1250 BC).

<u>Principal Themes</u>

1. The uniqueness of Yahweh, his love for his chosen people, and the need for Israel to love him by diligently keeping his commandments (4:7-8, 32-35, 6:4-9, 20-25, 7:7-11). Insistence on keeping God's commandments is repeated time and again in this book.
2. The loveliness of the Promised Land (5:7-10, 6:10-12, 11:11-15, 26:9).
3. The need for the complete destruction of the Canaanites and their places and objects of worship (7:1-6, 12:1-4).
4. The need for worship at a central sanctuary (12:5-12, 14:23, 16:2, 11, 15-16). This was to prevent Israel from using the local shrines of the Canaanites.
5. Concern for the poor (15:1-18, 22:1-4, 26:12-15, 26:12-15).

We shall consider the book in four sections:

1) Introductory speeches (chs.1-11)
2) The Deuteronomic law code (12-26)
3) Covenant renewal (27-30)
4) Conclusion of the Pentateuch (31-34)

(1) Introductory Speeches (1-11)

It has been suggested that 1:1-4:43 was designed as the introduction of the Deuteronomic history and 4:44-11:32 the introduction of the book of Deuteronomy itself.[20] Moses is speaking to Israel on the plains of Moab on the first day of the eleventh month of the fortieth year since Israel left Egypt (1:1-3). In chs.1-3 Moses reviews Israel's wilderness wanderings, and in 4:1-43 stresses the uniqueness of Yahweh and his love for his people. Then come the Ten Commandments (5:6-21) in a form that differs just a little from that in Ex.20:1-17; the greatest difference being in the 4th commandment where it may be the Deuteronomic version preserves the original form, later altered (to the form in Ex.20:11) by the priestly editor to reflect Gen.1. In 6:1-25 the primary commandment is stated (v.5). The Jews call it the 'Shema', the Hebrew word for 'hear' (v.4). Then follows a series of memory aids: recitation of the laws, daily discussion of them, binding (parts of) them on people's hands and foreheads, writing them on their doorposts and gates (vv.7-9). (So developed the phylacteries that scribes and Pharisees wore in Jesus' time - Mt.23:5; they were small leather boxes containing some Hebrew texts of Scripture, including Deut.6:4-9.) The Israelites are then strongly urged not to forget Yahweh when they have settled in their land and prospered (vv.10-15), and to instruct their children about the origin of their decrees and statutes (vv.20-25).

There follows a stern order to Israel to drive out or destroy the Canaanites, smash their shrines and objects of worship (7:1-26), and to remember the God who sustained them through forty years in the wilderness and not to let affluence dull their zeal for him (8:11-20). When the Lord drives out the Canaanites before you, Moses says, it is because of their wickedness and his promise to your ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, not because of your righteousness, for you have been a rebellious people (9:1-29). In chs.10-11 Moses reminds Israel of the Ark made to contain the tablets on which were written the Ten Commandments, once more urges obedience, and says they must choose whether they will fall under God's blessing or curse.

(2) The Deuteronomic Law Code (12-26)

This is the heart of Deuteronomy and is later referred to as 'the book of the law' (28:61, 29:21, 30:10, 31:26). First come **laws governing worship** (12:1-16:17) which include:

- Laws concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices to be offered at the central shrine (12:5), but also allowing animals for domestic use to be slaughtered locally, though the blood must not be consumed (12:15-16).
- The listing of clean and unclean animals (14:3-20), and the giving of instructions about tithes (14:22-29).
- Directions about the Sabbath (seventh) year when all debts must be remitted and slaves who wish it are to be set free, (15:1-18) – a law subsequently observed it seems only intermittently.
- Details of the three great annual festivals of Passover with Unleavened Bread, Weeks, and Booths (16:1-17, cf. Ex.23:14-17, Lev.23, Num.28-29).

Next come **laws governing leadership** (16:18-18:22) including:

[20] A. Phillips, *Deuteronomy* (Cambridge: University Press, 1973).

- The appointment of local judges and officers to administer justice (16:18-20). There must also be a central court of appeal in Jerusalem with clerical and lay judges (17:8-13).
- The acceptability of Israel's having a king, though not with the failings of Solomon! (17:14-20, cf. 1 Kings 10:28-29, 11:1-8)
- Provision for the Levites (18:1-8).
- The declaration that pagan practices must be shunned (18:9-14), but God will in time raise up a prophet like Moses who should be recognized and followed (vv.15-22).

Finally, there are **laws governing community life** (19:1-25:19) including:

- Setting up cities of refuge for those who have caused accidental death (19:1-13).
- Principles concerning witnesses (19:15-20), and the *lex talionis* (the law of retaliation – to *limit* the amount of retaliation for a crime, v.21, cf. Ex.21:23-25, Lev.24:20).
- Rules of war (20).
- A purification rite when there are unsolved murders (21:1-9), punishment for a tearaway son (21:18-21), and the statement that God's curse lies on one hanged on a tree (21:22-23, cf. Gal.3:13).
- Applications of the Golden Rule (22:1-4, cf. Lev.19:18).
- Laws relating to sexual relations, marriage and divorce (22:5-30, 23:2-8, 24:1-5, cf. Mk.10:1-12).
- Help for the poor – Levites, aliens, orphans and widows (24:6-22, 26:12-15).

(3) Covenant Renewal (27-30)

Here we have:

- Covenant renewal, followed by curses pronounced by the Levites on lawless behavior (27:1-10; re 27:26 cf. Gal.3:10).
- Blessings on obedience (28:1-14) and curses on disobedience to God's commandments (vv.15-68).
- Moses telling the people they must choose life or death and if, when they are scattered among the nations *and repent*, restoration will be possible (29-30, with 30:11-14 cf. Rom.10:5-10).

(4) Conclusion of the Pentateuch (31-34)

Moses writes down all the law code and deposits it with the priests to read every Sabbath year at the feast of Booths (31:9-13). The Song of Moses (32:1-43) reflects on Israel's unfaithlessness to Yahweh and the consequent sufferings, but also on Yahweh's ultimate deliverance. There follow the blessing of Moses on the twelve tribes (33), Moses' death and Joshua's succeeding him as leader of Israel (34:1-9), and the declaration that to this day no prophet like Moses has arisen in Israel (vv.10-12)!

What arguments are put forward in the early chapters of Deuteronomy to show the unique power, love and justice of God in his dealings with his people?

How does Deuteronomy tackle poverty?

Chapter 4

The Historical Books

In the Hebrew Bible the books Joshua to 2 Kings (without Ruth) were known as 'The Former Prophets'. They are all written from the prophetic point of view that Yahweh is the Lord of history, and in fact the books of Samuel and Kings feature a number of prophets. But as these books provide an account of the history of Israel from the settlement of the Promised Land (c.1250 BC) to the exile in Babylon (6th C BC) we are calling them 'The Historical Books'. In 1943 it was the Old Testament scholar Martin Noth who, noting the common phraseology and theological themes that permeate Deuteronomy and these books, first suggested they once were joined together to form a 'Deuteronomic History' by an editor in the period of the early exile using older material.[21] The editor's purpose was to show the Jewish exiles in Babylon that their plight was punishment for their nation's unfaithfulness to their covenant with Yahweh. Telling their history from such a point of view does not invalidate it as a historical record, for all history is written from a particular point of view. Yet this history is distinctive, as LaSor comments:

> The relating of historical events into a purposeful sequence as the acts of Yahweh is apparently a concept unique to the Bible. True, certain events are attributed to the actions of deities in other ancient Near Eastern literature. Nowhere else, however, is the idea consistently carried through a historical period, nor are all events related to one deity alone.[22]

Joshua

The book of Joshua is named after its central character Joshua, the son of Nun, the divinely appointed commander of the armies of Israel invading Canaan. The book describes the initial conquest and division of the Promised Land among the tribes of Israel. It was written some time after the events it describes for there are frequent statements that what happened then is there 'to this day' (e.g. 4:9, 5:9, 7:26).[23] The later Deuteronomic editor's distinctive style is evident particularly in chs.1 and 21-24.

Structure

1) Introduction (ch.1)
2) Conquest of the land (2-12)
   - Preparations and entering the land (2-5)
   - Conquest (6-12)
3) Distribution of the land (13-22)
   - Among the tribes (13-21)
   - Return of the eastern tribes (22)
4) Conclusion (23-24)

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[21] Eng. tr. of Noth's book: *The Deuteronomistic History*, in Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Sup.15 (Sheffield, 1981).

[22] *Old Testament Survey*, p.135.

[23] But this writer must predate the reign of David (c.1000-960 BC) for in 15:63 it says the people of Judah (or Benjamin – Jud.1:21) have not driven out the Jebusites, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, 'to this day', but in 2 Sam.5:6-10 David's conquest of the Jebusites is recorded.

Joshua's first farewell address (23)
Assembly of the tribes at Shechem (24)

(1) Introduction (1)

Joshua, the son of Nun, was the divinely commissioned successor of Moses (Num.27:18-23, Deut.31:7-8, 23, 34:9). *What else can you find out about him from Ex.33:11, Num.13:8, 16?*[24] One can imagine he was very nervous at the prospect of stepping into the shoes of Moses, and actually leading Israel to conquer and settle the Promised Land. Time and again in Joshua1 God encourages him and reassures him of his presence (vv.5-7, 9). God tells him he must take to heart all the law he gave to Moses. He instructs him to cross the Jordan with all Israel, so Joshua alerts the people that they will cross the river in three days (vv.2, 10-11).

(2) Conquest of the Land (2-12)

No one power ruled Canaan at that time. It consisted of a considerable number of independent city states each with its own king. From Shittim, east of the Jordan river, Joshua sent two spies to spy out how the Canaanites felt about the threat of invasion. They were kept from harm by the prostitute Rahab in Jericho and returned to Joshua with a positive report (2). There followed the crossing of the Jordan and setting up a base camp at Gilgal in the center of Canaan (3-4).[25] The account of how the waters of the river dried up to allow Israel to cross (3:15-16) may appear legendary but a natural explanation is possible for at Adam, some 25 km north of Jericho, the Jordan passes through high banks which are liable to periodic landslides, and these have occurred even in modern times, blocking the river.[26]

Israel then prepared themselves as obedient servants of Yahweh by circumcision (5:2-8) and celebrating the Passover (v.10), while Joshua himself was prepared by an encounter, it seems, with an angel (vv.13-15). In ch.6 we have the well-known account of the capture of Jericho. Because God achieved the victory by bringing down the city's walls without military action the booty was devoted to him. The city and its inhabitants, except for the family of Rahab, were destroyed. Chs.7-8 relate the saga of the capture and destruction of Ai, after the detection and punishment of Achan who had defied the ban on plundering goods from Jericho. Then the covenant was reaffirmed by sacrifice and, it appears, the full reading of Deuteronomy (8:30-35). Israel's initial conquests so terrified the Canaanite tribes that the inhabitants of the city of Gibeon (Hivites) posed as people from far away and secured a covenant of friendship with Israel. When the deception was found out they were punished by being made Israel's menial servants (9). This alliance led to a military campaign to the south which resulted in Joshua's victory over five Amorite kings and the capture of their territories and more. Then Israel returned to its camp at Gilgal (10). Ch.11 tells of Joshua's subsequent northern campaign against a great alliance of peoples, which again proved successful. Ch.12 summarizes what had been achieved, including the defeat of 31 kings.

[24] The Hebrew 'Joshua' was rendered in Greek 'Jesus'.
[25] There is an inconsistency in the text: the monument to the crossing is said to be placed in the middle of the river (v.9) and, after crossing, at Gilgal (v.20). It is surprising an editor did not remove the former – or the waters would!
[26] K.A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), p.167.

The rhetoric of victory leads to several declarations that the whole land has now been captured (10:40, 11:16, 23, 18:1, 21:43-45), but this is clearly exaggeration to stress that God had fulfilled his promises to the patriarchs. In reality, though a very significant start to the conquest of the land had been made, much remained still to be done as other passages reveal (13:1-6, 13, 15:63, 16:10, 23:4-5). Archeology has provided partial confirmation of the biblical accounts of Israel's victories. Excavations have shown that certain towns, including Lachish (10:32), Hazor (11:11, 13) and Bethel (12:16), were violently destroyed in the second half of the 13th century, the time of Joshua. But the prosperous city of Jericho, after destruction c.1550 BC, appears to have been resettled only in a small way in the 14th century. But then there was very serious erosion of the site so that, 'of the Late Bronze settlement from the mid-fourteenth century onward, almost nothing survives at all'.[27] The site taken to be that of Ai reveals the destruction of a strong walled town c.2400 BC and resettlement c.1200, but there is no indication of violent destruction in Joshua's time. Perhaps Ai was a very small settlement at that time (cf. 7:3) or perhaps the real site has not yet been found.[28] Archeology cannot pronounce at all on the claim that 'the sun stopped in mid-heaven, and did not hurry to set for about a whole day' to allow Joshua time for victory in his southern campaign (10:13). Whilst not wishing to deny God's almighty power, might it not have *seemed* that the sun stood still, allowing Joshua to complete his victory?

(3) Distribution of the Land (13-22)

These chapters do *not* make exciting reading, but they are important as a testimony that God fulfilled his promises to give the land of Canaan to the descendants of the patriarchs (e.g. Gen.13:14-17). Underlying Josh.13-22 are lists of towns and boundaries. The towns enumerate those given to the tribes, and the boundaries describe the borders between the tribes. Moses had already given an area east of the Jordan to the tribe of Reuben, Gad and half the tribe of Manasseh (13:8-31, cf. Num.32). Caleb, the only one of the twelve spies to encourage earlier occupation of the land (Num.13:6, 30, cf.14:24, 30) came, aged 85, to Joshua and requested he be given as an inheritance Hebron in the country of the giant Anakim who had so daunted the Israelites earlier (Num.13:32-33). To show he was right in saying they should not be feared he forthwith drove them out of this territory (Josh.14:6-15, 15:13-14 – or in reality did younger men do this on his behalf? Jud.1:12-13). His tribe Judah was then allocated a large area in southern Canaan (15). The tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, sons of Joseph, were next allocated land (16-17). Then the whole congregation of Israel assembled at Shiloh, where the tent of meeting was set up (18:1). Afterwards Joshua sent out three men chosen by each tribe to survey the rest of the land and to divide it into seven areas for allocation by lot to the other seven tribes. This they did and the areas were then given in turn to the tribes of Benjamin, Simeon, Zebulun, Issachar, Asher, Naphtali and Dan (18:11-19:48). Joshua took for himself the town of Timnath-serah in the hill country of his tribe Ephraim. Ch.20 specifies six cities of refuge for those who have committed accidental murder (cf. Num.35:9-34). The Levites, whose role remained to maintain the religious institutions of Israel, were given no region but instead forty-eight cities with their surrounding pastures, scattered throughout all the tribal areas (Josh.21). Thirteen of these were

[27] Kitchen, *Reliability*, p.187.
[28] *Ibid.*, pp.188-189.

allocated to the descendents of Aaron (vv.13-19), including the city of refuge Hebron, and Anathoth, later the home of Jeremiah (Jer.1:1).

Ch.22 tells of the return of the men of Reuben, Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh to their land east of the Jordan. They built a large altar, an act interpreted by the western tribes as treachery, but intended by them not for sacrifice but as a witness to their children that they too belonged to Yahweh. The priest Phineas, son of Eleazar, mediated and brought the dispute to a peaceful end.

(4) Conclusion (23-24)

Ch.23 tells of Joshua, by then very old, summoning all Israel and addressing them. He says they have now been allocated their territory and the Lord will enable them to drive out the remaining Canaanites from their land if they are faithful to him; but if they transgress the covenant they will perish. This is reinforced by a second speech to Israel at Shechem (24) in which he first reviews Israel's history, then challenges them to be loyal only to Yahweh and not to worship the gods of their ancestors beyond the Euphrates or the gods of the Canaanites. He says he and his family will worship Yahweh, and the people agree they will too, making a covenant to do so. He then, in an act reflecting Moses, wrote their statutes and ordinances in the book of the law of God, calling a great stone to be witness (24:25-28)! The last verses of the book of Joshua tell of the deaths of Joshua and Eleazar, and the re-interment of the bones of Joseph at Shechem.

Put yourself in the position of Joshua. How would you feel taking over leadership of Israel from Moses and being commissioned to lead the conquest of Canaan? What comfort can you find in Josh.1 for the much smaller challenges you face in life?

In the last chapter of the book Joshua challenges Israel not to relapse into their old religious ways but to reaffirm their loyalty to Yahweh. Are there any similar challenges we should put before our family and nation today?

Judges

The book of Judges spans the period between the death of Joshua and the establishment of the Israelite monarchy, c.1250-1020 BC.[29] The tribes attempted to occupy their allotted areas in Canaan with limited success. It was clearly a turbulent time of religious and moral failure with all 'doing what was right in their own eyes' (17:6, 21:25). We can learn both from their failures and from some notable acts of faith. A 'judge' in this book is not primarily a judicial figure but a leader. Those whose stories are recounted in considerable detail are often known as 'major judges'. They are in the main charismatic military leaders who achieve notable victories for Israel. Those about whom we have very little information appear to have been wealthy men who may have exercised a more administrative type of leadership. All are presented as serving *all* Israel but, as each comes from a particular tribe and usually their endeavors generally affect only one or two tribes, they may have been really tribal heroes bringing deliverance to just their part

[29] If one adds up all the numerical periods given in Judges it amounts to some 450 years, but probably some of these periods overlapped allowing the whole era to fit between the death of Joshua and the beginning of the reign of Saul.

of the land. Israel's adversaries depicted in these stories are not only the resident Canaanites, but also neighboring Moabites and Ammonites, nomadic Midianites, and Philistines whose invasions from the Aegean region of the Mediterranean started in the late 12th century.

The tent of meeting is referred to only once in Judges and then incidentally (18:31), but near the end of the book we hear that the Ark of the Covenant was at Shechem and was consulted from time to time for guidance, particularly before undertaking certain military operations (20:18, 27-28, cf. 1:1-2). Nevertheless God's care for his people holds the narrative of Judges together, and his Spirit is said to come upon various judges, enabling them to overcome great challenges (3:10, 6:34, 11:29, 13:25 etc).

The stories found in the book of Judges were probably passed down orally within the tribes to which they relate. Eventually they written down, combined, and an introduction added. It is surprising that the Deuteronomic editor, c.550 BC, did not always smoothly merge his sources, leaving sometimes unevenness in the text (e.g. 1:8, 21).

Structure

1) Introduction setting forth the main themes (1:1-3:6)
2) The stories of the judges (3:7-16:31)
3) Supplement illustrating Israel's degeneracy (17-21)

(1) Introduction Setting Forth the Main Themes (1:1-3:6)

1:1-21 tells of the successful campaigns of the tribes of Judah and Simeon in subduing the southern part of the country. Caleb is less prominent here than in Josh.15:13-19, and this would seem more realistic bearing in mind that he was 85 years old (Josh.14:10)! Vv.22-26 tell of the tribe of Joseph capturing Bethel, but the rest of the chapter is a tale of woe with the tribes of Joseph (Manasseh and Ephraim), Zebulun, Asher, Naphtali and Dan all failing to drive out the local peoples in their areas, and settling instead for accommodation with them. This contravention of the demands of Deut.7:1-6 leads in Jud.2:1-5 to condemnation and the declaration that Yahweh will no longer drive these peoples out but rather he will leave them as a snare for Israel. The death of Joshua is recounted in 2:6-11 showing surely that Judges was originally composed separately from the book of Joshua. In the rest of ch.2 a cycle is depicted which will recur time and again throughout Judges: Israel commits apostasy by worshipping Baal (the Canaanite god of rain) and Astarte (the goddess of fertility); in punishment God allows them to be plundered by enemies; Israel cries out to Yahweh for help, and in response he sends a judge who brings deliverance and peace as long as he lives; then Israel lapses once more into apostasy. 3:1-6 lists the peoples of the land with whom Israel intermarried.

(2) The Stories of the Judges (3:7-16:31)

- **Othniel** (3:7-11), a nephew of Caleb, is said to deliver Israel from the king of Aram-naharaim ('Aram between the two rivers' – Tigris and Euphrates) but, as we do not know of

any attacks on Israel from that region as early as this, it may be that the deliverance was rather from neighboring Edom, a name quite similar to Aram in Hebrew.[30]

- **Ehud** (3:12-30), a Benjaminite, who brought victory over the Moabites and their allies.
- Shamgar (3:31), whose name shows he was not an Israelite but, having attacked Israel's enemies the Philistines, was regarded as one of their heroes (cf.5:6).
- **Deborah** the Ephraimite prophetess and **Barak** of the tribe of Zebulun (4-5), who delivered Israel from the army of Jabin, Canaanite king of the region of Hazor. The story is told in prose (4) and poetry (5). Many scholars think ch.5 is one of the oldest parts of the Old Testament, written soon after the battle it celebrates. In it Israelites, settled in the largely unoccupied highlands, take over the more fertile and populated plain. Archeology has confirmed the town Taanach (5:19) was violently destroyed c.1135 BC.
- **Gideon** (6-8) of the tribe of Manasseh was a reluctant hero, but his story proves to be the most inspiring in the book of Judges. In contrast, his son Abimelech (9) is characterized by violent greed and vengeance.
- Tola (10:1-2) of the tribe of Issachar lived at Shamir in Ephraim where he was buried. It is simply said that he judged Israel 23 years.
- Jair (10:3-5) appears to have been a wealthy member of the tribe of Manasseh (Deut.3:14) who lived in the region of Gilead, east of the Jordan, and was a judge for 22 years.
- **Jephthah** (10:6-12:7), also from Gilead, was the son of a prostitute; clearly social class posed no barrier to exercising leadership within Israel at this time. Besides his notable victory over the Ammonites, he is remembered chiefly for his rash oath which resulted in the death of his only daughter (11:30-40).
- Ibza (12:8-10), a wealthy man of Bethlehem of Judah (or possibly Bethlehem in Zebulun, Josh.19:15?) who is said to have judged Israel for seven years.
- Elon (12:11-12) of Zebulun of whom no information is given other than that he was a judge for ten years and was buried at Aijalon.
- Abdon (12:13-15) of the tribe of Ephraim who was a judge for eight years. The size of his family and number of their donkeys again speak of his wealth and prestige.
- **Samson** (13-16) of the tribe of Dan. He was a Nazirite,[31] intended to be devoted to God's service, but his life appears one of greed, daring and vengeance. If he is accorded the title 'judge' it is not because he led Israel or even his tribe but because, through his divinely given strength, he inflicted suffering and death on many Philistines.

(3) Supplement Illustrating Israel's Degeneracy (17-21)

The two stories recounted here reveal the self-destructive forces at work within Israel at this time. It seems they are intended to portray the time before the monarchy as one of chaos. Both stories feature Levites. 17-18 tell of Micah, an Ephraimite, whose mother commissioned a silver idol dedicated to Yahweh! Vestments were made and one of his sons was installed as priest, later replaced by a Levite from Bethlehem in Judah. Subsequently an armed gang of Danites took the idol and its priest to Laish (or Leshem, Josh.19:47), a town they destroyed and rebuilt in the region of Sidon in northern Israel. The tribe of Dan had been allocated an area overlapping that of the Philistines in SW Canaan (Josh.19:40-48), but the story of Samson tells something of

[30] J.D. Martin, *The Book of Judges* (Cambridge: University Press, 1975), p.43.
[31] Cf. Num.6:1-8.

the consequent conflict, and oppressed by Philistines and Amorites (a Semitic people, Jud.1:34), they made their way north to Laish to establish a new homeland.

Jud.19-21 tell of a Levite from the territory of Ephraim who took a concubine[32] from Bethlehem. He lost and recovered her, but on his journey home, at Gibeah in the territory of Benjamin, she was raped and killed by local scoundrels. He publicized this which led to war between Benjamin and the rest of Israel. Many lives were lost but in the end emergency means were taken to prevent the total extinction of the tribe of Benjamin. There is much in this story that offends our Christian sentiments.

Read either the story of Gideon (6-8), or Jephthah (10:6-12:7). Are there any good examples found here? What warnings?

1 & 2 Samuel

In the Hebrew Old Testament the book of Samuel followed immediately after Judges. It is found divided into two books first in the Septuagint, perhaps to make two scrolls of manageable size.[33] The Hebrew text of 1 and 2 Samuel is in a poor state of preservation and translators often resort to the Septuagint to make better sense of the text.[34] It is clear that the editor(s) of 1 and 2 Samuel brought together material from different sources and from time to time they failed to reconcile differing accounts of events.[35]

Nevertheless, when we come from the often sordid stories of Judges to the books of Samuel we find much that is refreshing. Samuel is an exemplary figure and David, despite his one glaring failure for which he pays dearly, is the king 'after God's own heart'. The stories of these books are told with great artistry and sometimes, it appears, provide information from the royal archives (e.g. 2 Sam.8:15-18). The period covered by the books is c.1100 – 970 BC.

Structure

1) Early stories of Samuel (1 Sam.1-3)
2) Stories about the Ark of the Covenant (1 Sam.4-7)
3) The choice and early reign of Saul (1 Sam.8-15)
4) David's rise to power (1 Sam.16 – 2 Sam.5)
5) The reign of David (2 Sam.6-20)
6) Epilogue (2 Sam.21-24)

(1) Early Stories of Samuel (1 Sam.1-3)
These stories vividly depict God's dealings with people and their very human responses. Hannah is granted the child she so much wants and forthwith dedicates him to God's service.[36]

[32] Secondary wife, cf. 1 Kings 11:3.
[33] It was in the Septuagint also that the Book of Ruth was first inserted between Judges and 1 Samuel.
[34] The footnotes in some of the English versions often mention 'Gk' indicating the reading of the Greek Septuagint.
[35] E.g. in 1 Sam.16:14-23 it is said that David was recruited to play the lyre to calm Saul when agitated. Presumably Saul was then familiar with David through that; but in 1 Sam.17:55-58 he appears never to have seen him before.
[36] On the Nazirites (1:22) see Num.6:1-8.

The young Samuel is trained as a priest (2:18-19) and also called as a prophet to influence the whole of Israel (3). The priest Eli, whose sons so disgrace him, yet watches over the development of Samuel and dies at 98 years old, having judged Israel for 40 years (1 Sam.4:15, 18).

(2) Stories about the Ark of the Covenant (1 Sam.4-7)

These are intriguing stories indeed. The Ark, the special chest of acacia wood, overlaid with pure gold, topped with two golden cherubim, over which God's presence was said to rest (Ex.25:10-23), was housed at Shiloh with Eli and his sons as guardians. These stories show it was not to be regarded as a magical object whose presence automatically guaranteed Israel success in war, regardless of the nation's moral and spiritual state. Its capture in battle by the Philistines (4:10-11) might imply Yahweh's weakness, but the subsequent devastating effect it exerts on its captors and their god Dagon give a very different impression (5-6). After the Ark's return to Israel, the spotlight focuses once more upon Samuel, whose activities show him to be the last and the greatest of the judges (7:3-17).

(3) The Choice and Early Kingship of Saul (1 Sam.8-15)

The loose federation of tribes presided over intermittently by judges did not mold Israel into a really effective military force. So their elders came to Samuel and demanded to have a king like other nations (8:4). Samuel was not enthusiastic; he knew the demands such a king would make on his subjects (8:11-18). Moreover monarchy seemed a direct contradiction to theocracy, God's direct rule over Israel (10:17-19). Nevertheless, God told Samuel to grant their request (8:22). Such a king, then, besides uniting his people, was intended to lead them in obedience to Yahweh. Saul, an impressive figure from the tribe of Benjamin (9:1-2) was chosen and anointed by Samuel (10:1). God empowered him dramatically in a prophetic frenzy (10:9-16, 11:6). Despite appearing somewhat rash and impulsive he led Israel to impressive victories over the Amorites, Philistines and others (11, 14). Samuel's fury with Saul for not waiting for him to conduct a sacrifice (13:5-15) and for not slaughtering all the Amalekites and their livestock (15) might seem to us unfair, but perhaps, in the first case, Saul should have waited longer and, in the second, Saul's disobedience to Samuel was effectively disobedience to God.

(4) David's Rise to Power (1 Sam.16 - 2 Sam.5)

Some of the early psalms attributed to David reveal a person of strong, personal faith in God. This faith is amply demonstrated in the much loved story of David and Goliath (1 Sam.17). David's victory greatly assisted Saul in his quest for supremacy over the Philistines but also led to Saul's insatiably jealousy of the younger man. Remarkably, though Saul was intent on David's murder, David showed his nobility of character by twice refusing to take the life of 'the Lord's anointed' (24, 26). A deep bond of friendship developed between David and Saul's son Jonathan (18:1-4, 29, 23:15-18), leading to David's touching lament upon hearing of his death and Saul's at the hands of the Philistines on Mount Gilboa (2 Sam.1:17-27).

The later chapters of 1 Samuel describe in detail David's plight as a fugitive from Saul in the wildernesses of Judah. In the end David attached himself to the Philistine chieftain Achish of

Gath, who made him his bodyguard (1 Sam.27, 28:1-2). But David never had to fight against Saul. Tragically Saul, unable to get any message from Yahweh, did what he himself had banned, consulting a witch to call up the spirit of the dead Samuel for some glimmer of hope (28) – but all in vain! At Ziglag in the south of the country David received the news of the deaths of Saul and Jonathan and soon was anointed king at Hebron, first by his own tribe Judah (2 Sam.2:4), then some time later by all the other tribes of Israel (5:3). He then captured Jerusalem, a city lying between the two halves of his kingdom in territory never yet captured by Israel, and made it his capital (5:6-10).

(5) The Reign of David (2 Sam.6-20)

David's earlier victories had given him great popularity and he added to them after he became king (8:1-14), bringing Israel unparalleled power in the Middle East. He made Jerusalem not only his capital of government, but also the religious capital of Israel by taking the Ark of the Covenant there (6). He wanted to build God, who had so blessed him, a temple there too but was told by the prophet Nathan that, though God would establish his family line for ever, the task of building the temple would fall to his son (7:1-17). Far from exterminating the house of Saul David showed great kindness to Jonathan's son Mephibosheth (9). David's reign was sadly blemished when he fell to temptation and committed adultery with the beautiful Bathsheba, subsequently arranging the death of her husband Uriah the Hittite (11). Kings of other nations might expect to do such things with impunity, but not a king of Israel. David was confronted by Nathan who, using a parable, led David to condemn himself, and then pronounced God's terrible judgment on his sin. David repented and his own life was spared but Bathsheba's baby died (12), and rape, murder and rebellion followed, perpetrated by David's sons, and for a while David himself with his supporters, were forced to flee Jerusalem (13-17). Eventually the rebellious son Absolom was killed and David regained his throne (18-19), but only after a further rebellion by Sheba the Benjaminite was put down, was peace restored (20).

(6) Epilogue (2 Sam.21-24)

This last section consists of a number of disparate pieces dating from different times in David's life:

- 21:1-14 tells of a famine in Israel caused, it is said, by Saul's attempt to wipe out the Gibeonites who should have been protected by their treaty with Israel (Josh.9:3-15). Only when seven sons of Saul were handed over to be executed by the Gibeonites did rain begin to fall. Overall harmony was established when the bodies of those sons were interred with the bones of Saul and Jonathan in the family grave of Kish, Saul's father.
- 21:15-27 tells of further victories by David and the heroes of his time over the Philistines. It is surprising to read that a certain Elhanan killed Goliath 'the shaft of whose spear was like a weaver's beam' (v.19, cf. 1 Sam.17:7). How could this be? 1 Chron.20:5 says rather that Elhanan killed not Goliath but Lahmi, Goliath's brother.
- 22 contains a version of psalm 18, reminding us that David was a musician and composer as well as a warrior and king.
- 23:1-7 gives 'the last words of David' in a further poetic piece.
- 23:8-39 lists David's great warriors and some of their exploits. Surprisingly, though his brothers Abishai and Asahel are listed, Joab, David's long-serving military general, is not

mentioned. He played a vital part in covering up David's great sin (2 Sam.11:14-21), and subsequently proved insubordinate (18:9-15, 20:4-10, cf. 3:20-39) and fell out of favor with David (1 Ki.2:5-6). His support for Adonijah rather than Solomon as David's successor sealed his fate (1 Ki.2:28-34).

- 24 tells of David insisting on the taking of a census of his soldiers (800,000 from Israel, 500,000 from Judah). Perhaps he wanted to assess his power. Later he repented, presumably feeling it an act of arrogance or distrust in Yahweh. Through the prophet Gad he is told to choose whether the punishment will be three years of famine, three years of oppression by his foes, or three days of pestilence. He chooses the third option but even so 70,000 people perish and David is understandably distraught. Finally he builds an altar and offers sacrifice on the threshing floor of Araunah in Jerusalem and the plague stops. On that very spot Solomon would later build the temple (1 Chron.22:1, 2 Chron.3:1).

Make a character study of any of Eli, Hannah, Samuel, Saul or Jonathan. What should we imitate from them, what avoid?
What made David a 'king after God's own heart'? What were the consequences of his sin?

1 & 2 Kings

The two books of Kings were originally one but it seems, as in the case of Samuel, divided to make two scrolls of convenient size. They cover the period from David's death to the end of the monarchy (c. 970 – 586 BC) and conclude with a postscript telling an incident of hope (562 BC). After Solomon the kingdom split into two: the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. The picture is complex but fascinating. The writer (Noth's 'Deuteronomist historian')[37] used official records: *The Book of the Acts of Solomon* (1 Ki.11:41) and subsequently *The Books of Annals of the Kings of Israel* and *Judah*, and took stories from prophetic sources, imposing his own framework and interpretation upon his material. For most kings he uses a six-point scheme: 1. When he came to reign, 2. How long he reigned and where, 3. Name of his mother (for Judean kings only), 4. Religious policy, 5. Source of further information about him, 6. Death, burial and the name of his successor. In terms of religious policy, each king is assessed by whether he was loyal to Yahweh and his law, in particular whether he upheld the principle of the central sanctuary (cf. Deut.12:2-7) and whether he promoted the worship of Yahweh or other gods. With the building of the temple the central sanctuary was located at Jerusalem. As this lay within the kingdom of Judah automatically the kings of Israel could not uphold it and are condemned. No matter how long the kings reigned their secular achievements receive only slight attention. From the same perspective the writer assesses the reign of Solomon (1 Ki.11:4-13); later he explains why Israel had been defeated and its inhabitants deported (2 Ki.17:7-23), and why the inhabitants of Jerusalem were exiled (2 Ki.21:10-16, 24:3-4). So indeed the books of Kings are not simply a chronicle of history but a religious commentary on it. This does not mean the books do not provide us with real facts, indeed many points made in them are backed by archeological findings – for instance, horned altars have been discovered (cf. 1 Ki.1:30, 2:28), Ahab is mentioned on the Moabite Stone (c.830 BC), Sennacherib of Assyria in his annals of 701 speaks of his siege of Jerusalem and much more.[38]

[37] See above p.23. Jewish tradition maintained the writer was the prophet Jeremiah.
[38] D.J. Wiseman, *1 and 2 Kings: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), p.32-40.

Structure

1) Solomon (1 Ki.1-11)
2) The early divided kingdom (1 Ki.12:1-16:20)
3) The divided kingdom during the dynasty of Omri (1 Ki.16:21 - 2 Ki.8:29)
4) The divided kingdom from Jehu to the fall of Samaria (2 Ki.9:1-17:41)
5) Judah's final years (2 Ki.18:1-25:30)

(1) Solomon (1 Ki.1-11)

The first two chapters tell how it was that Solomon rather than Adonijah, David's eldest surviving son, succeeded David as king. David apparently promised this should be so, though in Kings we have no record of it, but we know that from birth Solomon was particularly loved by God (2 Sam.12:24-25). As a young king Solomon showed himself eminently suitable, for when asked in a dream what he would like God to give him, he asked, not for wealth or long life, but for a wise and understanding heart to govern his people rightly (1 Ki.3). This he was granted and God gave him great riches and honor as well. An incident that followed his prayer immediately revealed his wisdom (3:16-28); and his astuteness clearly guided his governing, trading and building projects. Furthermore he is credited with thousands of proverbs and psalms and great knowledge of nature (4:29-34). In his time the fame of his wisdom spread far and wide, drawing such notable visitors as the Queen of Sheba (10:1-13). His greatest achievement, however, was the building of the magnificent temple in Jerusalem, a project taking 7½ years. Subsequently the building of his palace and other buildings in Jerusalem took a further 13 years (chs.6-7). The structure of the temple: porch, nave and inner sanctuary seems to have resembled those of other temples in the Near East at that time. When the Ark of the Covenant was placed in the sanctuary the cloud of the Lord's presence filled the house (8:10-11). Solomon then made a long and moving prayer before dedicating the temple with many sacrifices. Then Yahweh appeared to him a second time promising that, if he was faithful to his commandments, he would not lack successors on his throne, but if he or his successors proved unfaithful, Israel would be cast out of its land and the temple destroyed (9:1-9). Sad to say, in time Solomon did prove unfaithful. In making alliances with other nations he married many foreign wives and, when he became old, he was led astray by them, building them shrines and even worshipping in these (11:1-8). In consequence the prophet Ahijah the Shilonite was sent to an able Ephraimite, Jeroboam son of Nebat, declaring that he would become leader of ten of the tribes of Israel (11:26-40). For David's sake this would not be in Solomon's lifetime but in that of his son (11:12-13).

(2) The Early Divided Kingdom (1 Ki.12:1-16:20)

This period (c.931-885) is characterized by: 1. The dominant role of prophets. 2. War between the two kingdoms. 3. God's declared commitment to Judah for David's sake. 4. The succession in the northern kingdom being so often by treachery and assassination.

The foolishness of Rehoboam contrasts markedly with the early wisdom of his father Solomon. His promise to rule Israel with ruthless power provokes the rebellion of all tribes

except Judah under the leadership of Jeroboam son of Nebat, thus fulfilling the prophecy of Ahijah[39] - an illustration of the mystery of divine sovereignty and human free will.[40] Rehoboam wants to fight and conquer Israel but is dissuaded by Shemaiah the prophet (12:21-24). This king is later credited with building hill shrines employing temple prostitutes like the Canaanites, thus leading Judah astray. In the fifth year of his reign Shishak of Egypt conducted a major raid into Judah exacting tribute which meant the loss of treasures from the temple and Solomon's golden shields.[41]

Jeroboam consolidated his hold over Israel by some shrewd measures: he built a new capital for his kingdom at Shechem and, to avoid his people going to Jerusalem to worship, made two golden calves, placing one at Bethel, some 19 km north of Jerusalem, the other at Dan in the far north of the country, and declared these were the God who had brought Israel out of Egypt – thus immediately leading his people into idolatry. Further, he built hill shrines and appointed non-Levitical priests for them, and on his own authority introduced a new festival. But when he himself was about to offer incense on the altar of the calf at Bethel he was confronted by a man of God who pronounced a prophecy of doom on the altar (12:25-13:3). A tragic prophetic saga followed illustrating the power of the word of the Lord. Later Jeroboam was condemned in the strongest possible terms for leading Israel into apostasy and was told his family line would be destroyed; this happened when his son Nadab, after reigning only two years, was murdered by Baasha, son of Ahijah, of the tribe of Issachar, who then killed all the house of Jeroboam (14:7-14, 15:25-30). Baasha reigned 24 years but was no more loyal to Yahweh than Jeroboam, and was denounced by the prophet Jehu, son of Hanani. Baasha's son Elah reigned just two years before he was killed by a chariot commander Zimri, who himself committed suicide seven days later and was succeeded by Omri the commander of Elah's army (15:33-16:20).

The kingdom of Judah fared somewhat better during this period. Rehoboam's son Abijam was no improvement on his father and reigned only three years, but his son Asa was a Yahweh loyalist and destroyed idols in the kingdom including his mother's (also removing her from power) and put away the temple prostitutes. He reigned 41 years, and by enlisting the help of Ben-hadad of Syria, was able to foil Baasha's attempt to blockade the road north from Jerusalem (15:9-24).

(3) <u>The Divided Kingdom during the Dynasty of Omri</u> (1 Ki.16:21 – 2 Ki.8:29)

This dynasty covered the years 885-841. Omri brought a measure of stability to the kingdom of Israel and gave it a permanent capital in Samaria. But of much more interest to our narrator is the cut and thrust between Omri's son Ahab and his successors and the outspoken prophets Elijah and Elisha. It was a tussle for the heart and loyalty of Israel. Ahab married Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal, king of Sidon, and built a temple to Baal[42] in Samaria and worshipped there. A lengthy drought led to a dramatic contest between Elijah and 450 prophets of Baal on Mount

[39] There is some uncertainty in the text whether Jeroboam took with him all but the tribe of Judah or all but Judah and Benjamin (12:20-21), but certainly mention of Benjamin drops out after this.

[40] Was the rebellion the result of Rehoboam's foolishness, or divine punishment for Solomon's sins – or both?

[41] Wiseman points to archeological evidence showing this raider was Sheshonq I in 925BC, *1 and 2 Kings*, p.152.

[42] Baal means Lord, and was used for local gods in the Near East. Probably this was the god of Tyre. Baal was viewed as the lord of rain and fertility and worshipped in part by sexual union with cult prostitutes, which was anathema to Yahweh.

Carmel. After Yahweh proved emphatically he was the true God, Elijah destroyed the prophets of Baal (1 Ki.18:20-40). But, after receiving a death threat from Jezebel, his nerve failed and he fled far south to mount Horeb (Sinai). Recommissioned, Elijah subsequently challenged Ahab again over the matter of Naboth's vineyard (21:1-24). In this story Jezebel displays her pagan belief in an absolute monarchy not fettered by moral laws. But Elijah declares emphatically the behavior of a king of Israel is subject to the standards of Yahweh, and pronounces dire judgment on Ahab and his family (21:20-24). Ahab's subsequent repentance shows he has a vestige of respect for Yahweh, and the judgment is delayed until the reign of his son, but even so Ahab dies in battle (22:34-37). It is then left to Jehu to carry out the full sentence of death on his wife, his male relatives, and the worshippers of Baal (2 Ki.9-10).

As Elijah was about to depart this earth, his chosen assistant Elisha asked for a 'double portion' of his spirit, not it seems to outdo his master, but to inherit fully his role.[43] The early chapters of 2 Kings show that he did indeed receive it. The story of his cure of the leprous Syrian general Naaman (ch.5) is well-known, but he is credited with numerous other miracles and remarkable, supernatural knowledge (chs.4, 6). Unlike Elijah, a marked individualist, he associated with prophetic guilds.

In this period there was a close connection between the royal houses of Israel and Judah. Jehoshaphat of Judah, a loyal supporter of Yahweh, was yet happy to fight beside Ahab (1 Ki.22). Jehoshaphat's son J(eh)oram married Ahab's daughter Athaliah, and followed in his father-in-law's ways, as did his son Ahaziah who fought alongside Ahab's son J(eh)oram – and like him perished at the hands of Jehu (2 Ki.8:16-18, 9:22-28).

(4) <u>The Dynasty of Jehu to the Fall of Samaria</u> (2 Ki.9:1-17:41)

This covers the period c.841-722 BC. When Elijah was re-commissioned on Mount Horeb one of his tasks was to anoint Jehu, son of Nimshi, as king of Israel (1 Ki.19:16). This task in fact fell to Elisha who sent one of the prophetic company to perform it[44] in the name of Yahweh, instructing Jehu to strike down the whole house of Ahab. This task Jehu undertook with vehemence, destroying also the worshipers of Baal in Samaria (2 Ki.9, 10). For this he was commended by Yahweh and, even though he did not destroy the golden calves at Bethel and Dan, his descendants to the fourth generation were allowed to follow him on the throne of Israel (10:28-30) - a royal succession unmatched in the whole history of the northern kingdom. Jehu's son **Jehoahaz** followed him, and although he 'followed in the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat', when Israel was repeatedly attacked by Syria he prayed to Yahweh and was granted a savior – in the form of Adad-nirari III of Assyria, who raided Syrian territory in 802 and 796 BC,[45] but the Syrians had greatly reduced Israel's fighting force (13:1-9). His son **J(eh)oash** likewise 'followed in the steps of Jeroboam', but seems to have had a good relationship with the elderly Elisha who prophesied he would strike Syria three times…but it could have been more (13:10-19). His son **Jeroboam II,** who reigned 41 years, acted like his father, but he also extended Israel's northern border, fulfilling a prophecy of Jonah son of Amittai[46] (14:25). It is during

[43] As with the first-born son – Deut.21:17.
[44] What a delegator! Cf. 2 Ki 5:10.
[45] Wiseman, *1 & 2 Kings*, p.240.
[46] To whom the book of Jonah in the Old Testament is also attributed.

Jeroboam's reign that the prophets Amos and Hosea were active (Am.1:1, Hos.1:1), condemning the kingdom's unfaithfulness to Yahweh. Jeroboam was succeeded by his son **Zechariah** about whom we hear nothing good before he was murdered by Shallum, son of Jabesh, after reigning only six months (15:8-12).

There followed a series of generally short reigns almost all terminated by murder: **Shallum** reigned just one month before being struck down by **Menahem**, son of Gadi (15:13-16). Menahem reigned for ten years and during this time had to pay a heavy bribe to Pul (Tiglath-pileser) of Assyria not to overrun his country (15:17-22). Menahem's son **Pekahiah** reigned only two years before being murdered by **Pekah**, son of Remaliah. Pekah reigned twenty years but lost Gilead and Galilee to Tiglath-pileser, retaining only the hill country of Ephraim, before being murdered by **Hoshea** son of Elah (15:23-31). Hoshea reigned for nine years, becoming a vassal of Shalmaneser V of Assyria but, when he proved treacherous, Samaria was besieged for three years until it fell in 722 and its inhabitants were deported to Assyria (17:1-6). Evidently Shalmaneser died before the siege was over for it is his successor Sargon II who claims in his annals that he deported as prisoners '27,290 of the people…and the gods in whom they trusted'. All the kings of Israel in this period who rate any significant comment are said to have 'followed in the path of Jeroboam I'. Clearly they were disloyal to Yahweh and adopted Canaanite religious practices, as the commentary in 17:7-23 declares. Sargon settled Babylonians in place of the Israelites and, when these were attacked by lions, an Israelite priest from among the exiles was sent to live in Bethel to teach these newcomers the correct worship of Yahweh. But in fact it is evident they mixed worship of Yahweh with that of their Babylonian gods, and this persisted to the time of the writing of Kings.

In the kingdom of Judah during this period, after the death of Ahaziah, son of J(eh)oram, his mother **Athaliah** reigned as regent for six years and tried to exterminate the royal house of Judah. But one child **Joash** (or Jehoash) was hidden during this time in the temple until the priest Jehoiada arranged his public coronation and the subsequent execution of Athaliah. Jehoiada then facilitated a covenant in which king and people promised to be loyal to Yahweh, after which the temple of Baal in Jerusalem was destroyed. Joash reigned for 40 years and, under the good influence of Jehoida, proved a loyal Yahwist, ensuring the temple was repaired. In the end he was murdered by his servants (2 Ki.11-12).[47] His son **Amaziah** succeeded him as king and reigned 29 years. He was also a loyal Yahwist but, after a savage victory over Edom, over-confidently attacked the army of Jehoash of Israel and was taken captive. In further reprisal Jehoash destroyed part of the wall of Jerusalem and took treasures from the temple and king's house. Amaziah was obviously released or escaped for he is said to have outlived Jehoash by fifteen years though he was later killed (14:1-22). His sixteen-year-old son **Azariah** (Uzziah) reigned in his place for 52 years. In the later part of his reign he was struck with leprosy and his son **Jotham** was effective ruler. Upon his father's death Jotham ruled a further sixteen years. Both father and son were loyal Yahwists though, like so many kings of Judah, they did not destroy the hill shrines (15:1-7, 32-38). Jotham was succeeded by **Ahaz** who reigned for 16 years. When threatened by Rezin of Damascus and Pekah of Syria he turned for help not to Yahweh but to Assyria. In consequence he introduced Assyrian practices into the temple (2 Ki.16, Is.7:1-17). Many more details of the reigns of these kings of Judah are given in 2 Chronicles 22-28.

[47] The reasons for the murder are explained in 2 Chron.24:17-27.

(5) Judah's Final Years (2 Ki.18:1-25:30)

During the period 722-586 BC the little kingdom of Judah was buffeted by superpowers. The first king, **Hezekiah,** son of Ahaz,[48] was one of the most loyal to Yahweh. He reigned 29 years. He removed the hill shrines and the Asherah[49] poles, he destroyed the bronze serpent made by Moses (Num.21:9) that people had been worshipping, and he observed Yahweh's commandments. He first refused to serve Assyria, but when he saw the remorseless progress of Assyria's forces, even into Judea (701 BC), his nerve broke and he sent a huge fine to Sennacherib which necessitated even stripping gold from the doors of the temple. Unappeased Sennacherib sent an army to besiege Jerusalem. His annals say he 'shut up Hezekiah the Judean…like a caged bird within his royal city (Jerusalem)'. But, fortified by messages of Yahweh from Isaiah, Hezekiah refused to surrender and soon the Assyrian army experienced a tragedy which caused it to withdraw (2 Ki.18-19). The stories of Hezekiah's sickness and the visit of the Babylonian delegation (20:1-19) surely occurred earlier than the preceding stories for Hezekiah still had treasures to show the Babylonians. Isaiah clearly thought the king had acted foolishly in showing the Babylonian visitors his treasures and predicted the ransacking of the temple and exile of Judeans to Babylon.

Manasseh, Hezekiah's son, only twelve years old, succeeded his father and reigned for 55 years. He like Ahaz must have submitted to Assyria, for he is recorded in Assyrian annals as paying tribute. He appears to have delighted in all kinds of pagan practices (2 Ki.21:1-18) for he is said to have introduced them into his kingdom and into the temple itself. The statement that he 'shed very much innocent blood'(v.16) may refer to his liquidating those like-minded to his father. The apocryphal work *The Ascension of Isaiah* says Isaiah was sawn in two in his reign, though it is impossible to know how far this is based on history. Our narrator says that it is because of the abominations of Manasseh that Judah met its terrible punishment. **Amon**, Manasseh's son and successor, reigned just two years, and is said to have followed in his father's evil ways before he was murdered. His murderers were themselves killed and Amon's eight-year-old son **Josiah** was made king.

Josiah's reign of 31 years was as good as Manasseh's was bad. Of greatest significance appears to have been the discovery of 'the book of the law' (22:8) during repairs of the temple in 621 BC. Consequently Josiah led his people in a covenant to obey it (23:1-3) and undertook far-reaching reforms based on the book, which involved not only the cleansing of the temple at Jerusalem but also removal of the hill shrines and even the desecration and destruction of the altar at Bethel erected by Jeroboam I (23:15-16 cf. 1 Ki.13:1-2). It is said there was no king like him who turned to the Lord with all his heart and sought to obey the law of Moses (23:25). Today it is generally believed that the book of the law was in fact Deuteronomy. If so, it was no doubt the terrible threats of Deut.28:15-68, which disturbed the king so much. Huldah the prophetess confirmed such punishment of the nation was pending but would not affect penitent Josiah (2 Ki.22:14-20). But Josiah was not 'gathered to his grave in peace' as the prophetess predicted, for in 609, leading an army to halt the Egyptian king Neco II's incursion into his territory, he was killed in battle at Megiddo. Neco deposed his son **Jehoahaz** after three months

[48] In 729/8 he became coregent with Ahaz, his sole reign beginning in 716/5 (Wiseman, *1& 2 Kings*, p.272).
[49] The female consort of Baal.

in office and installed instead his brother Eliakim, changing his name to **Jehoiakim** ('Yahweh has established'), no doubt believing Yahweh was on his side (23:31-34). But superpower maneuvers continued and Egypt was defeated by the forces of Babylon at the battle of Carchemish in 605. Jehoiakim first served and then rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. He died before the Babylonians captured Jerusalem in 597. It was his 18-year-old son **Jehoiachin** who, after a reign only three months, surrendered to them and he, his family and 10,000 of the leading citizens of Jerusalem were deported to Babylon (23:36-24:16). Nebuchadnezzar installed Jehoiachin's uncle Mattaniah ('gift of Yahweh') as king, changing his name to Zedekiah ('righteousness of Yahweh'). He first was subservient, then rebelled. His dealings with the prophet Jeremiah are not recorded in Kings (cf. Jer.27-28, 32-34, 37-38). Jerusalem was besieged by the Babylonians for well over a year before being captured and largely destroyed in 586. All who remained alive except a few poor farmers were taken to Babylon together with what remained of value in the temple. Gedeliah, son of Ahikam, was appointed governor of the few who remained, but he was soon murdered and then the remnant of Judah, taking with them an unwilling Jeremiah, fled to Egypt (Jer.43:1-7).

The narrative then breaks off and concludes with an incident of hope from 562. In that year Evil-merodach succeeded Nebuchadnezzar as king of Babylon and, it seems, as a deliberate reversal of his father's policy, released Jehoiachin from prison and treated him kindly. This did not imply he was now being regarded as a vassal but, 'It indicates that God protects his own and that this is not the end of the story' (Wiseman).

The latest editor of 1 & 2 Kings may have believed there was no hope for the northern kingdom of Israel, but can you find any indications that Yahweh continued to care for it?

Choose a king and a prophet and make a character study of each. What important things can we learn from each of their lives?

Chapter 5

The Prophetic Books

Prophecy

The word 'prophet' is from the Greek *prophētēs* meaning 'one who speaks for a god and interprets his will to man'.[50] The prophet's work was both 'forthtelling' – declaring God's verdict on a present situation, and 'foretelling' – announcing what God would do in future. The Hebrew word for prophet is *nabi* from a root meaning 'to call'. A prophet was one called by God to declare his messages (e.g. 1 Sam.3:1-4:1, Is.6). An early term for a prophet was 'seer', one who saw visions and could be called upon by people to give information they needed (e.g. 1 Sam.9:6, 19-20). Some early prophets went into ecstasy, a prophetic frenzy in which they acted quite out of character. This was seen as an indication that God's Spirit had fallen upon them (e.g. Saul, 1 Sam.10:5-13). Ecstatic prophecy was known also in other Near Eastern religions.

Moses was seen as a mighty prophet (Deut.18:15, 34:10-12). Deborah was both a prophetess and a judge (Jud.4:4). In the books of Samuel and Kings we hear of many prophets. The call of Samuel seems to have marked the beginning of a new era of prophecy in Israel coinciding with the start of the monarchy. Lasor remarks, 'One may conclude that the prophet was intended to serve as the voice of God to the king.'[51] In the 8th century there was a move to collect together the prophets' utterances (oracles) and write them down in books bearing their names. It is these 'writing' prophets that we shall study in this chapter. Those whose utterances make up a large book (Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel) are known as 'major' prophets; those associated with smaller books (Hosea to Malachi) are known as 'minor' prophets. The 'writing' prophets continued to address Yahweh's messages to kings but also to the people of Israel and Judah, and to foreign nations which indicated Yahweh was not just a national god, but Lord of all nations.

There were clearly many more prophets than those named in Scripture. Elisha was associated with bands of 'sons of the prophets' (2 Ki.4, 6), not all of whom may have been authentically called by God to the prophetic role; certainly we hear of false prophets, such as Hananiah (Jer.28), who appear to have invented their own messages, telling people what they wanted to hear. Genuine prophetic messages generally reinforced the Law of Moses so LaSor can say, 'The shadow of Mt. Sinai, with its covenant law, tinges everything the prophets say.'[52] Sometimes they denounced empty ritual that was unaccompanied by moral and spiritual concern (e.g. Am.5:21-24). Post-exilic prophecy (6th C on) encouraged the rebuilding of the temple and spoke of re-establishment of the throne and kingdom of David. Yet predictions of a glorious new era failed to materialize, apocalyptic[53] elements were introduced and, after Malachi, prophecy ceased in Israel.

[50] Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*.
[51] LaSor, p.226.
[52] *Ibid.*, p.229.
[53] Symbolic predictions of the future and the end times.

Isaiah

To move from the accounts of the reigns of the kings of Israel and Judah to the book of Isaiah is to move from the valley to the mountain top. LaSor speaks of the 'sheer grandeur of the book' and says it may be called 'the centerpiece of prophetic literature'.[54] Any reader of Isaiah1 must be struck by the power of its words.

Isaiah, the son of Amoz, had a long prophetic ministry of about 50 years in Jerusalem, it seems, during the reigns of four kings of Judah – from the year of Uzziah's death (740 BC) to the reign of Hezekiah (sole ruler 727-686). According to 2 Chron.26:22, Isaiah wrote up the achievements of Uzziah, which suggests he was a scribe or keeper of the official records. Certainly he had ready access to kings Ahaz and Hezekiah. Isaiah was married and had two sons, who were given names to reinforce his message (7:3, 8:3). From the change of tone and scene of Is.40-55, and again of chs.56-66, it is commonly believed these sections of the book come from later prophets in full sympathy with Isaiah, who are known as Second or Deutero-Isaiah and Third or Trito-Isaiah respectively. But the unity of the entire book still has its able defenders.[55] Certain common themes permeate the book as a whole:

- The holiness of Yahweh
- Yahweh as savior and redeemer of his people
- That Yahweh is the only God, the Lord of all nations
- He empowers his servants by his Spirit
- He expects righteous and just behavior and punishes sin
- Blessing for the faithful remnant of his people and the world

<u>The Stucture of the Book</u>

1) Condemnation and hope for Yahweh's people (chs.1-12)
2) Judgment on foreign nations (13-23)
3) The 'Isaiah Apocalypse' (24-27)
4) Punishment for the rebellious, blessing for the faithful remnant of Israel (28-35)
5) Historical appendix (36-39)
6) Hope for Jewish exiles in Babylon (40-55)
7) Chastisement and hope for the returned exiles (56-66)

(1) <u>Condemnation and Hope for Yahweh's People</u> (1-12)

The book opens with powerful prophetic rhetoric denouncing the sinfulness of Isaiah's people (ch.1) and announcing their punishment by a foreign nation (5:26-30, later revealed to be Assyria – 10:5-6). Idolatry and injustice are rampant (2:6-8, 5:8-23). It is clear that Judah's leaders are involved in this (5:8-10, 10:1-2). King Ahaz, far from leading his people in obedience to Yahweh, conspicuously lacks faith (7:1-17); from elsewhere we learn he put himself instead

[54] LaSor, p.276.
[55] Amongst them LaSor himself - pp.282-87.

under the yoke of Assyria (2 Ki.16:5-18). Amongst Isaiah's most poignant prophecies here is a love song speaking of Israel as a vineyard that produces wild grapes (5:1-7). Light breaks through the gloom of denunciation in:

- Is.2:1-4 (= Mic.4:1-3) – telling of a future time when all nations will come to the temple in Jerusalem to receive instruction from Yahweh, resulting in world peace.
- Is.6 – recording Isaiah's call as a prophet in terms which ever after led the prophet to refer to Yahweh as 'the Holy One of Israel' ('holy' meaning 'separate, set apart'). He is majestic and expects loyalty and moral living from his people.
- Is.7:14, addressed to Ahaz, speaks of the birth of a child called Immanuel.[56] If we may connect this with 9:6-7, this child's rule will bring peace, justice and righteousness[57] to the world. We are very familiar with this passage from Christmas Bible readings. 11:1-5 appears to be speaking of this same person who will be empowered by God's spirit. The outcome of his rule will be peace even in the animal kingdom, and 'the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea' (v.9). The remnant of Israel will be brought home from foreign lands. The only fitting response is praise to such a wonderful God who brings this about (Is.12).

(2) Judgment on Foreign Nations (13-23)

Though this section of Isaiah appears less relevant to us it is important, as it shows Yahweh is not just the national God of Israel, but the Lord of all nations, who are answerable to him for their actions. First Babylon is forcefully denounced (13:1-14:24), then briefly Assyria (14:25-27, Assyria has already been denounced elsewhere - 10:5-16, 24-26). Then the prophet turns to Israel's neighboring countries: Philistia (14:29-39), Moab (15-16), Damascus and Ephraim (the latter signifying the northern kingdom of Israel – 17), Ethiopia[58] (18, which is not a denunciation but perhaps a call to revolt), and Egypt (19:-20:6) - a surprisingly positive note is sounded in 19:25 referring to Egypt as the Lord's people and Assyria as the work of his hands alongside Israel, his heritage. Then various other places are denounced, most notably Tyre (23).

(3) The 'Isaiah Apocalypse' (24-27)

'Apocalypse' is from the Greek word 'to reveal'. So this is a revelation about the end times. These chapters depict judgment of the world bringing desolation, but hope and joy for God's people. 26:19 speaks of the raising of the (faithful) dead.[59] 'Leviathan' in 27:1 refers to a sea monster, otherwise called Rahab, slain by God (cf. Job 3:8, Ps.74:14). Archeology has revealed the story of a struggle between a high god and a sea monster was widespread in the ancient Near East.

[56] Meaning 'God is with us'. Though the Hebrew of this verse speaks of his mother's being a 'young woman', the Greek LXX was surely right to translate this 'virgin' or else what was the distinctive sign?
[57] Doing right , conforming to the will of God.
[58] Or Nubia, northern Sudan.
[59] The only other such clear reference is Dan.12:2-3, otherwise death is envisaged in the OT as bringing the shades (ghosts?) of all to Sheol, the pit, a most unwelcome prospect (e.g. Ps.88)!

(4) Punishment for the Rebellious, Judgment for the Faithful Remnant of Israel (28-35)

Repeatedly in these chapters God's chosen people, especially their leaders, are condemned for not trusting the Holy One of Israel. This failure is like signing their own death warrant (28:15, 18). Reliance on Egypt is against God's will and futile (30-31). The rebellious will be punished, but God is a precious foundation stone (28:16)[60] and the upright (who build their lives on him) will find rich blessing in a paradisal kingdom (32:15-20, 33:15-22, ch.35). Note how Isaiah's simple, repetitive teaching is mocked by his fellow countrymen (28:9-10). The (evil) nations are to be punished. Edom (34:5-17) is singled out for special condemnation, it may be, because once it frustrated Israel (Num.20:14-21) and so it can be taken as typical of those nations pursuing their own ways in opposition to God.

(5) Historical Interlude (36-39)

This section is virtually the same as 2 Ki.18:13, 17 - 20:19. 2 Ki.18:14-16 adds information about tribute paid by Hezekiah to the Assyrians – but in vain! Is.38:9-20 adds a lament by Hezekiah struck down by sickness. 38:21-22 seems to have been misplaced from after 38:6 (cf. 2 Ki.20:7-8).

The events in Is.36-37 took place in 701 (the 24th year of Hezekiah's reign). Hezekiah, understandably distressed at having the Assyrian army outside the gates of Jerusalem, unlike his father Ahaz (Is.7), turns to Yahweh and trusts his word through Isaiah. The outcome is that Jerusalem escapes unharmed. In ch.38 terminally ill Hezekiah pleads for his life and is granted an extension of 15 years. This is clearly a miracle, despite the use of a compress of figs; God can surely use both natural (or medical) and supernatural means of curing sickness. But what of the 'sign' in 38:8? Oswalt sagely remarks, 'Since reversing the rotation of the earth carries with it so many other implications, it seems likely that some sort of refraction of light was involved.'[61] With regard to ch.39, while Assyria was still dominant at this time, Babylon was getting restless. Clearly it was looking for allies and therefore sent a delegation to Hezekiah. His error appears to have been simple indiscretion; perhaps also, by showing the delegation all his treasures, he was parading his own glory rather than giving glory to Yahweh. Isaiah is far from happy and predicts Nebuchadnezzar's sack of Jerusalem – a prophecy fulfilled nearly 150 years later.

(6) Hope for the Exiles in Babylon (40-55)

These chapters are surely amongst the most inspiring in the whole Bible. They address the final years of Judah's exile in Babylon. They announce the end of God's judgment on his people. He caused Israel's captivity (42:24-25); he will end it. He has not forgotten his people (49:14-17). His judgment has been a measured response to Israel's rebellion (50:1-2). Especially well known are:

- Is.40 with its message of comfort and its declaration of the incomparability of Yahweh, who can refresh all who wait on him (vv.28-31).
- Is.53 telling of God's Suffering Servant who will pay the penalty for all our sins.

[60] In the NT this verse is referred to Jesus Christ – Rom.9:33, 1 Pet.2:6.
[61] J.N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), p.678.

- Is.55 which, starting from a market scene, speaks of God as the One who satisfies our needs.

But there is much more:

- A pronouncement of doom upon Babylon (46-47 – Bel and Nebo are Babylon's chief gods being carried into captivity).
- Cyrus II of Persia is referred to as Yahweh's shepherd through whom Jerusalem will be rebuilt (44:28), and as his anointed agent though Cyrus does not realize it (45:1, 4).
- Uncompromising monotheism is repeatedly stated, and in 44:9-20, idolatry is ridiculed.
- The four 'Servant Songs' in 42:1-4, 49:1-6, 50:4-9, 52:13-53:12 have attracted much attention. Who is this servant? Certainly Israel is referred to several times in Deutero-Isaiah as Yahweh's servant, including in the second of these songs (49:3). But then, in this same song, the servant is distinguished from Israel (vv.5-6). Elsewhere Israel is referred to as a blind and deaf servant who fails to do God's will (42:18-23). Moreover Israel does not fit the fourth song for, as Isaiah has repeatedly said, she has suffered for her own sins not those of others. Some have wondered if the servant is the faithful remnant of Israel or Cyrus or Isaiah himself. But the Christian Church has, from the start, declared only Jesus Christ himself satisfactory fits the picture. Jesus himself surely suggested that in Mk.10:45 etc.
- God's desire for the salvation for all nations is declared in 51:4-8, 55:3-5.

(7) Chastisement and Hope for the Returned Exiles (56-66)

The exalted tone of Is.40-55 is not sustained throughout chs.55-66. It is generally thought that these last chapters reflect the period after exiles have returned from Babylon to Judah (538 BC). Their behavior sometimes falls far short of Yahweh's expectations. Perhaps their hopes had been dashed when they had discovered Jerusalem and its temple in ruins (63:18, 64:10-11) and paradisal blessing seemed remote indeed. These chapters depict two groups of exiles: the righteous and the wicked (57-58). The latter go so far as to indulge in pagan religious rites; of the former God says, 'I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit' (57:15). He requires from his people true fasting, real observance of the Sabbath, and care for the needy (56, 58). A bright future is promised in chs.60-62 through the leadership of a figure anointed with God's spirit (61:1-2, quoted by Jesus Lk.4:18-19). A glorious new world awaits not the rebellious (65:1-7) but the faithful (vv.8-25). Salvation is to extend to people of all nations who keep God's covenant (56:6-8, 66:18-24). So Isaiah ends with prophesies of worship in a renewed Jerusalem by faithful people from all races living in a new world order.

Share with your group the parts of Isaiah that you find most inspiring, and mention a part of the book you would like to study more closely.

Jeremiah

To dismiss Jeremiah as a 'prophet of doom', or portray him as a bullfrog (!), is to do him a grave injustice. He is in fact a very fascinating figure about whom we know more than any other writing prophet. He came from a priestly family in Anothoth about five km NE of Jerusalem. He was born probably in the late 640s BC, receiving his call in 627 in the reign of Josiah and

continuing to prophesy until c.685, after the fall of Jerusalem. He was instructed by God to remain single, for the fraught situation of his country was not suitable for nurturing children. He had the most unenviable task of prophesying the forthcoming destruction of Jerusalem as God's punishment for Judah's sin. This included combating the belief that, since Jerusalem contained the temple of Yahweh, and had survived the siege of the Assyrians (2 Ki.19), it would *never* be conquered. When the Babylonians were besieging Jerusalem he unwaveringly declared that surrender was the only way to preserve the city and the lives of its inhabitants. Jeremiah was therefore regarded as a heretic and a traitor. He was threatened with death, beaten, put in the stocks, and placed in a muddy cistern, but he was delivered and, when Jerusalem fell, treated leniently by the Babylonians. Fascinatingly the book includes many of Jeremiah's personal complaints and pleas to God.

It may be that Jeremiah's scribe Baruch (36:4, 32, 45:1) was the initial editor of the book, for he was ultimately taken with the prophet to Egypt (43:5-7). Whoever edited it has in fact left an untidy product. Though many of the later chapters are dated, seldom are they arranged chronologically. A further matter, not evident from our modern translations, is that the book exists in two versions: that of the Hebrew Masoretic text, and that of the Greek Septuagint which is about an eighth shorter. Our modern translations follow the Hebrew, but sometimes give footnotes indicating when material is not found in the Greek.

The General Structure of the Book

(1) Jeremiah's call (ch.1)
(2) Early prophesies against Judah (2:1-15:9)
(3) Jeremiah's personal pleas (15:10-20:18)
(4) Confrontation with rulers and prophets (21-29)
(5) Messages of comfort (30-33)
(6) Jerusalem under siege (34-38)
(7) The fall of Jerusalem and the aftermath (39-45)
(8) Prophesies against foreign nations (46-51)
(9) Historical appendix (52)

(1) Jeremiah's Call (1)

Jeremiah's call by Yahweh is powerful and insistent. It is backed by two visions. The prophet's realization of his call enabled him to withstand great opposition and physical punishment during nearly 40 years of prophesying at a very turbulent point of his nation's history.

(2) Early Prophecies against Judah (2:1 – 15:9)

How powerfully Jeremiah denounces Judah's apostasy!

> Be appalled, O heavens, at this,
> be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the Lord,
> for my people have committed two evils:
> they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water,
> and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water. (2:12-13)

In ch.3 he likens the northern kingdom of Israel to an unfaithful wife, whose husband has given her a bill of divorce (cf. Deut.24:1-4). Instead of learning from this object lesson, Judah has behaved even worse! While there is a chance even now for Israel to repent (3:11-4:4), Judah must prepare for invasion (4:5-5:29). False prophets are saying 'Peace, peace' when there is no peace, and priests are offering meaningless sacrifices. Within Jerusalem there is oppression, all its people are greedy for unjust gain. In consequence an army is about to invade from the north, cruel and merciless (6). The people must not trust the temple to save them when they are breaking all Yahweh's commandments; even human sacrifices are being offered at Topheth in the valley of Ben-Hinnom – it will become the valley of slaughter! (7) The bones of its kings and people will be shamefully disinterred and spread on the open ground (8:1-3). Jeremiah is overwhelmed by grief for his sinful people and their savage punishment (8:18-9:13). They are uncircumcised in heart (9:26). How can they worship idols like the nations? There is no comparison between the living, majestic Yahweh and lifeless idols (10:1-16, cf. Is.44).

Jeremiah's solemn message to Judah and Jerusalem to obey the words of 'the covenant' may well be his endorsement of the reforms of Josiah in 621 BC following the discovery of the book of the law (Jer.11:1-17, 2 Ki.22-23). If so, the anger of the people of Anathoth against him (11:21-23) probably came from Deuteronomy's insistence on worship at one central shrine (Deut.12:5-12), which would have meant the suppression of the local shrine at Anathoth. Jeremiah declares that the Lord has abandoned his people because of their wickedness and they will be exiled, though later may return home if they repent (12:7-17). This is reinforced by the illustrated prophecy of the loincloth (13). Jeremiah then predicts a drought but is told not to pray for his people's welfare; he is very sorrowful (14). Yahweh says he will not relent from punishing his people for they have rejected him (15:1-9).

(3) Jeremiah's Personal Pleas (15:10-20:18)

The warnings of punishment continue but most characteristic of this part of the book are Jeremiah's person pleas:

- He complains he is being cursed by and isolated from his people because of his prophetic message and declares God 'is like a deceitful brook, like water that fails'; he is warned to repent (15:10-21).
- He is told he must not take a wife for such a time is not suitable for having children, nor must he take part in his people's social gatherings; somewhat surprisingly we do not hear him complaining, rather he confesses God as his refuge and strength (16:1-9, 19).
- He asks for healing for himself and the shaming of his persecutors (17:14-18).
- People are plotting against him and he asks they may be punished (18:18-23).
- For prophesying disaster for Jerusalem he is beaten by the temple officer Pashur and put in the stocks overnight; Jeremiah's response is to pronounce disaster on Pashur; then he complains that, because God has forced him to declare 'Violence and destruction!' he is the laughing stock of all, and he curses the day on which he was born (20:7-18).

This section of the book is notable also for his declaration that 'the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?' (17:9) and a passage on the importance of Sabbath observance (17:19-27). It also contains two further illustrated prophecies: the potter and his clay (18:1-11) and the smashing of an earthenware jar (19:1-13).

(4) Confrontation with Rulers and Prophets (21-29)

The material here is not in chronological order. It is concerned chiefly with kings and false prophets. One could wish that particularly chs.21 and 24 had been placed with chs. 34, 37 and 38, as they all relate to the reign of **Zedekiah** (597-586). This king is not hostile to Jeremiah and indeed consults him for messages from Yahweh, but he is weak and under the influence of his nationalistic officers; if he is hoping for comfort from Jeremiah all he receives is the unchanging message that Yahweh is going to deliver Jerusalem into the hands of the Babylonians and only surrender to them will ensure people's safety (21). Jews exiled to Babylon in 597 are likened to a basket of good figs, those remaining in Jerusalem to one of rotten figs (24).

Chs.22, 25 and 26 relate to the earlier reign of **Jehoiakim** (609-598) and should be set alongside chs.35 and 36. Ch.22 speaks not only of this king but of the very short reigns of his predecessor Shallum (Jehoahaz) and his successor Coniah (Jehoiachin), but reserves the strongest denunciation for Jehoiakim, who appears to have enriched himself while oppressing his people. He will be accorded the burial of a donkey, his body thrown out of Jerusalem onto open soil. Ch. 25, dated to 605/4, appears to come from the beginning of the scroll dictated by Jeremiah to Baruch (ch.36) for it reviews all Jeremiah's prophesies during the past 23 years; it includes a dire message for Egypt and Judah's smaller neighbors. Ch.26 is dated 609 and may well be referring to Jeremiah's prophecy about the temple in ch.7. If so, while ch.7 gives more of the *content* of Jeremiah's prophecy, ch.26 gives more of the *hostile reaction* that followed; only the protection of Ahikam, son of Shaphan, saved the prophet from death. It was no doubt this temple speech that led to Jeremiah's being banned from the temple (36:5).

False prophets are condemned in 23:9-40: they invent their own messages or steal them from one another, while God's true word is 'like fire…and like a hammer which breaks the rock in pieces' (v.29). This contrast is illustrated by the dramatic clash between Jeremiah and the false prophet Hananiah in chs.27-28. Ch.29 contains Jeremiah's letter to the exiles in Babylon telling them to settle down for they will not return home for 70 years. Events proved he was much closer to the truth than the false prophets. They predicted a speedy end to the exile. In fact the first Jewish exiles returned home after a little under 60 years in Babylon (697-538).

(5) Messages of Comfort (30-33)

This whole section is one of comfort and hope for the faithful remnant among the exiles. Of particular interest is Jeremiah's prophecy of a **new covenant**, where God's law would be written on the hearts of his people to enable them to obey him (31:31-34, 32:38-40)[62] - a prediction ultimately fulfilled by Jesus Christ (1 Cor.11:25, Heb.8). Jeremiah prophesies that a righteous king from David's line will rule over the restored nation (33:14-18). Ch.32 tells of Jeremiah's buying a field in Anathoth, a sign of confidence that one day the exiles will return to their land for settled life.

[62] 'In acclaiming this new form of covenantal relationship both Jeremiah and Ezekiel [Ezek.36:25-27] saw that it changed the older concept of a corporate relationship completely by substituting the individual for the nation as a whole.' (Harrison, *Jeremiah and Lamentations* (Leicester: IVP, 1973, p.140)

(6) Jerusalem under Siege (34-38)

Jerusalem was besieged by Babylonian forces from January 587 – July 586 BC. Chs 34, 37 and 38 relate to this period (along with chs.21, 24, 27-28 which we have already looked at). Ch.34 tells of Jeremiah's going to Zedekiah with the unwelcome message that Yahweh will hand over Jerusalem to Nebuchadrezzar, the city will be burnt and Zedekiah will be captured but will die in peace and then be honored. During the siege Zedekiah had prevailed on those who owned Hebrew slaves to release them (cf. Deut.15:12-18), but later they took them back which drew a further message of condemnation from Yahweh. Chs.37-38 reveal Jeremiah's personal situation. He consistently declares Yahweh's message is: only surrender to the Babylonians will save the city from destruction and preserve the lives of its inhabitants. Though Zedekiah is not hostile to him he cannot control his officials who view Jeremiah as a traitor and beat him and place him in a muddy cistern. Appealing to the king he is moved to the court of the guard where he remains until the city falls.

Chs.35-36 date from the reign of Jehoiakim. In ch.35 Jeremiah contrasts the obedience of the Rechabites to their ancestor Jonadab's command not to drink wine[63] with Judah's disobedience to the commands of the Lord. Ch.36 shows Jehoiakim's contempt for Jeremiah and his prophecies. The prophet dictated all his prophecies from the beginning to 605/4 to Baruch the scribe and, because Jeremiah was banned from the temple, he instructed Baruch to read them out there on his behalf. Eventually they were read to the king who, with total disdain, cut up the scroll and burnt it in his fire. The story reached Jeremiah who once more dictated the prophecies and more to Baruch and declared Jehoiakim would have no successor as king, and his dead body would be shamefully cast out on open soil.

(7) The Fall of Jerusalem and its Aftermath (39-45)

These chapters provide a more-or-less continuous account of the fall of Jerusalem. They tell of Zedekiah's flight and capture. Jeremiah was first, it seems, bound with chains like the other captives, then released and allowed to choose whether he would go with the exiles or stay under the charge of the newly appointed governor Gedeliah, son of Ahikam. He chose to stay. Judean forces in the field rallied to Gedeliah, but among them Ishmael, the son of Nethaniah, working for Baalis the Ammonite king, treacherously murdered Gedeliah. Ishmael fled and Johanan, son of Kareah, became *de facto* leader of the Judean remnant. He consulted Jeremiah for guidance from Yahweh as to whether to flee to Egypt or stay in Judah. After ten days Jeremiah received a message that they should stay and that flight to Egypt would be disastrous. But, declaring Jeremiah was lying, Johanan and his party speedily departed to Egypt, taking with them the reluctant prophet and Baruch. There Jeremiah delivered his final prophecies, predicting Pharaoh Hophra would suffer at the hands of the Babylonians.

(8) Prophecies against Foreign Nations (46-51)

True to his call as a 'prophet to the nations' (1:5), in these chapters, Jeremiah prophesies against Egypt (46), Judah's neighboring countries (47-49), and Babylon (50-51). This section of the book may have circulated independently for in the Septuagint it is placed after 25:13. The

[63] Cf. Num.6:1-8; 2 Ki.10:15-17 shows J(eh)onadab was a loyal Yahwist.

prophecy that Babylon would punish Egypt was partly fulfilled by a punitive raid in 568/7 BC, but there was no full-scale invasion.[64] Babylon is condemned for her arrogance. Ultimately she was conquered by the Persian king Cyrus in 539.

(9) Historical Appendix (52)

This chapter largely repeats the account of the fall of Jerusalem given in 2 Kings 25, though omitting the reference to Gedeliah and adding statistics of the captives taken to Babylon.

How would you describe the life of this true prophet of Yahweh? What do you most admire about Jeremiah? What in his story surprises you? What can we as Christians learn from him?

Ezekiel

The style of the book of Ezekiel is in marked contrast to that of Jeremiah. It is written in somber, often repetitive prose. Its visions and acted prophesies appear somewhat bizarre, and the prophet less 'human' than Jeremiah. But the book is better organized with careful dating and largely in chronological order. As it is very largely autobiographical it may well be that Ezekiel himself compiled it. The Jewish historian Josephus says that Ezekiel left behind him *two* books.[65] Perhaps chs.1-39 and 40-48 were originally separate. Ezekiel's somber work is enlivened by visions, allegories and metaphors. There is also a passionate intensity about his message, driven by a deep awareness of the holiness and sovereignty of God, yet also of God's great love for his rebellious people and his longing for them to repent and be renewed.

Ezekiel, son of Buzi, was a younger contemporary of Jeremiah and, like him, a priest but, as the final part of his book reveals, far more interested in priestly matters. A married man, he was one of those taken into exile in Babylon after the initial capture of Jerusalem in 597 (1:1, cf, 2 Ki.24:14). There in 593 by the river Chebar[66] he had a remarkable vision of God and received his call as a prophet. His latest dated prophecy (against Egypt, 29:17) was in 571. In the book we hear far less of his personal feelings than with Jeremiah, though sometimes he protests to God at things he thinks unfair (e.g. 4:14, 9:8). He and Jeremiah share the same fundamental message: it is because of Judah's sinfulness, their chronic disloyalty to their covenant with Yahweh that Jerusalem is being destroyed and its inhabitants killed or exiled. Both also agree that hope remains for the restoration of a purified remnant, loyal to Yahweh, whose hearts God himself will change. Both also stress individual responsibility before God.

Structure of the Book

(1) Ezekiel's vision and call (1-3)
(2) Prophecies of judgment on Judah and Jerusalem (4-24)
(3) Prophecies against neighboring nations (25-32)
(4) Reaffirmation of Ezekiel's call (33)
(5) Promises of salvation (34-37)

[64] See Harrison, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, p.171.
[65] *Antiquities* 5.10.1.
[66] Probably an irrigation canal from the Euphrates looping SE from Babylon via Nippur.

(6) Final defeat of the forces of evil (38-39)
(7) The new temple, its worship, and the re-settlement of Israel (40-48)

(1) Ezekiel's Vision and Call (1-3)

These chapters depict in vivid detail Ezekiel's vision of the chariot-throne of Yahweh God and its attendants which in ch.10 are called 'cherubim' (cherubs). Their bodies are like those of humans but each has four wings and four faces: of a man, a lion, a bull and an eagle – respectively the apex of creation, the king of wild and domesticated animals, and the king of the birds. Only supreme forms of life are suitable to bear God's throne. The glorious appearance of Yahweh himself is also briefly mentioned (1:26-28). He addresses Ezekiel as 'son of man' (NRSV 'mortal'), stressing his finiteness in the presence of the Infinite. Ezekiel is called to be Yahweh's messenger to his rebellious people and not to fear their hostility. He is to be a watchman, relating messages from God warning them to repent. If he does not pass these messages on he will be held responsible for the death of his people.

(2) Prophecies of Judgment on Judah and Jerusalem (4-24)

These are rich and varied in form predicting the fall of Jerusalem in 586. First come two acted prophecies:

- Ezekiel is instructed to draw a sketch of Jerusalem on a brick and range siege works around it. Then he is to lie facing it, first on his left side (for Israel), then on his right (for Judah) for a period of days representing the number of years for which each is being punished for their sins (ch.4).
- He is next to shave off his hair and beard with a sword and divide it into thirds. One third he must burn to signify those who will be destroyed in the city, one third he must strike with his sword around the city representing those that will be killed in the country, and one third he must scatter to the wind representing the exiles, saving just a few hairs from the last third presumably to represent a small remnant of Judeans who will ultimately be restored (ch.5).

Then Ezekiel prophesies against the Canaanite hill shrines which have polluted Israelite worship (ch.6), before announcing unambiguously 'the end has come' for Jerusalem (ch.7). Ch.8 introduces a new development: in September 592, while being consulted at his home by the elders of the exiles, Ezekiel is lifted up in spirit and taken to Jerusalem. There, in the very temple consecrated to Yahweh, he is shown all kinds of idolatrous worship taking place.[67]

Read this chapter carefully and then Ex.20:2-5. If you were God, how would you feel?!

Chs.9 and 10 depict the destruction of all the inhabitants of Jerusalem except those who deplored these abominations (9:4). In response to this idolatry the glory of the Lord moved from the

[67] The 'image of jealousy' (vv.5-6) was perhaps an image of the Canaanite goddess Asherah, as Manasseh had placed one in the temple before (2 Ki.21:7). The animal gods being worshipped in a hidden room (vv.8-13) recall the gods worshipped by the Egyptians. Tammuz (v.14) was a god of vegetation from the region of Babylonia. Sun worship (v.16) had taken place in the temple before the reforms of Josiah (2 Ki.23:11) and has returned.

temple's inner sanctuary to the east gate (9:3, 10:18-19). Ch.11 shows 25 men 'devising iniquity'. These are perhaps a *political* pressure group who, in their self-confidence, may be advocating fighting against the Babylonians. They regard themselves as 'meat' (v.3), i.e. the best part of Judah, while they view the exiles as of no further significance (v.15). Yahweh's own view is quite the opposite (vv.16-21, cf. Jer.24). Then, in a touch of great pathos, his glory (his very presence) departs from the city (vv.22-23), leaving it unprotected before the advancing Babylonians. Ezekiel then returns to the exiles.

Subsequent chapters contain a great variety of matters, many quite shocking to his hearers:

- In ch.12 Ezekiel is told to act like an exile to show there will be more exiles after the destruction of Jerusalem. The current exiles view this acted prophecy with skepticism and as relating to the remote future (vv.22, 27), but are assured it is just about to be fulfilled.
- In ch.13 false prophets are condemned. *What similarities can you find between vv.1-16 and Jer.23:16-40?* Vv.17-23 condemn women who are practicing magical arts.
- In ch.14 Yahweh refuses to be consulted by the elders of Israel (via Ezekiel) because they have 'taken their idols into their hearts' causing them to stumble spiritually. Such people must repent or be wiped out. Ezekiel is told that when God is punishing a land for its sins, even if righteous figures like Noah, Daniel[68] and Job were in it, only they would be saved.
- Ch.15 contains the allegory of the vine. Its wood is suitable only for burning – so Jerusalem!
- Ch.16 declares that Yahweh adopted the original pagan citizens of Jerusalem and nurtured them to be a rich and beautiful bride for himself, but they behaved adulterously, using their wealth to *buy* other lovers (contrast prostitutes!), but he will shame them by honoring his original covenant with them and establish instead an eternal covenant (vv.59-63).
- In ch.17 Ezekiel uses eagle allegories to depict the immediate history of Judah. The explanation (vv.11-21) may have been given later, after his hearers had puzzled over their meaning. Nebuchadnezzar was the first eagle, making a covenant with Zedekiah; the Egyptian Pharoah was the second eagle. Vv.22-24 refer presumably to a future Davidic Messiah.
- The proverb current among the exiles: 'The parents have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge' (18:2, also in Jer.31:29), calls forth a powerful declaration from Yahweh of **individual responsibility** – all will be rewarded/punished for their *own* deeds.
- Ch.19 contains a lamentation for three unfortunate kings of Judah: Jehoahaz taken to Egypt (v.4, 2 Ki.23:31-33), Jehoiachin taken to Babylon (v.9, 2 Ki.24:15), and Zedekiah who will be the final king of Judah (vv.10-14). Though elsewhere Ezekiel is fiercely critical of Zedekiah, here he mourns for him, like the others, as a Davidic king.

Again the elders of the exiles come to consult Ezekiel; it is July/August 591 (20:1). Again Yahweh says he will not be consulted by them because of their idolatry, and then he reviews the history of Israel's failures. The meaning of 20:25-26 is uncertain. Could it be that the Judeans

[68] Or Danel. For further discussion about this see below p.96.

were misinterpreting the law that all human first-born belong to the Lord (Ex.22:29, but cf. Num.18:15-16) as meaning they should be 'passed through the fire' as in the cult of Molech? Vv.33-44 speak of a purified remnant of Israel being brought back to worship Yahweh on his holy mountain (Zion). In v.49 Ezekiel is accused (with some justification) of propounding riddles. Another illustrated prophecy follows in ch.21: Ezekiel is to moan, clap his hands, and use swordplay to accompany his statement that God will attack Jerusalem (using the Babylonians). In ch.22 the metaphor of the smelting pot for refining metals is used of what is happening to Jerusalem. There follows in ch.23 an extended, somewhat repulsive, allegory depicting Samaria and Jerusalem as the two sisters Oholah and Oholibah who prostitute themselves and receive dire punishment.[69] On January 15, 587, the day of the start of the siege of Jerusalem (24:1), the city is likened to a rusty cooking pot. Just at that time Ezekiel's wife dies, but the prophet is told to refrain from mourning her death as a sign to the exiles that they must not mourn the fate of Jerusalem.

(3) Prophecies against Neighboring Nations (25-32)

First judgment is pronounced on Israel's small neighbors Ammon, Moab, Edom and Philistia for their obvious delight at Judah's calamity (25). Then there is an extended proclamation against Tyre, the port city made great by trading, and its king who viewed himself as a god (26-28). Finally there are no less than six dated prophecies (not in chronological order) about Egypt (29-32), the first in January 587 (29:1), a year after the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem, the last in April 571 (29:17).

(4) Reaffirmation of Ezekiel's Call (33)

This closely resembles the prophet's original commission in 3:16-27. There follows a refutation of the charge that the Lord is not fair in his dealings with people. In vv.21-22 we hear of news brought to Ezekiel of the fall of Jerusalem. The date ('twelfth' year of our exile) would mean the news took 18 months to reach him! It is probably better to follow the Syriac version which has 'eleventh' year. Vv.23-29 show people's reaction to the news. Finally vv.30-32 tell us that the exiles liked to consult Ezekiel for messages from Yahweh, but not to obey them; they regarded him rather as providing a form of entertainment!

(5) Promises of Salvation (34-37)

Chs.34, 36 & 37 deserve careful study for they constitute one of the most encouraging parts of the book. In place of the uncaring shepherds Israel has experienced (their rulers) God says he himself will care for his scattered sheep, rescuing them, bringing them back home and providing a good Davidic prince to lead them, and he himself will be their God (34). Their homeland will be renewed (36:1-12) and, to sanctify his holy name, he will change his people's hearts:

[69] 'Despite the distasteful theme and the indelicate language, the reader of these verses must appreciate that this is the language of unspeakable disgust and must try to recognize Ezekiel's passion for God's honour and his fury at the adulterous conduct of His covenant people.' (J.B. Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: IVP, 1969), pp.170-71)

> I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. (36:25-27)

This complements the words of Jeremiah (Jer.31:31-34) and we may surely recognize it as pointing to its ultimate fulfillment in Christian baptism and the work of the Holy Spirit. The theme of God's reviving spirit is expressed further in the well-known picture of the valley of dry bones in 37:1-14. This is followed by Ezekiel's joining together two sticks to represent the reuniting of (the remnant of) the houses of Israel and Judah under a good Davidic king, all bound in an everlasting covenant to Yahweh, who will richly bless them. (Ch.35 pronounces judgment on Mount Seir (Edom) for its age-long hostility to Israel.)

(6) Final Defeat of the Forces of Evil (38-39)

These chapters may have been placed here by an editor to round off Ezekiel's prophecies, chs.40-48 being added later. Gog is the personified head of the forces of evil, Magog almost certainly the country where he lived. Meshech and Tubal were tribes in Asia Minor engaged in slave trade with Tyre. These forces will invade Israel from the north, but Yahweh will vindicate his holy name by massacring them on the mountains leaving their bodies as prey for birds and wild animals. Later this theme was developed to depict a final battle between the forces of good and evil at the end of time at Armageddon (Rev.16:16, 20:8-9).

(7) The New Temple, Its Worship and the Resettlement of Israel (40-48)

Ezekiel declares he was again taken in spirit to Jerusalem (in 573 - 40:1) where, on a very high mountain, he was shown the structure of a city. An angelic figure gave him measurements of the temple area. The plan is quite similar to Solomon's temple. Then the glory of the Lord entered the temple from the east, filling it with his presence (43:1-5). God tells Ezekiel he will live there among his people for ever. The prophet must write down what he has heard so that his people may build this temple. There follow details of the altar and how it should be consecrated. No foreigner may enter the sanctuary; it is the Levites who are to minister there (44:10-11), and the Levitical priests from the lineage of Zadok who are to offer the sacrifices (vv.15-16). Chs 45-46 speak of how land is to be allocated to the temple and the prince, and what offerings should be made and festivals observed. 47:1-12 describes water flowing out from beneath the main (eastern) entrance of the temple and becoming a mighty river which brings life wherever it flows. It is bordered by many trees whose fruit is for food and whose leaves, which never wither, are for healing. 47:13-48:35 is devoted largely to the distribution of the land among the twelve tribes of Israel, the priests and Levites, the prince… The description ends by naming the city in Hebrew *Yahweh shammah*, meaning 'the Lord is there' - a fitting conclusion to the book.

Clearly Ezekiel thought he was delivering a blueprint for the renewed land where God would truly dwell among his people. But even renewed people are not perfect, and those who later returned from exile, and others who resettled the land, were far from that. Ezekiel's temple was never in fact built. But the author of Revelation, in describing his heavenly new Jerusalem, owed much to Ezekiel's vision, especially when speaking of God's dwelling among his people and of the river of water of life (Rev.21-22).

What do you most value from what we have explored of the book of Ezekiel? In what ways did this prophet particularly (a) help his people, and (b) prepare for Christianity?

The Minor Prophets

In the Septuagint these quite small books were known as 'the Twelve'. They were first referred to as the 'Minor Prophets' in the Vulgate. It may be that putting these small books together gave them a bigger voice, equivalent to a major prophet. Together they filled one scroll. In this coursebook they will be placed, as far as possible, in chronological order. Some of the books appear to have been used regularly in worship, perhaps being recited by temple prophets.[70]

Amos

Amos is the earliest of the 'writing prophets'. He was a shepherd and a cultivator of sycamore fig trees whose home was Tekoa, c.10 km south of Bethlehem in the kingdom of Judah, but was called by Yahweh to prophesy to the northern kingdom of Israel when Jeroboam II was king of Israel (793-753) and Uzziah (Azariah) king of Judah (792-740). Though Amos's book is relatively short, its message is so powerful that Amaziah, the senior priest of Bethel, reported to Jeroboam, "The land is not able to bear all his words!" (7:10). The oracles we have are highly rhythmic and resonate with rhetorical power.

Structure

(1) Oracles against foreign nations (1:1-2:5)
(2) Oracles against Israel (2:6-6:14)
(3) Visions and interpretations (7:1-9:10)
(4) Message of hope (9:11-15)

He begins by announcing that Yahweh, from his throne in the temple at Jerusalem, roars like a lion, pronouncing judgment on Israel's neighbors for their merciless cruelty and, in the case of Moab, blatant disrespect (2:1), and Judah, rejection of God's Law (2:4). Yahweh is thus shown as the lord of all nations not just his chosen people. His punishment is announced in each case as the destruction of each nation's cities by fire.

Then Israel is severely condemned for the inhuman treatment of the poor by the rich (2:6-8, cf. 4:1, 5:10-12, 6:4-6, 8:4-6) and total disregard for God's will (2:7b-8, 11-12, cf. Lev.18:15, Ex.22:26-27). Punishment will perhaps take the form of an earthquake (2:12-16) and military attack which few will survive (3:11-15). God declares he has pleaded with Israel to change their ways by sending them natural disasters, but in vain (4:7-11), so now there will be a more direct confrontation with the Creator (4:12-5:2). There is yet time to repent (5:4, 6, 14-15, cf. 5:24) or else the 'Day of the Lord' will be, not a time of blessing, but of severe punishment (5:18-20). Religious observances without right behavior are totally unacceptable to God (5:21-24). A nation is being raised up to punish Israel (6:4), and the indolent rich will be the first to be taken into exile (6:7).

[70] J.D.W. Watts, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (Cambridge: University Press, 1975), p.2.

In 7:1-9:10 Amos relates a number of visions from which further judgment is pronounced. *What are they?* After each of the first two the prophet pleads for mercy for Israel and this is granted (7:1-3, 4-6), but thereafter punishment must take its course. The king and many people will die (7:11, 8:3), the remnant will go into exile (7:11, 17, 9:4), the temple at Bethel, the central shrine of the Kingdom of Israel where Jeroboam I had placed a golden calf (1 Ki.12:28-30), will be destroyed ((9:1, cf. 3:14), and worse, no longer will people be able to hear the word of Yahweh (8:11-12). Amaziah, the senior priest at Bethel, tries to send Amos back to Judah for his disturbing prophecies. He clearly assumes Amos is a professional prophet from there, but Amos completely denies this and pronounces devastating punishment on him (7:10-17).

After wholesale condemnation of Israel, Amos's prophecy ends on a note of hope, foretelling restoration and blessing, not for the evil who will perish (9:10) but presumably for the purified remnant (9:11-15).

Hosea

Hosea is said to have prophesied (1:1) in the reigns of the Judean kings Uzziah (792-740), Jotham (740-735, coregent with Uzziah from 750), Ahaz (735-719) and Hezekiah (719-698, coregent with Ahaz from 727), and in the days of Jeroboam II of Israel (793-753). Though he mentions Judah, the focus of his attention is on the northern kingdom of Israel before the capture of Samaria (722). This suggests he came from Israel and his ministry was c.755-725. That it is dated in the reigns of Judean kings at all suggests his book was preserved in Judah after the fall of Samaria. All we know of Hosea's personal life comes from this book. He was the son of Beeri and he married Gomer, a woman from prostitute circles. His evident rhetorical skill may suggest he was from the upper classes, and his frequent use of rural metaphors implies he was a country man. The Hebrew text of the book is said to be 'notoriously difficult, perhaps the most obscure and problematic of the entire Bible'[71] perhaps due to the peculiar dialect of the northern kingdom which he spoke.

<u>The Structure of the Book</u>

(1) Hosea's marriage (chs.1-3)
(2) 'Legal proceedings' (4:1-5:7)
(3) Oracles of judgment (5:8-9:9)
(4) Historical review of Israel's apostasy (9:10-13:16)
(5) Promise of salvation (14:1-9)

Hosea is the first prophet to liken Yahweh's relationship with Israel to a marriage that has turned adulterous. For him this was particularly poignant having married a prostitute who was unfaithful to him. The names God gave his children bore out the message he proclaimed: 'Jezreel' declared God's judgment on Jehu's bloodshed there (1:4, cf. 2 Ki.9-10), 'Not Pitied' and 'Not My People' expressed God's rejection of his unfaithful people (vv.6, 9).[72] Punishment for Israel's 'adultery' is the message of 2:2-13. Ch.3 gives the impression that Hosea was then

[71] Francis I. Andersen in *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, p.290.
[72] The harshness of this message appears to have led a later Judean editor to add material rescinding it – 1:7, 10-2:1. This could have been Hosea's own message delivered later, cf. ch.14.

sent to love another harlot but perhaps, in the light of 2:7, it was Gomer again whose errant love-life has left her a slave.

God then lays a legal charge against his people for their unfaithfulness to him; indeed they have no knowledge of him (4:1, 6) for a corrupt priesthood has failed to teach them the Law (4:4-10). People sacrifice at hill-top shrines, engaging in the ritual sex of the fertility cult of Baal and Asherah (4:13-14), and break Yahweh's commandments wholesale (4:2). Hosea warns that God will punish his people, both Israel and Judah (ch.5) - but they only superficially repent! (6:1-4) Priests are involved in criminal activities (6:9); the references to kings in 7:3, 5, 7, 8:4 may well relate to the unstable period after the death of Jeroboam II when six kings assumed the throne and were toppled within 30 years.[73] Hosea employs a number of homely metaphors in describing the way Israel (= 'Ephraim'[74]) turns to foreign powers rather than to their own God (e.g. vv.8, 11). Israel is idolatrous, the root cause being worship of the golden calf set up by Jeroboam I, but it will be broken in pieces (8:4-6, cf. 1 Ki.12:28-30) and carried away to Assyria (10:5-6). Yahweh reject's Ephraim's worship and will burn her cities (8:13-14); her people will be deported and lose their identity among foreigners (8:8, 9:3). Their prophets, intended to be watchmen over God's people, have become deeply corrupt and will be punished (9:7-9, cf. Jud.19:22-30).

In the section 9:10-13:16 we find themes from Israel's early history. When Israel was but a 'child' Yahweh looked after him tenderly, but almost at once, he began worshipping idols! (11:1-4, cf.9:10). And he continues to this day (13:2). Now one incident of wickedness, now another is alluded to in tumultuous prophetic rhetoric: the coronation of Israel's first king Saul at Gilgal (9:15, 1 Sam.11:14-15, cf. 1 Sam.8:11), the obscene treatment of the Levite's concubine (10:9, Jud.19:22-30), worship of the golden calf at Bethel (10:15)… Yahweh promises implacable punishment: the king of Samaria will die (10:7, 15), your fortresses will be destroyed (10:14), your people shall become fugitives among the nations (9:17, 11:5). 13:15-16 seems to be referring to the final Assyrian attack on Ephraim that culminated in the capture of Samaria, though this still lies in the future. Amidst all this promise of punishment comes a revelation of the anguish in the heart of Yahweh that this horror should happen to his chosen people, and his wish to hold it back (11:8-9). And so, in the last chapter of the book, there is an impassioned plea to Israel to turn back to her God that he may heal them. This book then grants us unique insight into the anguished heart of our profoundly loving God faced with persistent human sin.

Compare and contrast the lives and messages of the prophets Amos and Hosea. What kept them firm in their prophetic mission?

Micah

The name Micah is a shortened form of Micaiah which means 'Who is like Yahweh?' This prophet came from the little village of Moresheth (1:1 or Moresheth-gath, 1:14) in the Judean foothills some 40 km SW of Jerusalem. He prophesied to the kingdom of Judah in the reigns of Jotham (750-35), Ahaz (735-19) and Hezekiah (727-698). Jer.26:18 confirms he lived in the reign of Hezekiah. He was thus a contemporary of Isaiah but, while the latter moved among the

[73] See p.44 above.

[74] Perhaps because, due to Assyrian encroachment, only a small area of the kingdom of Israel, around Samaria in the hill country of Ephraim, remained free at this time

leaders of his society, Micah may have been of quite humble birth for he freely criticized the injustice of the leaders (3:1-8, cf. 2:2, 9, 6:12). The book, after introducing the prophet, has a three-part basic structure: (1) 1:2-2:13, (2) 3:1-5:15, (3) 6:1-7:20, each section beginning with "Hear!" and containing first oracles of judgment then of hope.

The first section opens with an announcement of God's forthcoming punishment of Samaria (1:5-7, this city has not yet fallen), then extending this condemnation to Judah for oppression and the stealing of land (2:2, 8-9); and it envisages invaders reaching even to the gates of Jerusalem (1:9, 12), though this was not fulfilled until Sennacherib besieged the city in 701. It seems people are complaining at Micah's harsh message (2:6). He ends on a note of hope for the purified remnant (2:12-13).

In the second section the prophet condemns the rulers of Israel for their violent inhumanity to their people (3:1-3) and the false prophets who prophesy blessing in return for food (3:5-7). He, in contrast, is filled with Yahweh's Spirit and power enabling him to denounce Israel's sin (3:8). Because of the rulers' injustice and violence and the corruption of priests and prophets, who vainly trust in Yahweh's protection, Jerusalem will be reduced to rubble (3:9-12). Nevertheless, at some time in the future, Jerusalem will become the center to which all nations will come to receive the pure teaching of Yahweh resulting in world peace (4:1-3 // Is.2:2-4); though Jerusalem is currently besieged, out of insignificant little Bethlehem will come God's ruler who will have world dominion (5:1-5a); a purified remnant, scattered among the nations, will be given victory over its adversaries (5:7-15).

The final section starts with a court scene in which Yahweh lays a complaint against his people. This includes a review of Israel's early history (6:1-5). Israel wonders how she should respond appropriately and even considers child sacrifice (vv.6-7) – but is told she is 'to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God' (v.8). For corrupt trading practices, violence and deceit God will punish his people (vv.9-16). Micah laments the corruption of his people, a corruption in which he plays no part (7:1-7), but the book ends with Jerusalem's hymn of confidence in Yahweh and the blessing he will bring to the remnant of his people. If a reader of Micah is somewhat confused by the ease with which the prophet moves from judgment to hope, it is important to remember that his oracles, uttered on different occasions, have probably been put side by side by a later editor. Despite this there is much of value in Micah's message for us.

Zephaniah

The name Zephaniah means 'Yahweh protects'. In the introduction the prophet's ancestry is traced back four generations, perhaps because his father was black (Cushi means Ethiopian) and, to compensate, he appears to be great grandson of king Hezekiah. His intimate knowledge of Jerusalem (1:10-11) suggests he lived there. He prophesied in the time of Josiah (640-609) but, as he speaks of foreign religious practices (1:4-6, 8-9) and corruption among its secular and religious officers (3:3-5), his prophecy must relate to the period before Josiah's religious reforms in 621 (2 Ki.23) which he no doubt supported.

<u>Structure</u>

(1) Judgment on Judah (1:1-18)
(2) Judgment on the nations (2:1-3:8)
(3) Redemption for the remnant of Israel (3:9-20)

As with Amos, Joel and Malachi, the coming 'Day of the Lord' features prominently in Zephaniah's message. It is a day of wrath, of judgment on idolatrous and unjust behavior. It will encompass the whole earth (1:18, 2:11, cf. 3:8). Judah's close neighbors Philistia, Moab and Ammon (2:4-10), as well as from further afield Ethiopia (2:12) and Assyria (2:13-18) are specifically mentioned, and the sin of pride condemned (2:10, 15). It is only those who are humble and live by Yahweh's laws who may escape the devastation of that Day (2:3). They will constitute the remnant of Israel who will be rewarded (3:11-13). They will be brought home from exile (3:20) and Yahweh will reign among them as king (3:15, 17), removing all oppression and making them renowned among the peoples of the earth (3:18-20). Even foreigners will be able to call on Yahweh and serve him. Reversing the punishment of the proud people who built the tower of Babel (11:6-9) they will be given a pure language for this purpose (Zeph.3:9).

Nahum

Why is it we never hear the book of Nahum read in church? Because it is one long denunciation of Nineveh, capital of Assyria, and is thus presumably not felt spiritually edifying for Christians. But this short prophecy displays great rhetorical power and is a 'carefully crafted, brilliantly executed piece of poetry'.[75] Nahum came from Elkosh whose location, apart from probably being in Judah, is not known. From the earnestness of his message it appears he prophesied shortly before 612 when Nineveh fell to the combined armies of the Babylonians and Medes. From the vividness of some of its descriptions (2:1, 3-10, 3:2-3, 14) one almost feels the prophet was an eye-witness of the events he relates, though probably this was prophetic vision (cf. 1:1).

Structure

(1) Hymn on the greatness of Yahweh (1:2-11)
(2) Contrasting fortunes of Nineveh and Judah (1:12-15)
(3) Nineveh's ruin (2:1-13)
(4) Oracles and taunts (3:1-19)

In ch.1 the intensity of Nahum's rhetoric is reminiscent of that of Isaiah (Is.1, 40:21-25, 52:7). In Nah.1:12-15 Yahweh is addressing two different audiences – the NIV helpfully introduces the names 'Nineveh' in vv.11, 14, 'Judah' in v.12, though these are not in the original Hebrew. In 2:3-9 the reader can picture the Babylonians attacking Nineveh, leading its people away captive and looting its treasure. The reference to 'lions' in 2:11-12 is no doubt taunting Assyria for its national emblem the lion. In 3:8-10 the fate of the Egyptian city of Thebes is given as an object lesson to Nineveh - in 663 Thebes had been captured by the Assyrian armies of Ashurbanipal.

Why, unlike all the other prophetic books of the Old Testament except Obadiah, does this little book contain no criticism of the sins of God's people? Perhaps because Nahum speaks soon after the reforms of Josiah (622). Yet he does emphasize the righteousness of God in its

[75] Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book*, p.241.

punishment of one of the cruelest of empires of the ancient world. It has been suggested that Nahum was read in temple worship in Jerusalem to celebrate the downfall of Nineveh and remind worshippers of the greatness of Yahweh's power.[76] We can lay hold of 1:7 for our own comfort.

Habakkuk

This is a delightful little book. We know nothing of Habakkuk himself except that he is called 'the prophet' (1:1, 3:1), possibly denoting he held an official position such as temple prophet. He lived at a time when there was evil within Judah and Babylon was the adversary, which suggests the reign of Jehoiakim (609-598). Habakkuk wrestles with the problem: how can a righteous God tolerate the prevalence of evil? The first two chapters of the book contain his questions and Yahweh's answers.

Structure

(1) First complaint and answer (1:1-11)
(2) Second complaint and answer (1:12-2:20)
(3) Liturgical hymn and confession of faith (3:1-19)

Habakkuk first asks why God does nothing about the injustice among his people (1:2-4). God responds that he is rousing the Chaldeans (Babylonians) to conquer the earth (vv.5-11). Habakkuk replies in effect, "Oh holy, eternal God, how can you have chosen such wicked, ruthless people to execute your judgment?" He then stations himself on a watch-tower to observe God's reply (2:1). He is told to write down the vision he receives clearly so that it may be recited to others; even if the answer appears delayed it will surely come. Habakkuk then pronounces woe on the Babylonians for their plunder of goods, overthrow of peoples, and building communities by violence. You will drink the cup of God's wrath (cf. Is.51:17), he says; how futile is your worship of lifeless idols! 'But Yahweh is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him' (2:20).

In ch.3 a psalm-like prayer celebrates the greatness of Yahweh, the mighty Creator, who has watched over his people in the past. The prophet must now wait quietly for calamity to fall upon the Babylonians (3:16), and he concludes with a strong affirmation of faith, the last verse echoing Ps.18:33. From the musical footnote it is clear this prayer was sung, perhaps in post-exilic times, in temple worship.

Trust in God even when he seems inactive has been Habakkuk's powerful message to subsequent generations of Jews and Christians. The apostle Paul used Hab.2:4 in building his great argument about justification by faith (Gal.3:11, cf. Rom.1:17). Even if Habakkuk actually says that the righteous live faith*fully*, faithfulness is practiced by those who have faith in God.

[76] Drane, *Introducing the Old Testament*, pp.142-43.

Obadiah

The name Obadiah means 'servant of Yahweh'. It was a common name and, apart from what is in this, the shortest book in the Old Testament, we know nothing about its author. Most of the book (vv.1-14) is devoted to condemning Israel's neighbor Edom, particularly for its delight at and taking advantage of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586. Probably this prophecy was uttered shortly after that event. Vv.15-21 focus on 'the Day of the Lord' when, for all nations, the principle applies: 'As you have done, it shall be done to you; your deeds shall be on your own head' (v.15, cf. Mt.7:1-2), and Israel will get their revenge.

Edom, also known as Seir, was the territory south and east of the Dead Sea which the descendants of Esau occupied (Gen.36). They refused Israel passage through their territory on the way to the Promised Land (Num.20:14-18). After Israel had settled in Canaan there were savage conflicts between the two nations, Israel displaying ruthlessness towards its neighbor (1 Sam.14:47, 2 Sam.8:13-14, 1 Ki.11:15-16, 2 Ki.8:20-22, 14:7). The inhabitants of Edom were then delighted when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians and exploited the situation to the full (Obad.11-14, cf. Ps.137:7). But their delight called forth further judgment upon them (Obad.18, Mal.1:4). Sometime later their territory was occupied by the Nabatean Arabs, and the remnant of the Edomites, now known by the Greek name Idumeans, moved into southern Judea. Their most famous son was Herod the Great.

Tourists today can see what was once part of the mountainous territory of the Edomites (Obad.3) when they visit Petra in Jordan. In Old Testament times the wisdom of the Edomites was proverbial (Obad.8, cf. Jer.49:7). LaSor pertinently remarks, 'Edom epitomized national pride, self-sufficiency, trust in human wisdom and might. All of this turned into greed and cruelty in the face of Judah's calamity.'[77] This little book shows us God's response to such an attitude.

Haggai

This book is small in size but tells of an event great in importance in the history of the Jews: the building of the second temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem. The name Haggai is from *hag*, the Hebrew word for festival. Perhaps he was born on a Jewish festival. Haggai was a prophet, but his mention of things ceremonially 'clean' and 'unclean' (2:11-13) may suggest he was connected also with priestly circles. His little book contains just four oracles delivered within four months in 520. Before we look at it further, we need some background information.

Jerusalem was captured by the Babylonians in 597 and destroyed in 586.[78] On each occasion the more important Jewish captives were deported to Babylon. There, urged by Jeremiah, they settled down, expecting to stay 70 years (Jer.29:10). But in 539 the army of Cyrus the Great of Persia entered Babylon unopposed bringing to an end the Babylonian empire. Cyrus then reversed the policy of exiling conquered peoples, destroying their temples, and bringing their gods to Babylon. His general policy is stated on the Cyrus cylinder:

[77] LaSor, p.373.
[78] See above p.46.

> The holy cities beyond the Tigris whose sanctuaries had been in ruins over a long period, the gods whose abode is in the midst of them, I returned to their places and housed them in lasting abodes. I gathered together all their inhabitants and restored (to them) their dwellings…May all the gods whom I have placed within their sanctuaries address a daily prayer in my favour before Bel and Nabu, that my days may be long…[79]

Bel and Nabu (or Nebo - Is.46:1) were the chief gods of Babylon. Clearly Cyrus thought repatriation of exiled peoples and the return of gods to their restored temples would favor the stability of the Persian empire. In accord with this policy he allowed Jewish exiles to return to their homeland with the sacred vessels looted by Nebuchadnezzar, and provided funds for them to rebuild the temple (Ez.1, 6:3-5). It appears the first party returned in 538 under Sheshbazzar, son of Jehoiachin[80], the last king of Judah (Ez.1:8, 11); sometime after, a party of 50,000 returned under Zerubbabel (nephew of Sheshbazzar) as governor and the priest Joshua (Ezra 2:64-65). An altar was built and the foundations of the temple laid (Ez.3:11), but the opposition of local officials prevented further work until the reign of Darius I. Then in 520, through the urging of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, building of the temple began, being completed by 515 (Ez.6:15). Now let us study the book of Haggai; its four sections correspond to the prophet's four oracles.

Structure

(1) Call to rebuild the temple (1:1-15)
(2) The glory of the second temple (2:1-9)
(3) A defiled people purified and blessed (2:10-19)
(4) Message to Zerubbabel (2:20-23)

Haggai's first oracle is addressed to Zerubbabel and Joshua. It blames the series of poor harvests the returned exiles have been experiencing on the fact that they have dishonored Yahweh by building their own homes but failing to build his temple (cf. Deut.28:15-24). Rebuilding then began, Haggai assuring the people that Yahweh was with them in this endeavor (1:13). There were those present who remembered the glory of Solomon's temple, and the work of the exiles seemed pitiful in comparison (2:3, cf. Zech.4:10, Ez.3:12-13), but in his second oracle Haggai assured the people that Yahweh would ensure that, in time, the splendor of the new house would outshine that of the former, and they would also experience prosperity (2:6-9).

The third oracle involved consulting priests about ritual purity. They confirmed that ritual holiness was not transferable (Lev.6:26-27 applying only within the temple sanctuary, it seems), but ritual impurity was contagious (Num.19:11-13). Haggai comments that, though the exiles and anything they could offer Yahweh would be unclean, because of the rebuilding work, God would bless them (2:14, 19). The final oracle is addressed to Zerubbabel and is messianic in line with God's promise to David (2 Sam.7:16). It declares Yahweh is about to overthrow nations but he will make Zerubbabel, his chosen one, like a precious signet ring (something denied to his grandfather, Jer.22:24). Political independence for Judah seems to be envisaged. But there is no

[79] Qu. from *Documents from Old Testament Times*, ed. D. Winton Thomas (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p.93.
[80] 1 Chron.3:16-18, assuming Shenazzar = Sheshbazzar.

evidence that Zerubbabel ever achieved more than governor status. The Persians were more benevolent than the Babylonians but they were intent on holding their empire together.

Zechariah

The book of Zechariah, though seldom read in church, is in fact an important book preparing the way for the New Testament. It falls into two major parts: chs.1-8 record the visions and oracles of Zechariah, while chs.9-14 contain oracles only and differ from the earlier chapters in both style and content, appearing to come from one or more different authors.

Zechariah 1-8

The name Zechariah means 'Yahweh remembers' or 'Yahweh has remembered'. He is said to be the son of Berechiah and grandson of Iddo (1:1 - according to Ez.5:1 he was the son of Iddo). Iddo was one of the priests who returned to Judah with Zerubbabel (Neh.12:4) so it may be that Zechariah himself was a priest as well as a prophet. He was clearly a contemporary of Haggai, both books being carefully dated according to the reign of Darius. Perhaps they were jointly edited in priestly circles. The three dates in Zechariah mark the beginning of the three sections of the book. The dates show he prophesied during the years 520-518 BC.

Structure

(1) Call to repentance (1:1-6)
(2) Visions and interpretation (1:7-6:15)
(3) Oracles (7-8)

1:1 dates the start of Zechariah's prophecies to October/November 520. 1:2-6 warns the returned exiles not to be like their ancestors who disregarded the warnings of the earlier prophets and failed to obey Yahweh.

The eight visions of 1:7-6:15 are early 'apocalyptic' literature. 'Apocalyptic' means 'uncovered' or 'revealed' but, as it contains much symbolic language its meaning is actually hidden until the correct interpretation is supplied, often by angels.[81] Daniel is the only fully apocalyptic book in the Old Testament (and Revelation in the New), but parts of other books are apocalyptic, including this section of Zechariah and Is.24-27, Ezek.38-39 and Joel 3. To return to Zechariah:

- The first vision (1:8-17) is of horses of various colors sent out to patrol the earth; they discover it is peaceful – a reflection it seems of the peace established under the Persians. Yahweh promises that now the temple in Jerusalem will be rebuilt.
- The second (1:18-21) is of four horns, symbols of strength referring no doubt to Assyria, Babylonia and other world powers. They are to be struck down by four blacksmiths. Yahweh is sovereign lord of all world powers.
- In vision three (2:1-5) a man who intended to measure the size of the city of Jerusalem is told it does not need walls for Yahweh says, "I will be a wall of fire all round it, and I will be the

[81] For a fuller explanation see LaSor, p.409, or a Bible handbook or dictionary.

glory within it" (v.5). In the oracle that follows Yahweh says, not only will Israel's oppressors be themselves plundered, but many nations will become his people. This was fulfilled through Jesus Christ.

- In vision four (3:1-10) Joshua, the high priest, is stripped of his dirty robes, vested in clean ones and told that, if he walks in Yahweh's ways, he will have charge of the temple. God will also bring forward the 'Branch', presumably a Davidic ruler (cf. Is.11:1), later revealed to be Zerubbabel (Zech.4:9, 6:12).
- The fifth vision (4:1-14), of two olive trees beside a golden lampstand, reinforces the message of the previous vision. It specifies Zerubbabel as the temple builder and refers to him in messianic tones but, Yahweh declares, he will prevail, 'Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit'. The olive trees must surely represent Joshua and Zerubbabel, the two leaders anointed with olive oil.
- Visions six and seven go together. In the first (5:1-4) a flying scroll is seen containing curses on thieves and those who swear falsely in Yahweh's name. In the second (5:5-11) wickedness is pictured as a woman in a casket being deported to Babylon (called by its ancient name 'Shinar', cf. Gen.11:2). It has been suggested that this may be speaking particularly of idolatry, while the former vision is referring to moral sins. One way and another the land of God's people is to be cleansed of evil.[82]
- The final vision is of four chariots representing the four winds of the earth. The statement that Yahweh has 'set my Spirit at rest in the north country' (v.8) surely means that aggression against Israel, often pictured as coming from the north (e.g. Jer.1:14-15), has been put to an end with the victory of Persia over Babylon. Now at last the Jews can live in peace.

An oracle follows (6:9-15) in which a golden crown is placed on the head of Joshua, though it is said the Branch shall build the temple. This is surprising and suggests perhaps that, as Zerubbabel had *not* emerged as Messiah, an editor has substituted Joshua's name for his here. Certainly, in post-exilic times it was the priestly aristocracy that led the Jews, while a Davidic Messiah was just a hope for the future.

The last section of this first half of the book of Zechariah is dated November/December 518 (7:1), nearly two years after the visions. In 7:2-7 exiles are asking whether they should continue to observe times of mourning and fasting, presumably over the destruction of Jerusalem (586). Rather surprisingly they are challenged for the emptiness of these observances, then Zechariah reminds them of God's requirement of right behavior. But 7:11-14 seem to reflect more the time of Jeremiah than that of Zechariah. Has an editor incorporated earlier material here? In contrast ch.8 gives an entirely positive message. Yahweh promises rich blessing and, if the people obey his will (vv.16-17), the fasts they have observed will become joyful festivals for Judah, and many nations will come to Jerusalem seeking the favor of the Lord of hosts.

<u>Zechariah 9-14</u>

These chapters breathe a different atmosphere from chs.1-8. There are no visions and no mention of Darius, Zerubbabel or Joshua, only oracles, and in 9:13 Israel's adversary seems to be Greece. Most scholars therefore assign them to a later date. In fact the material in them may come from several different authors in different ages.

[82] Rex Mason, *The Books of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi* (Cambridge: University Press, 1977), p.58.

Zech.9 speaks of Yahweh's stripping Israel's old enemies of their power, and a remnant of the Philistines becoming his, like a clan of Judah (v.7). Vv.9-10 are messianic and well known to Christians as a prophecy of Jesus Christ riding into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday (Mt.21:5, Jn.12:15). Notice this figure is to bring peace throughout the world (v.10). The last part of the chapter speaks of national deliverance for Israel.

Ch.10 reveals that idolatry and lack of good leadership are harming Yahweh's people, but he will strengthen them and bring them home from among the nations. There are echoes here of Ezekiel (compare vv.2-3 with Ezek.34) and Deutero-Isaiah (vv.8-11 with Is.43:2-7). This material might well date from the time of the exile. Ch.11 is wholly pessimistic. The shepherds here appear to be leaders of Judah who grossly mistreat the people (cf. Ezek.34). The prophet himself is called to be a leader but clearly faces much opposition and renounces his task. His pay and his treatment (vv.12-13) poignantly point forward to Judas Iscariot (Mt.26:15, 27:5). The prophet's snapping of God's staffs 'Favor', representing his covenant with humankind (vv.10-11, cf. Gen.9:13-17), is surprising and the cause is not explained. The snapping of the staff 'Unity' is a reversal of the prophecy of Ezek.37:15-23. Was it the bad shepherds' behavior that led to such a drastic step?

The second oracle (chs.12-14) first pictures a universal attack on Judah and Jerusalem, after which God gives his people victory (12:1-9). Then comes a mysterious passage declaring that people will 'mourn over me whom they have pierced' (v.10) and ending with a prediction that a fountain will be opened to cleanse Judah from sin and impurity (13:1). 12:10 was recognized as a prophecy of the crucifixion (Jn.19:37) but 13:1 would seem also to point to Christ's atonement wrought on the cross. While 12:10 originally referred to Yahweh such an unpalatable thought has led various interpreters to think it might refer rather to the prophet himself.[83]

Ch.13 speaks of the removal of idolatry, and the abolition of prophecy! (We actually hear of no prophets after Malachi.) Then the shepherd, who is God's associate, is to be struck down and his sheep scattered – another verse familiar from the gospels (Mk.14:27, Mt.26:31); we do not know what it meant to people when it was originally spoken. Vv.8-9 recall Ezek.5:1-12. Ch.14 has an eschatological and very nationalistic ring to it. It tells of Yahweh's victory over Jerusalem's enemies. Those of these enemies who remain alive will themselves worship Yahweh at Jerusalem – or else…! The touching final verses say that war horses will now come under Yahweh's dominion and even common cooking pots will become sacred.

* * * * *

So draws to a close the enigmatic book of Zechariah. Remarkably it is quoted some 70 times in the New Testament. The author of Revelation draws repeatedly on the imagery of Zechariah's visions, and the gospel writers return time and again to Zech.9-14 for predictions of the passion story of Jesus Christ.

Joel

The name Joel means 'Yahweh is God'. Joel's father was Pethuel. The book's references to Zion/Jerusalem and Judah suggest the prophet lived in the southern kingdom, perhaps in

[83] V.11 refers to the annual mourning for the death of Hadad the Syrian god.

Jerusalem. As he never mentions a king but rather elders (1:2, 14) the book is post-exilic, and as there is a temple where priests offer ceremonial worship, it must surely date from after the completion of the second temple in 515 BC. Joel offers no criticism of the priesthood so possibly he was a temple prophet.

His prophecy focuses first on a devastating locust plague, whose intensity is greater than any in living memory (1:2). The attack of the locusts is described in graphic detail in chs.1 and 2. Joel declares that wholehearted repentance by all may lead to deliverance (2:12-14). When the nation does indeed repent Yahweh promises, not only to drive away the locusts, but to bring rain and an abundant harvest (2:18-27).

Then, even more wonderfully, God promises to pour out his Spirit on all his people: old, young and slaves. They will prophesy and receive dreams and visions, and remarkable portents will be seen in the sky, ushering in the awesome Day of the Lord, when all who call on Yahweh's name will be saved (vv.28-32). The promise of the pouring out God's Spirit was what Moses longed for (Num.11:29), but only found fulfillment in the Church starting with the first Christian Pentecost (Acts 2). The portents in the sky Christ said would herald his second coming to judge the world (Mk.13:24-27). But Joel perhaps expected the Day of the Lord much sooner. Ch.3 depicts Yahweh as summoning all nations to the valley of Jehoshaphat (a name that means 'Yahweh judges'), leading to punishment for Israel's enemies and blessing for his people.

Jonah

The book of Jonah is unique among the Minor Prophets in that it is a narrative not a collection of oracles or visions. It is a story the first part of which has appealed to countless generations of children. Jonah, the son of Amittai, was a prophet in the time of Jeroboam II (793-53 BC) who predicted the expansion of the kingdom of Israel to its northern limit under Solomon (2 Ki.14:25, cf. 1 Ki.8:25). His prophecy of blessing, so different from the doom prophesied by his contemporary Amos, suggests he was a nationalist. The book of Jonah is a masterpiece of story-telling, but its principal character is really Yahweh. Jonah is portrayed in a very negative light (as an 'antihero') who deplores God's mercy being shown to Assyria, Israel's cruel enemy. The structure of the book is straightforward with the chapters marking the progression of the story:

<u>Structure</u>

(1) Jonah's commission rejected (ch.1)
(2) Jonah's prayer from within the fish (2)
(3) Jonah's fulfilling his commission (3)
(4) Jonah deplores God's mercy on Nineveh (4)

In ch.1 Yahweh calls the prophet to go and preach to the wicked city of Nineveh. Totally horrified Jonah heads in the opposite direction – he boards a ship at Joppa (modern Jaffa) bound for Tarshish (perhaps Spain). Yahweh stirs up a storm and the crew of the ship, fearing for their lives, cast lots to find out who is the culprit. Jonah is indicated, admits his sin and is thrown overboard and swallowed by a large fish. Ch.2 relates that from the belly of the fish he prays to Yahweh for deliverance. His prayer takes the form of a psalm which in fact mentions nothing of

his story and may be an independent composition incorporated into the narrative by the author or even a later editor. Then the fish vomits Jonah on to dry land.

Recommissioned by Yahweh, Jonah goes straight to Nineveh. It was indeed a big city, made capital of Assyria in 700 BC but, according to archeological investigations, scarcely 'three days walk across' (3:3). Jonah's preaching leads to immediate repentance by its king and people and, in response, Yahweh withdraws the calamity he had intended for them. But Jonah's reaction was *not* joy but horror that God could forgive Israel's cruel enemy. The story ends with Yahweh's question: Should I not have compassion on a city of 120,000 people, giving them a chance to repent?[84]

Does the book of Jonah give us actual history or rather is it a novel like Tobit and Judith in the Apocrypha? While there are scholars who defend its historicity[85] the majority would see it as a novel or parable, attributed to Jonah but written perhaps in the 5th century BC as a protest against the exclusive Jewish nationalism of Ezra and Nehemiah. Whether it is history or story its message is the same: Yahweh is not just the God of Israel but, as Creator of the world, he cares about *all* humans, wishing them to come to him and find salvation (cf. Is.19:25, Jer.18:7-10), a preparation for the worldwide scope of the Christian Gospel.

Malachi

The book of Malachi provides a poignant ending to the Old Testament. Malachi means 'my messenger' but is probably just a description of the office of the writer not his proper name.[86] The book consists almost entirely of six disputes between Yahweh and his people. A distinctive literary pattern is adopted: Yahweh makes a statement, his hearers ask a question, and then Yahweh gives an answer. The fact that a governor not a king is mentioned (1:8), and that clearly the temple has been rebuilt (completed 515 BC) suggests the book comes from the first half of the 5th century. The return from exile has not produced an exalted messianic age and, it seems, many have lost heart and are questioning God's love and justice (1:2, 2:17). Worship has become slipshod (1:6-14) and tithes are not being paid (3:6-12).

Structure

(1) Yahweh loves Israel (1:1-5)
(2) Rebuke for priests over sacrifice (1:6-2:9)
(3) Rebuke over divorce (2:10-16)
(4) Yahweh's coming in judgment (2:17-3:5)
(5) Neglect of tithing (3:6-12)
(6) Yahweh's responses to the arrogant and the reverent (3:13-4:3)
(7) Conclusion (4:4-6)

[84] 120,000 is probably a round figure stressing the city's huge population, not an accurate statistic. 'Who do not know their right hand from their left' may mean that, lacking the revelation of the Law, they do not know right from wrong. (T.D. Alexander in *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), p.130.
[85] E.g. Alexander, *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, pp.69-77.
[86] The Septuagint heads the book with the words *angelou autou* meaning 'Of His Messenger'.

The introductory words 'An oracle, the word of the Lord' (1:1) occurs also in Zech.9:11 and 12:1, suggesting perhaps that those two oracles were once joined with this book, then later detached and added to Zech.1-8, while a new title 'Malachi' was given to this book, perhaps influenced by the occurrence of 'my messenger' in Mal.3:1.

The first dispute (1:2-5) is over Yahweh's love for Israel. God points to his destruction of Israel's enemy Edom as proof that he does love Israel (cf. Obad.1-10). The second dispute centers on sacrificial worship in the temple. Instead of offering unblemished animals as the Law required (Lev.1:3, 10 etc) the priests are offering blind, lame and sick animals such as they would not dare to present to the governor (1:6-9). God is insulted and would prefer no sacrifices be offered at all! (1:10-14). The priests are said not to be living up to God's covenant with Levi (2:4-5, cf. Deut.33:8-11, Num.25:10-13).

The third dispute concerns marital matters. Jewish men have married worshippers of foreign gods (2:11); others are readily divorcing the wives they married in their youth (2:13-16). God declares he hates divorce – preparing the way for Jesus' later statements (Mk.9:2-12, Mt.19:3-9). The matter of slipshod sacrificial worship seems to be in view again in the fourth dispute which speaks of God's refining fire of judgment purifying the descendants of Levi (3:1-4). God's judgment will catch up with all kinds of evil doers (3:5).

The fifth dispute focuses on the neglect of tithing (3:8-12). If tithes are paid in full God promises his blessing. Tithes were necessary for the upkeep of the Levites and poor (Num.18:21-32, Deut.14:28-29). The final dispute reveals the practical atheism which seems to have developed among the returned exiles (3:13-15). But there are also still some who revere Yahweh. The day of judgment will burn up the arrogant but richly reward the faithful (3:16-4:3). All are instructed to obey the Law of Moses, and to expect Elijah as the herald of 'the great and terrible day of the Lord'. Families are to be reunited lest, when God comes as judge, he strikes the land with a curse (4:4-6).

Jewish prophecy came to an end with these words of Malachi. It had been hoped that the remnant of Judah, purified by the exile, would repopulate the land in total obedience to God. But this did not happen. The sinfulness of the human heart (Jer.17:9) had not been dealt with. That awaited the coming of John the Baptist ('Elijah'), Jesus the Messiah, the new covenant, and the work of the Holy Spirit.

How do the books of Micah, Zechariah, Joel and Malachi prepare for the coming of Jesus Christ?

What do the books of Nahum, Habakkuk and Jonah teach about the character of God?

The Poetic Books

The Writings

The third major section of the Hebrew Bible, after the Law and the Prophets, is the Writings. This consists of an amorphous collection of different types of books: songs, wisdom literature, short stories, historical books and apocalyptic. Its contents were agreed by the rabbis c. AD 100.[87] In this chapter we shall look at four books of Hebrew poetry: Psalms, Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes. In our Bibles Job is placed before Psalms because of its believed antiquity. Psalms is before Proverbs and Ecclesiastes because its authorship is attributed to David, while the latter two books are associated to his son Solomon. The rest of the Writings we shall look at in chapter 7.

Hebrew poetry does not have the same rhythm and rhyme as our poetry; rather it relies on the number stressed syllables in a line.[88] Another characteristic is parallelism, which can be:

- 'synonymous', when the meaning of the first stich (half) within a strophe (verse) is largely repeated in the second (e.g. Ps.114:1)
- 'antithetic', when the meaning of the second stich contrasts with the first (e.g. Prov.8:7)
- 'synthetic', when the meaning of the second stich develops the thought of the first (e.g. Ps.1:3).

Some psalms are acrostics, each verse starting with the next letter of the 22-letter Hebrew alphabet (e.g. Ps.34). Ps.119 is a remarkable feat of Hebrew poetry glorifying the Law; it has twenty-two blocks of eight verses, the lines of the verses of each block starting with the same letter, running through the Hebrew alphabet, making a total of 176 verses.

Psalms

Psalms is the longest book in the Old Testament and constituted the hymnbook of ancient Israel. The word 'psalm' is from the Greek *psalmos* meaning the plucking or striking of the strings of a musical instrument; later it came to mean a song sung to such instruments. There are 150 psalms in this psalter, the collection probably being complete by the end of the 3rd C BC.[89]

> The psalms are songs and prayers which constitute the response of the people of Israel to the revelation from God. They are primarily a human creation as opposed to God's direct revelation to mankind. Yet they have become God's words for men.[90]

In the 16th century, Martin Luther spoke of the psalter as 'the favorite book of all the saints', and John Calvin described it as 'an anatomy of all parts of the soul'. It remains a source of great inspiration today for it contains intensely personal prayers expressing joys, hopes and fears

[87] See above p.15, 'The Contents' and 'The Canon of Scripture'.
[88] Indicated by the words in heavy type in the Gelinau musical setting used in St. Andrew's Seminary chapel
[89] The Septuagint translation, which was completed in Egypt by the beginning of the 2nd C, has a psalm 151 but it is described as 'outside the number', i.e. the number of recognized psalms was 150.
[90] This fine statement is from Fr. Ayabo's coursebook introducing the Old Testament.

which find an echo in our own hearts. It is good to discover from these psalms, after hearing of so much sinfulness and unfaithfulness to Yahweh (for instance in the books of Kings), that there were also in ancient Israel people with great faith in God and a delight in his law.

Our book of Psalms in fact consists of five books, each ending with a doxology: (1) 1-41, (2) 42-72, (3) 73-89, (4) 90-106 and (5) 107-150, perhaps a conscious reflection of the five books of the Law. Some scholars suggest that these derived from three collections:

1. 3-41, an early 'Yahwistic' psalter, in which God is almost invariably referred to as 'Yahweh'. This, consisting almost entirely of 'Psalms of David', was probably completed before the exile in 586 BC, and perhaps originated in the southern kingdom of Judah. Pss.1 and 2 were added later as an introduction to this collection or indeed to the whole psalter. Ps.1 declares God blesses those who keep his law (cf. Jer.17:5-8) and Ps.2 affirms that Yahweh's hand is on the Judean king - or on the future Messiah.
2. 42-89, an 'Elohistic' psalter, in which God is referred to more often than not by the Hebrew word for God, 'Elohim'.[91] This collection contains some 'psalms of David' but also others 'of the sons of Korah', 'of Asaph' etc. Some scholars have suggested it was originally the collection of the northern kingdom of Israel. But while this might apply to 68, 80, and possibly to the royal psalms 45, 61 and 72, it can scarcely be true of those extolling Zion (48, 65, 76, 84) or those obviously from the time of the exile (44, 60, 74, 79, 89). Indeed it is a very diverse collection.
3. 90-145, a later 'Yahwistic' psalter – post-exilic, i.e. composed after 536 BC (though clearly 137 is from the time of the exile itself). This collection again contains some 'psalms of David' though most of its psalms are untitled. It includes various new groups of psalms: several declaring that, even though the Judean monarchy may have ceased, 'Yahweh is king' (93, 95, 97, 99); fifteen entitled 'A song of ascent' (120-134) were probably used on pilgrimages to Jerusalem; five 'Hallelujah' psalms (146-150) bring the psalter to a resounding close. Here also is the longest psalm of all (119) repeatedly affirming the centrality of God's commandments to life.

Earlier still there could have been separate collections of psalms of David, of Asaph, of the sons of Korah etc. David we know was both a skillful lyre player (1 Sam.16:18) and a person of great faith (cf. 1 Sam.17:45-47); we can well believe he composed psalms. 73 psalms in all are headed 'of David', though this title could, it seems, mean either *by* David (like Ps.18 which is found again in 2 Sam.22) or '*belonging to the Davidic collection* of psalms'. Perhaps a considerable number in the first Yahwistic psalter were actually composed by David (including Ps.23). Asaph is referred to in 1 Chron.15:16-19 etc as a Levite who was both a singer and an instrumentalist and lived in the time of David; psalms 73-83 are attributed to him. 2 Chron.20:19 refers to the Korahites as Levitical singers living in the time of Jehoshaphat (870-848); psalms 42, 44-49, 84-85, 87-88 are attributed to them. Though the ascriptions or titles of the psalms are ancient (they are found in the Septuagint) they are not thought by scholars today to have been in the original Hebrew. They appear to have been written by professional musicians for they often contain

[91] Actually this is a plural word in the Hebrew which could be translated 'gods' but the translation 'God' is generally required in the light of the 1st Commandment, 'You must have no other gods beside me'. The plural form may be a hangover from earlier polytheistic days – or is it a hint of the three Persons in one God of Christianity? It could be both.

musical terms. But their attempts to allocate certain psalms to incidents in the life of David, while sometimes convincing (e.g. Ps.51), at other times seem far-fetched (e.g. Ps.34).

In the main one cannot detect concrete historical situations behind psalms that testify to personal tragedy and deliverance, for they have been generalized to allow them to be used in many situations. Some employ extravagant poetic imagery, for instance 'strong bulls of Bashan surround me' (Ps.22:12), seen later as depicting Jesus' enemies watching his crucifixion.

A new approach to the study of the psalms was pioneered by the German scholar Hermann Gunkel (1862-1932) when he classified them by literary types. His approach has been widely accepted though a little refined by others. We can see in the psalter:

- Hymns which declare God's glory for his creative power (e.g. 8, 19, 95, 104), his dwelling place in the temple in Jerusalem (e.g. 46, 48, 84), and his activity in the history of Israel (e.g. 78, 114).
- Laments, both individual (e.g. 22, 51) and communal (e.g. 44, 74).
- Thanksgivings particularly for personal deliverance (e.g. 18, 30, 40).
- Royal psalms which focus on different aspects of the life of the king (e.g. 20, 21, 45, 72).
- Wisdom psalms which clearly seek to teach right belief and action (e.g. 1, 34, 37, 119).
- Liturgies which answer questions (e.g. 15), or have refrains (e.g. 42-43, 136).

Choose a psalm from each of these categories, read it carefully and reflect on it. How does it speak to you?

Wisdom Literature

The composition of wisdom literature was an international venture. Egyptian examples are known from the third millennium BC and other such material was composed in Mesopotamia, and even in Canaan itself before any was written in Israel. There were 'wise men' in Israel from earliest times, Joseph being a notable example. Kings needed wise counselors; David could turn to Ahithophel (2 Sam 16:23). But pre-eminent among Israel's sages was David's son Solomon. As a new king he prayed to Yahweh for wisdom and his prayer was richly granted (1Ki 3:5-12). He is said to have composed 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs, and to have discoursed knowledgeably upon all kinds of living things (1 Ki 4:29-34). People came from far and wide to consult him, most notably the Queen of Sheba (1 Ki 10:1-13). He then became in effect the patron of Israel's wisdom literature. His proverbs form the bulk of our book of Proverbs, and the author of Ecclesiastes, though writing in a later age, formally presents himself as Solomon (Eccles 1:1).

Wisdom literature could be proverbial or reflective. Both types are found in the Old Testament. Proverbs is of course the former, Job is the latter, and Ecclesiastes is a hybrid of the two forms. The three books have been likened to three houses: Proverbs to 'a prosperous house',

Job to 'a stricken house' and Ecclesiastes to 'a decaying house'.[92] We shall now look at each in turn. The Apocrypha contains two further representatives of wisdom literature, Wisdom and Sirach (Ecclesiasticus).

Proverbs

Proverbs is a very practical book. It is concerned with how to live successfully. It sets forth wise actions and attitudes in many situations, and the fool, the sluggard (lazy one) and the scoffer are deplored. The book aims to form sound character in the young but also prescribes much of value for adult life. It insists wisdom is based on 'the fear of the Lord' (1:7, 2:5, 9:10 etc). To be wise is to be godly; the wicked are fools. But, as one commentator aptly puts it, Proverbs seldom 'takes you to church'; its function is 'to put godliness into working clothes'.[93]

The Hebrew word for 'proverb', *masal*, means 'comparison', so the book consists in the main of short, pithy sayings many of which contain similes and metaphors. Sometimes they exaggerate, sometimes show wry humor (e.g. 17:28, 19:24, 21:9). As poetry they constantly use parallelism.[94] The date of the composition of Proverbs cannot be before the time of Hezekiah (reigned 727-698, cf. Prov.25:1), the first and last sections of the book perhaps being added after the exile, possibly as late as c.500 BC. The enduring popularity of Proverbs is shown by its being quoted frequently in the New Testament (cf. 3:7a in Rom 12:16; 10:12 in Jas 5:20 and 1 Pet 4:8; 25:7 in Lk 14:10 etc) and to our day (e.g. 13:12, 24, 16:18).

Structure of the Book

(1) The importance of Wisdom (1:1-9:18)
(2) Proverbs of Solomon (10:1-22:16)
(3) Words of the Wise (22:17-24-22)
(4) More words of the Wise (24:23-34)
(5) Further proverbs of Solomon (25:1-29:27)
(6) Words of Agur (30:1-32)
(7) Words of King Lemuel (31:1-9)
(8) An excellent Woman (31:10-31)

(1) The Importance of Wisdom (1:-9:18)

While 1:1 announces that what follows are proverbs of Solomon, probably it refers to the bulk of the book rather than the first section which is thought by scholars to have been added later. 1:2-7 states the purposes of the book's material. There follow ten lengthy exhortations of a father to a son,[95] repeatedly contrasting the results of seeking wisdom and pursuing folly. Wisdom is personified in 1:20-33, ch.8 and 9:1-6.

[92] So in Fr. Ayabo's OT coursebook, complete with diagrams of the houses!
[93] Derek Kidner, *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary* (London: IVP, 1964), p.35.
[94] See above p.75.
[95] To be 'gender sensitive' some modern versions replace 'my son', which is what the Hebrew says, with 'my child'.

(2) Proverbs of Solomon (10:1-22:16)

Here are some 375 maxims contrasting many facets of the way of the righteous (wise) and the way of the wicked (foolish). Their order appears largely haphazard, but they contain many perceptive observations and much practical advice. They speak of hope deferred (13:12), the discipline of children (13:24), care for the poor (14:31), and God's sovereignty (16:1-9). They deplore pride (16:18-19), respect old age (16:31), tell of the serious consequences of bad temper and drunkenness (19:19, 20:1), speak of kings and commerce (20) and much more.

(3) Words of the Wise (22:17-14:22)

This section contains 30 instructions by sages unknown. Much of the material appears based on the Egyptian *Instructions of Amen-em-ope* (c. 1000 BC).[96] Kidner comments, 'If Proverbs is the borrower here, the borrowing is not slavish but free and creative. Egyptian jewels, as at the Exodus, have been re-set to their advantage by Israelite workmen and put to finer use.'[97] These proverbs are parental in tone, deal with both secular and religious matters and inculcate 'fear of the Lord'.

(4) More Words of the Wise (24:23-34)

Here are five more instructions: against the taking of revenge (v.29), being lazy (vv.30-34) and dealing with other matters.

(5) Further Proverbs of Solomon (25:1-29:27)

These are said to have been copied by officials of King Hezekiah (25:1). They are similar in style and content to those in10:1-22:16 but are better grouped by subject: kings (25:2-7), fools (26:1-12), the sluggard (26:13-16), and domestic animals (27:23-27).

(6) Words of Agur (30:1-32)

Agur is said to be the son of Jakeh, but we know nothing about either – unless the Hebrew word *massa*, translated 'oracle' in v.1 is a proper name referring to a descendant of Ishmael (cf. Gen.25:14, 1 Chron. 1:30), in which case they probably came from northern Arabia. Here are longer sayings, often bringing together several similar things on a topic. Vv.8-9 contains a moving prayer to be neither rich nor poor because both could have ungodly consequences. The fine cadences of v.4 recall Is. 40 or Job.

(7) Words of King Lemuel (31:1-9)

Who was Lemuel? Again we do not know, unless *massa* (tr. 'oracle' in v.1) indicates he too came from northern Arabia. Here we have his mother's advice to her son on how to govern effectively, urging him to avoid being controlled by women (v.3) and alcohol (vv.4-7), and to speak out for the poor and judge righteously (vv.8-9).

[96] For evidence of this see LaSor, p.467.
[97] Kidner, *Proverbs*, p.24.

(8) An Excellent Woman (31:10-31)

This is most unlikely to come from Lemuel.[98] It is an artistic piece indeed, an acrostic poem with each line of Hebrew starting with the next letter of the alphabet. It brings Proverbs to a notable conclusion. What a woman is described here! Some commentators suggest she is none other than the Lady Wisdom of ch.8, but that is not necessarily so. She is extremely hard-working at home and successful in business. She is wise in speech and caring for the poor. And behind all this she is God-fearing (v.30). Feminists today may hate what they see here as a model of an exploited woman. But what tribute she receives! Her children rise up and bless her and her husband, an elder who sits in the city gate (v.23), declares she is incomparable! How many tombstones of beloved wives and mothers quote these words! With service at the heart of the Christian life (Mk 10:45, Jn 13:3-5) how can we fail to applaud her and to hope that men too will, in their own way, perform comparable service?

Choose a topic and list the various things Proverbs says about it. One such topic might be laziness (6:6-11, 24:30-34, 26:13-16 etc).
Or perhaps study what is said about wisdom in ch.8. What would the writer have said in the 21st century?
Or look at the description of the excellent woman in ch.31 and consider what might be her counterpart today. And her male equivalent?

Job

The book of Job is certainly one of reflective wisdom. It focuses on the problem of God's allowing unjust suffering in the world. The book consists of a framework of prose around dialogues of poetry. As a piece of literature it has won great admiration. LaSor writes:

> Students of literature lavish superlatives on the artistry of Job. For example the varieties of poetic parallelism, including the exquisite use of complete triplets and even longer units, reveal remarkable literary powers…Metaphors and similes abound in startling numbers and masterful quality.[99]

But the average reader may be irritated by the 'dialogue of the deaf' that seems to take place between Job and his 'friends', and by the fact that the same points tend to be repeated time and again. But the matter of unjust suffering still perplexes us today so the book remains relevant to us all. When was it written? The name Job is known from two 2nd millennium BC texts where it refers to tribal leaders in and around Palestine. The introduction to the book (chs.1-2) suggests the story comes from patriarchal times when wealth was measured by the quantity of livestock a person owned, and individuals offered sacrifices without the aid of priests. But the speeches of the book have affinities with prophetic writings of 8th – 6th centuries BC. E.g. Job 3:3-26 with Jer 20:14-18, and other passages seem to echo Deutero-Isaiah and Psalm 22. But the book does not deal with the matter of *national* suffering so it probably predates the fall of Jerusalem in 598 and the exile. Perhaps then it was written in the 7th century being based on an ancient story, true

[98] In the Septuagint vv.1-9 are placed in ch.24 and are thus separated from vv.10-31 by five chapters.
[99] *LaSor*, p.487.

or fictional. As a Jewish rabbi suggested, the book might best be viewed as an Old Testament parable exploring the question of undeserved suffering.

Structure of the Book

(1) Prologue (1:1-2:13)
(2) Dialogues (3:1-42:6)
    A. Job and his Friends – First Cycle (3:1-11:20)
    B. Job and his Friends – Second Cycle (12:1-20:29)
    C. Job and his Friends – Third Cycle (21:1-31:40)
    D. Elihu's Speeches (32:1-37:24)
    E. Yahweh and Job (38:-42:6)
(3) Epilogue (42:7-17)

(1) Prologue (1:1-2-13)

The scene moves between Yahweh's heavenly court and earth where Job is the wealthiest man in the East. Satan (meaning 'adversary') is part of the heavenly court and subject to God's authority yet clearly hostile to his will. He is given permission to test Job, God's model servant, and he afflicts him with a series of tragedies which take him from riches to rags in one day. But Job responds, "The Lord gave, the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord" (1:21). Then Satan attacks his health and Job's whole body is covered with loathsome sores and he is reduced, it seems, to sitting on an ash heap, scraping puss from his body. His wife, clearly acting as Satan's agent, says to him, "Curse God and die!" but he will not. Then his three friends come to console him, sitting round him in silence for a week out of respect for his condition. They are sages, the first comes from Teman in Edom, a nation reputed for its wise men (Obad.8-9).

(2A) First Cycle of Speeches (3:1-11:20)

Job bitterly laments his situation and curses the day he was born (cf. Jer.20:7-18). Then in turn Job's friends speak and Job responds. LaSor says that each friend speaks from a different perspective: 'Eliphaz as a gentle, confident mystic… Bildad as a firm traditionalist… Zophar as a rash dogmatist'.[100] But they all turn out to be spokesmen of traditional wisdom. Eliphaz says Job should take suffering as a discipline and turn to God who will restore him. Bildad says something similar (5:17-18, 8:5-7). But Zophar is far less patient, deriding Job's loquacity, and he asks how can one question God? (11) Job thinks them all treacherous companions and complains he does not deserve his suffering. But who can contend with God?

(2B) Second Cycle of Speeches (12:1-20:29)

Job now laments he is a laughing stock, and he wishes he could put his case to God. He expresses human mortality in words often quoted in Christian funeral services (14:1-2). Eliphaz complains that Job's approach does away with fear of God and says the wisdom of the aged is against Job. Job again complains about his miserable comforters and declares it is actually God who is assaulting him through his calamities. Bildad and Zophar reiterate it is the *wicked* that

[100] LaSor, p.476.

God punishes (18, 20). Job once more turns on his companions, and complains he is alienated from his family and friends. He says he would like to make a written protest of his innocence and, in words well-known to us, declares he will eventually be vindicated, and in his flesh will see God (19:23-27).

(2C) Third Cycle of Speeches (21:1-31:40)

This cycle seems to have suffered in transmission over the years. While Eliphaz makes a full speech (22), Bildad makes only a short one (25:1-6), and Zophar none at all, Job makes three speeches in a row. It has been suggested that 26:5-14 might originally have been part of Bildad's third speech, and 27:13-28 have been said by Zophar. But we do not know. It is widely held that ch.28, a poem on wisdom, is so unlike Job's normal passionate speeches that it should be regarded as not from him but as the author's interlude between the dialogues up to this point and the final speeches.

In his speeches Job now asks why the wicked prosper in life (21, cf. Ps.73) and why, with so much injustice around, God does nothing (24). Eliphaz' final contribution to the debate (22) is to say that Job's suffering must be the result of his disregard for the poor (a point strongly denied by Job in ch.29), and he must now delight in God and he will find prosperity. Job says, if only he could *find* God he would lay his case before him and would be acquitted by him for ever, though, after saying this, his confidence seems to fail him (23). Bildad's last shot is to ask how any mortal can be righteous before God (25). But Job once more insists he is righteous (27:2-6). In his final speech he yearns for the old days when God favored him, people respected him and he helped the needy (29). He then once more deplores his dreadful plight, crying out that even the lowest in society mock him (30), and says, *if he had done anyone any wrong* he would deserve his punishment (31). His friends say no more. What's the use of arguing with one who is righteous in his own eyes (32:1)?

(2D) Elihu's Speeches (32:1-37:24)

Since his elders have no more to say Elihu, son of Barachel, an angry young man, 'bursts on the scene like a tornado',[101] quoting and then dismissing statements of Job. This section of the book has provoked great controversy as Elihu is not mentioned in either the prologue or the epilogue. Is this a later addition to the book? Yet his speeches fit in quite well, matching Job's in their intensity. Like Job's friends he says it is the wicked God punishes and God will not listen to the proud (34-35). He makes a new point when he says that God warns people by dreams and messages to turn back from bad deeds and pride, and if someone mediates for sinners God prolongs their lives (33:14-28). Then, preparing the way for God's own intervention, he stresses the greatness and inscrutability of God (36-37).

(2E) Yahweh and Job (38:1-42:6)

Finally God speaks to Job out of a whirlwind asking who it is who dares to question him from ignorance. He shows respect to Job by entering into conversation with him, but he also reprimands him by posing for him questions Job cannot possibly answer but which reveal his

[101] N.C. Habel, *The Book of Job* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p.171.

own almighty power. Job's response is to recognize how small he is in comparison with God and to lay his hand on his mouth and say no more (40:3-5). But Yahweh continues to cross-question him, asking if he can humble the proud (40:10-13), and he points to two mighty creatures: Behemoth (lit. 'beast', 40:15-24) and Leviathan[102] (41), which some have tried to identify with the hippopotamus and the crocodile. But clearly the description of Leviathan goes far beyond anything we find in nature, depicting him as breathing fire and smoke – the image of a dragon! (41:19-21) Job is overawed and repents that he has dared to question God (42:1-6). This opens the door to his restoration.

(3) Epilogue (42:7-72)

Now Yahweh condemns Job's three friends for speaking falsely and instructs them to offer a burnt-offering and then Job will pray for them. This happens and they are pardoned. Then God blesses Job with even greater prosperity than he had at the beginning and eventually Job dies a very old man.

In closing let us note LaSor's perceptive comment, 'Job's harsh lot has made it possible to believe that Jesus, the Messiah, was truly righteous even though he endured an excruciating death among criminals.'[103]

Do you find human suffering hard to reconcile with belief in a God of love? Share your experiences and feelings. Has the message of the book of Job helped you in any way?

Ecclesiastes

'Ecclesiastes' is the title of the book in the Septuagint and it means 'one who addresses an assembly'; English translations simplify this to 'Preacher', 'Teacher' or the like. The original Hebrew title *qoheleth* or *koheleth* is often used in Bible commentaries for the author of the book. Some Hebrew traditions place Ecclesiastes after Proverbs and before the Song of Solomon as in our Bibles, others place it among the five small scrolls (Megilloth) which we shall study in our next chapter. We study Ecclesiastes here, however, because it is clearly a piece of wisdom literature. But at the outset we must admit with Wesley Fuerst: 'This small book certainly is unlike the rest of the Old Testament. It poses harder questions, raises graver doubts, and arrives at more despairing conclusions than any other book.'[104] This is what caused great debates amongst the Jewish rabbis in the 1st century of our era as to whether it should be included in the canon[105] of the Old Testament; it was probably its claim to Solomonic authorship (1:1, 12) that influenced their final decision. But in fact there are good reasons for believing it was written by a sage in the 3rd century BC.[106]

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[102] Believed to be the great sea monster, a serpent with seven heads which Canaanite mythology said was slain by Baal and his consort Anat (Habel, *Job*, p.225. In the Old Testament it is God who kills Leviathan (Ps.74:12-14, Is 27:1).

[103] LaSor, p.495.

[104] Wesley J. Fuerst, *The Books of Ruth, Esther, Ecclesiastes, The Song of Songs, Lamentations: The Five Scrolls* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p.91.

[105] See above in this coursebook p.15.

[106] See Drane, *Introducing the Old Testament*, p.103 or a commentary for details.

The contents of Ecclesiastes appear to us haphazardly arranged, repetitive and sometimes contradictory, but this was fairly typical of the way wisdom material was collected in the ancient Near East. We have seen this haphazard style already in Proverbs. But while Proverbs is pervaded by an optimistic view of life, much of Ecclesiastes is pessimistic. Clearly the Teacher does not accept the conventional belief of his time that wisdom, wealth, and work bring assured satisfaction. The Teacher does believe in the sovereign God in whose hands are all things (e.g. 5:1-7) but he finds that belief hard to reconcile with what he observes in the world around him. In particular three problems trouble him:

- Death, which strikes down all, good and bad alike (2:16, 3:18-21, 6:1-6, 9:1-6).
- Oppression and injustice which often go unpunished (4:1-3, 8:10-12, 14).
- The hiddenness of God and his plans which prevents humans from understanding more about life (3:11, 8:17).

And so he constantly exclaims, 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity!' and he views life as being as futile as chasing the wind. The Hebrew for 'vanity' *hebel* is rendered in some modern translations 'emptiness' or 'meaningless(ness)'; the word is sometimes translated elsewhere in the Old Testament 'vapor' or 'mist'. As we read through Ecclesiastes we see the Teacher sometimes trying to reconcile some of the contradictions he finds (e.g. 8:10-13) but with limited success.

He *does* make some *positive* points in the course of the book which we should notice:

1. Though wisdom can lead to sorrow (1:18), it is genuinely much better than folly (7:11-25).
2. Life may be short but let us make the best of it. He says repeatedly, 'There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I say, is from the hand of God' (2:24, 3:12-13, 8:15 etc).
3. There is a right time for all the varied activities of life (3:1-11a)[107] – we need to discern it.
4. Young people, pay attention to your Creator in the days of your youth, for the time will come when life yields no pleasure (12:1-2). There follows a 'lovely and haunting poem' (Fuerst) on death (vv.3-7). One can, with some imagination, see here the effect of aging on the different parts of the body: the 'strong men' being perhaps the shoulders, the women grinding being the teeth, those looking dimly through the windows being the eyes (v.3) of an old person. *What of the 'silver cord' and the 'golden bowl' (v.6)?* It is rather sad to find that, after this fine description, the Teacher returns to his old refrain, 'Vanity of vanities…all is vanity', but the truth is he had found no answer to the problem of death. That awaited the coming of Jesus Christ and his rising from the tomb which gave to his followers a totally new perspective on life (Jn.11:25-26, 1 Pet.1:3).

There is no clear structure in Ecclesiastes. Many have tried to find one. For Bible Study a good framework is provided by Fee and Stuart in their *How to Read the Bible Book by Book*:

1. 1:1-11 Introduction to the Theme
2. 1:12-2:26 Various Ways of Trying to Gain from Labor
3. 3:1-22 A Time for Everything
4. 4:1-16 Success, Oppression, and Solitariness
5. 5:1-7 On Approaching God

[107] Taken up in Mary Hopkins' song 'Turn, turn, turn'.

6. 5:8-6:12 Wealth and Oppression
7. 7:1-29 The Advantage of Wisdom
8. 8:1-17 Dealing with an Unjust World
9. 9:1-12 Living in the Face of Death
10. 9:13-10:20 The Way of Wisdom
11. 11:1-8 On Not Understanding the Ways of God
12. 11:9-12:8 A Final Word to the Young
13. 12:9-14 Epilogue: Qohelet as a Wise Man

Choose one or two sections of Ecclesiastes for study in your group now. How far do you find it easy to accept what he is saying?

The Other Writings

The remainder of the Writings fall into three groups: a collection of quite small books called 'the Five Scrolls', the historical books 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, and Daniel.

The Five Scrolls

This group of small books is known in Hebrew as 'Megilloth' (meaning 'scrolls'). Since the Middle Ages they have been placed in the order: Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther because that is the order in which they are read at festivals in the Jewish calendar:

- Song of Songs at Passover (March/April)
- Ruth at the Festival of Weeks (50 days after Passover)
- Lamentations at a festival commemorating the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC (July)
- Ecclesiastes at the Feast of Tabernacles (September/October)
- Esther at Purim, established in the book itself (February/March)

It's a very diverse collection of books. Debates raged among the Jewish rabbis as to whether the Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes and Esther should be included in their list of sacred books. More will be said in our study of the individual books below; we have already dealt with Ecclesiastes in chapter 6.

Song of Songs

What a surprise to find a collection of intimate love songs in the Bible! Yet that is exactly what we find in the Song of Songs. It belongs to a genre of love lyrics which existed also in ancient Egypt.[108] But why was it accepted into the Writings of the Old Testament? It never mentions God, rather it is a celebration of erotic love. A decisive argument for its inclusion seems to have been its association with Solomon. He is mentioned in chs.1, 3 and 8 and there are references to queens, concubines and 'my prince' in ch.6. The statement of the influential rabbi Aqiba ben Joseph (c. AD 100): "All the writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies" may have clinched the matter. To avoid any offence from the erotic nature of the poems rabbis soon began to treat the Song allegorically as a description of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel. In the 3rd century the Church Father Origen interpreted it similarly as speaking of the love between Christ and the Church, or between Christ and the individual Christian soul. This approach became popular.

The Song is written in evocative poetry, richly embroidered with metaphors from nature. Perhaps it should be seen against the backdrop of Gen.2 where, in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were naked yet felt no shame (vv.24-25). The Song allows us to delight in erotic love as

[108] Fuerst, *The Books of Ruth*, pp.168 quotes one from *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* ed. By J.B. Pritchard, tr. J.A. Wilson, pp.467-68.

God's good gift to humans, a counterbalance to asceticism which has so often prevailed in the Church as the appropriate attitude to sex.

The Song may be seen as a drama. As far back as the Septuagint it was recognized that it has three speaking parts: the bride, the bridegroom and the bride's companions (the 'daughters of Jerusalem'). Some modern English translations incorporate such headings into the text to clarify who is speaking, but in fact they are not in the original Hebrew. Perhaps the Song was composed for a wedding celebration, complete with a bridal dance (7:1-5). Was it for originally for Solomon's wedding to an African bride (1:5-6)? And did the bride have a hand in composing it, for so much of it is from her perspective? But, whatever the connection with Solomon, the book must have been later generalized to embrace all marriage couples. One can scarcely imagine a king, with many women in his harem (cf. 8:11-12, 1 Ki 11:1-3), leaping over the mountains like a gazelle or peering through the lattice of a window at his bride (2:8-9), his hair wet with the dew of the night (5:2); nor would his bride wander the streets of Jerusalem at night searching for him (3:1-4, 5:6-7)! As the book is written in a late style of Hebrew, which includes Aramaic expressions and a Persian word, it is likely that it reached its final form during or after the exile in the 6th century BC. To get the overall feel of the book let us take the structure proposed by LaSor:[109]

Poem 1: Royal Relationship, Longing and Discovery (1:2-2:7)
Poem 2: Invitation, Suspense, Response (2:8-3:5)
Poem 3: Ceremony and Satisfaction (3:6-5:1)
Poem 4: Frustration and Delight (5:2-6:3)
Poem 5: Pomp and Celebration (6:4-8:4)
Poem 6: Passion and Commitment (8:5-14)

A few points of explanation: in 2:15 the 'foxes' that spoil the vineyard might in fact be 'fruit-bats' (NEB nt). They clearly spoil the lovers' enjoyment.
In 4:8, while mountainous Lebanon is to the north of Galilee, Amana and Hermon are mountains within northern Galilee. Senir is an old name for the Hermon range of mountains.
The meaning of 'Shulammite' (6:13) has caused debate . Should the Hebrew word behind it be rendered 'Solomoness'? Or was the word originally 'Shunammite', recalling perhaps the beautiful Abishag who tended the elderly David (1 Ki 1:3-4)? Or did the woman simply come from a village called Shunem which is not otherwise recorded? Who knows!

Now please read the love lyrics right through, perhaps with different members of your group taking the various parts. What do you think is the value of this book in the Bible?

Ruth

The book of Ruth makes delightful reading. In our Bibles it is just four chapters long and has three main characters, Naomi, Ruth and Boaz. The story is told with drama and suspense. It is set c.1100 BC in the time of the judges, but it could not have been written before the time of David (4:17, 22) at least 100 years later. Some scholars today believe it was written during the Israelite monarchy, but the fact that it was placed among the Writings suggests the rabbis

[109] LaSor, pp.518-9.

thought it was one of the later books of the Hebrew canon. The fact that the heroine Ruth is a Moabite is surprising since that race had long been regarded as an enemy of Israel (cf. Deut. 3:3-6). Some scholars therefore suggest it may have been written as a protest against the strict Jewish racial purity insisted on by Ezra and Nehemiah in their reforms in the 5th century.

Structure of the Book

(1) Introduction (1:1-5)
(2) Return from Moab to Bethlehem (1:6-22)
(3) Ruth gleans in the field of Boaz (2:1-23)
(4) A proposal of marriage (3:1-18)
(5) Suspense and a happy ending (4:1-22)

In brief, the story is as follows: There is a famine in Israel and the family of Elimelech moves from Bethlehem to Moab in search of greener pastures. There the sons Mahlon and Chilion marry the Moabite women Orpah and Ruth. But Elimelech dies, soon followed by his two sons. Naomi hears the famine has broken in the region of Bethlehem and determines to return home. She encourages her daughters-in-law to stay in Moab; Orpah does so, but Ruth clings to her promising that her mother-in-law's people and God will be her own too. They return during the barley harvest; Naomi is embittered by what has happened to her. Ruth gleans in a field and finds it belongs to Boaz, a wealthy relative of Naomi's family; he treats her kindly. Naomi, wanting a long-term solution to their problems, instructs Ruth how to act to request marriage from Boaz in accordance with what appears to be an extension of 'levirate' marriage (Deut.25:5-6). Boaz reacts favorably, impressed that Ruth has not preferred a younger man, but says he is not her nearest kinsman. At the town gate Boaz draws that kinsman into discussion about the purchase of Elimelech's strip of land (not previously mentioned). When Boaz says the purchaser must also marry Ruth, the kinsman backs out. Who knows how much of his land Ruth's offspring might claim! He pulls off his shoe and hands it to Boaz who then takes Ruth to be his wife.[110] (Perhaps Boaz was not already married or at least had no son.) Ruth gives birth to a son, Obed, the grandfather of David (4:17, 22, cf. 1 Chron. 2:5, 9-15).

The story shows God's care for ordinary people and how he can bring, from what appears total disaster, a glorious end.

Read the story right through noting in what ways Ruth, Naomi and Boaz all contribute to the fulfillment of God's good plan.

Lamentations

From its vividness and intensity Lamentations must have been written shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BC. The accounts in 2 Kings 25 and Jeremiah 52 give the history but Lamentations captures the emotions of the Jewish survivors. In the tone of a funeral dirge the writer depicts a scene of utter desolation. He has deeply absorbed the message of Jeremiah and Ezekiel that what has happened to Jerusalem is God's punishment for the sin of his people. He confesses God's own bride has run after other lovers (1:2, 19, cf.

[110] This ceremony appears a milder version of what is stipulated in Deut. 25:7-10.

Jer 3:2, Ezek 23:11-21), and her prophets have held out false, deceptive visions of hope (2:14, cf. Jer 23:16-17, Ezek 13:9-10). He is convinced it is Yahweh himself who has destroyed the temple (2:6-7) and pulled down the city walls through the agency of the Babylonians (2:8). He gives no credit for this to Bel and Marduk, the gods of the conquerors, never mentioning them.

The Septuagint attributes Lamentations to Jeremiah (influenced perhaps by such passages as Jer.4:19-22, 9:1, 14:17-19, cf. 2 Chron.35:25, though this last passage is speaking of the time of Josiah well before the fall of Jerusalem). But there are statements in Lamentations hard to reconcile with Jeremiah's attitudes, for instance 4:20 speaks reverentially of Zedekiah whilst Jeremiah reproved Zedekiah for not obeying God's word (Jer.38:17-23). In fact Lamentations is anonymous and it is best to admit we do not know who wrote it. As LaSor aptly says, its author was clearly an eye-witness to the destruction of the city, a profound theologian, a poet of great skill, and a Jewish patriot.[111] Chs.1-4 are all acrostics (though with different meters), a real labor of devotion. The differing tone and meter of the various chapters has led some scholars to attribute them to different authors, with ch.3 perhaps being written last; and then a final editor (before the fall of Babylon in 539, for there is no hint of that) bringing them together into a liturgy of lamentation. Indeed 3:21-33 sounds a real note of hope, based on the Yahweh's character of steadfast love and faithfulness (cf. Ex.34:6-7) while the closing words of the book (5:19-22) are far less confident. But it is possible all the chapters were written by the same author at different times over a period of a few years.

<u>An Outline of the Book</u>

(1) A poignant lament for the destroyed city of Jerusalem (chs.1-2)
(2) The author laments as personified Jerusalem (3)
(3) Reflection on the last days of the siege (4)
(5) Prayer for the remnant who remain among the ruins (5)

Lamentations actually belongs to a well-known genre of writing in the ancient Near East. Sumerian (southern Mesopotamian) written laments on the destruction of cities like Ur, Abraham's home town, have been discovered. Our book was written much later and with no hint of the polytheism we find in the Sumerian material, but its author was no doubt aware he was using a well-known literary style. Christians chant Lamentations somberly in Holy Week as a moving preparation for the rejection and crucifixion of Christ.

Esther

The book of Esther is agreed by many scholars to be a historical novel or novella, i.e. a fictional story incorporating elements from history. It is set in the reign of the Persian king Ahasuerus. His Greek name was Xerxes I and he reigned 586-565 BC. It celebrates Jewish nationalism and victory and has therefore proved very popular among the Jews – *but not all!* The rabbis in fact debated whether it deserved a place in the Hebrew Bible since it never mentions God or Yahweh. And it is the only book of the Old Testament of which no trace has been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Qumran community did not observe the feast of Purim, enjoined in this book to be observed in perpetuity (9:20-28). Furthermore the Septuagint adds some 107 verses not found

[111] LaSor, p.527.

in the Hebrew. These form six passages added to the Hebrew story, and they *do* mention God and various religious practices of the Jews; evidently their composer was embarrassed that the Hebrew story lacked these. (For more details see the next chapter of this coursebook.)

Esther is in fact a masterpiece of story-telling, involving intrigue, suspense and revenge. The Persian king Ahasuerus holds a great feast in his (winter) palace in Susa, while his beautiful wife Vashti holds a smaller one. When the king is merry with wine he sends for his wife, but she refuses to come! He promptly deposes her and then has beautiful virgins from across the empire brought to his harem. Amongst them is Esther, a young Jewess brought up by her cousin and protector Mordecai. She is selected as the new queen. Shortly afterwards Mordecai uncovers a plot by two eunuchs to harm the king. He tells Esther and the plot is foiled. But the rising star of the empire is Haman the Agagite. He is promoted to be second only to the king, and by royal command all must bow down to him. But Mordecai refuses, fearing perhaps lest he should treat him as a god. His pride hurt, Haman vows to destroy all Jews in the empire and issues a decree to this effect and has it sealed with the royal seal. He casts lots (Hebrew *purim*) to find a propitious day to put it into effect. Mordecai wears sackcloth in mourning. He asks Esther to entreat the king for the safety of her people. She risks her life by going to him unsummoned, but is treated favorably, and then invites the king and Haman to dinner. The king is most impressed with the meal and promises to grant her any request up to half his kingdom. She invites the two to dinner again the next night. Coming out, Haman again meets an unbending Mordecai and has a gallows made upon which he intends to hang him before dinner. But the plan fails when the king remembers he has not rewarded Mordecai for reporting the eunuchs' plot to harm him, and asks Haman's advice on how to honor a worthy person. Haman outlines an extravagant plan but then is instructed by the king to carry it out for Mordecai. At dinner Esther denounces Haman for his plan to exterminate her people and the king storms out of the room in rage. Haman begs the queen for mercy, but the king, returning, interprets his action as a threat to her life. Haman is promptly hanged on his own gallows! Now Mordecai becomes the rising star in the empire. Esther cannot get the king to revoke his edict against the Jews, but she is granted another edict allowing the Jews to defend themselves. This turns out to be an opportunity for the Jews to slaughter their enemies, and many thousands are killed. Mordecai, who has now risen to the former office of Haman, instructs all Jews to celebrate in perpetuity their victory over their enemies at the feast of Purim (14^{th} & 15^{th} Adar – Febuary/March). The story ends with him as protector of Jewish interests throughout the empire.

How should we view such a book which clearly celebrates Jewish nationalism? Though it does not mention God by name, his providence for his people is surely evident throughout the story. We may not sympathize with the Jews' savage revenge on their enemies, but must remember their own safety was at stake. Hostility to the Jews because of their distinctive practices has recurred throughout history, and it may be that the historical kernel that gave rise to this novella was an experience of such hostility in the Persian Empire. Purim has been observed it seems from at least the 2^{nd} century BC and is still enthusiastically celebrated to this day.

How should we as Christians respond to the emphatic nationalism of other races? How far should we push our own nationalism?

1 & 2 Chronicles

These two books are one in the Hebrew Bible[112] and placed last among the Writings. It is somewhat surprising to find in 1 & 2 Chronicles a second account of history already given in the books of Samuel and Kings. But a comparison of the two accounts reveals certain marked differences:

- The first eight chapters of 1 Chronicles are filled with genealogies, from Adam to the family of Saul, most space being devoted to the tribes of Israel.
- The reigns of David and Solomon are the centerpiece. They are presented as the 'golden age' of the history of Israel, most of the material telling of the failures of these kings being omitted. Central to the work of these kings is the foundation of the temple.
- The subsequent reigns related are of the kings of Judah alone, because the Chronicler believes that only the Davidic dynasty is legitimate, and acceptable worship must be in the temple in Jerusalem. Kings faithful to Yahweh are rewarded, those disloyal are punished.
- The account ends with a brief reference to Cyrus' decree that the temple in Jerusalem in Judah should be rebuilt.

Great emphasis is laid by the Chronicler on the role of the Levites, including the temple singers and musicians Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun. Asaph is particularly prominent and, in one place, it is said that his words were sung alongside those of David (1 Chron.16:7, 37, 2 Chron.5:11, 29:30), so it is not so surprising that we find his psalms in the psalter. Jeduthun's name appears too in the titles of Psalms 39, 62 and 77.

Why these special emphases? Because, it seems, Chronicles was written around 400 BC,[113] perhaps by a Levite or group of Levites interested in music, to encourage the returned exile community gathered round the second temple to remain loyal to Yahweh. The Chronicler drew heavily on the books of Samuel and Kings,[114] selecting material that suited his purposes, adapting or omitting the rest. He appears to have had some other sources too, but it seems he was also a 'creative' writer, 'preaching' to his audience the points he wished to make.

Outline

(1) Genealogies and lists (1 Chron.1-9)
(2) The reign of David (1 Chron.10-28)
(3) The reign of Solomon (2 Chron.1-9)
(4) Subsequent kings of Judah (2 Chron.10-36)

(1) Genealogies and Lists (1 Chron.1-9)

The genealogies, starting from Adam, give the origins of the nations of the ancient Near East (ch.1), then are devoted to the tribes of Israel (chs.2-8). Judah (2:3-4:23), Levi (ch.6) and

[112] The division into two books, presumably to fit into two scrolls, was first made in the Septuagint.
[113] The genealogy in 1 Chron.3:17-24 traces David's successors to around that time.
[114] Scholars say he had a slightly different text from ours, closer to what is found of Samuel and Kings in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Benjamin (7:6-12, & ch.8) receive most attention; clearly they are the most important to the Chronicler. The tribes Zebulun and Dan are not even mentioned. Ch.9 lists returned exiles, particularly priests, Levites and other temple servants.

(2) The Reign of David (1 Chron.10-29)

This section begins with the death of Saul (ch.10). His failure serves as a foil for the success of David. The Chronicler ignores the fact that David was first made king of Judah (2 Sam.2:4) and moves straightaway to his being anointed king of all Israel at Hebron (1 Chron.11:3). We hear of David's victorious wars (1 Chron.14, 18-20), but the centerpiece is the bringing of the Ark of the Covenant from Kireath Jearim to Jerusalem with song and dance (chs.13, 15-16). David's prayer to God in ch.17 corresponds to that in 2 Samuel 7. Then just one sin of David is mentioned, that of taking a census of Israel (ch.21). The Chronicler partly exonerates him even here by introducing the subject with the words, 'Satan stood up against Israel, and incited David to count the people of Israel' (v.1), but it seems he relates the story because the pestilence that follows the census as a punishment stops at the threshing floor of the Jebusite Ornah (Araunah in 2 Sam.24:18, 24) which, after David has built an altar and offered sacrifices, he designates the site of the future house of the Lord God (1 Chron.22:1). Then, in a departure from the narrative of Samuel, David charges Solomon to build the temple (22:6-16), a matter taken up again in chs.28-29 after a long excursus on the duties of Levites and other officers (chs.23-27). David says that Yahweh will not allow him to build the temple because he is a man of war, who has shed much blood, but Solomon is a man of peace (22:8-9, 'Solomon' means 'peaceable'). David amasses quantities of precious material for the temple and its furnishings and dedicates them in a prayer we use to dedicate the offertory at the eucharist (29:11).

(3) The Reign of Solomon (2 Chron.1-9)

The Chronicler here draws heavily on 1 Kings 1-11. The centerpiece is the building of the temple and, after priests have placed the Ark in its inner sanctuary, the Levitical singers Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun and their sons provide music (5:11-14). The feast on which the temple was dedicated (v.3) was Tabernacles. After Solomon's prayer of dedication (ch.6, closely following 1 Ki.8:12-50) fire came down from heaven and consumed the sacrifices and the glory of the Lord filled the building (7:1-2, no counterpart in Kings, but cf. Ex.40:34-35 re the tabernacle). God responds with a message of acceptance and warns Solomon of the serious consequences of failing to keep the Law. Then the other positive achievements of Solomon's reign are recounted and the visit of the Queen of Sheba. After a catalogue of his wealth it is stated that he excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and wisdom (9:22, cf. 1 Ki.10:23). Then the account of his life closes. The sins revealed in 1 Kings 11 are not mentioned – or he would cease to provide a role model for the returned exiles.

(4) Subsequent Reigns of Kings of Judah (2 Chron.10-36)

While the Chronicler is clearly well aware of the northern kingdom of Israel, he mentions it only when it has a direct bearing on the lives of the kings of Judah. He reveals his position in a speech of Abijah, grandson of Solomon, shouted in the arena of battle to Jeroboam I, initiator of the northern kingdom: "Do you not know that the Lord God of Israel gave the kingship over

Israel for ever to David and his sons by a covenant of salt?" (13:5 – an inviolable covenant) He went on to say that, in contrast to Jeroboam's illegitimate priests who offer sacrifices to golden calves, his kingdom employs priests who are descendants of Aaron and they offer the prescribed sacrifices to Yahweh (13:8-11). Then, outnumbered and ambushed by Jeroboam's troops, the soldiers of Judah cry to Yahweh for help, and are then enabled to crush their opponents (vv.13-20).

Throughout this section the Chronicler draws from 1 & 2 Kings what he wants and supplements it with other material. He wishes to show that kings loyal to Yahweh are blessed by him and those disloyal receive punishment. But he has to admit the situation is not always as straightforward as that. Certain kings begin as loyal supporters of Yahweh but end up falling away – so Asa (chs.14-16) and the boy king Joash (chs.23-24). Josiah who, along with Hezekiah, is the most loyal of monarchs, rashly confronts the major power Egypt in battle, and brings about his own destruction (ch.34-35). The Chronicler does admit these weaknesses, being guided by his source in Kings, so we may hope that, when he gives information uncorroborated by that source, he is not just using his own creative imagination – as with Ahaz, who is seen as totally bad (ch.28), and Manasseh who is bad until taken captive by the Assyrians, but then cries out to Yahweh in repentance and becomes a reformer (ch.33).

The Chronicler's account ends fittingly with a reference to the edict of Cyrus of Persia (539/8) declaring Yahweh, the God of heaven, has charged him to build him a house in Jerusalem in Judah, and inviting Judean exiles to return home for this purpose (29:22-23). This edict is repeated in Ezra 1:1-3.

All historians are selective with their material; how far do you think it fair for them to be 'creative' with it?

Ezra and Nehemiah

No simple, straightforward picture emerges from studying these books. In the Hebrew Bible they were joined together, presumably because the book of Nehemiah also contains information about Ezra. There are a number of similarities between these books and the books of Chronicles: both focus on the tribes of Judah, Benjamin and Levi; both give long lists of names of individuals, both refer to the sons of Asaph as musicians. It may be that the author of Chronicles (or perhaps a later disciple) also edited Ezra and Nehemiah. But, because the latter books consist of a very disjointed collection of personal memoirs, stories, lists of names and official documents which perhaps were gathered together by their editor for *future* arranging into a cogent pattern, for which there was not time. All the books of the Old Testament we have studied so far were written in Hebrew. But Ezra is written partly in Hebrew and partly in Aramaic, the language of trade and diplomacy in the western Persian Empire. As official imperial documents are included in the Aramaic sections this may be a sign of their authenticity.

Ezra, a priest and scribe, an expert in the Law of Moses, is said to have come from Babylonia to Jerusalem in the seventh year of the Persian emperor Artaxerxes (Ez.7:1-7); Nehemiah is said to have traveled from Susa to Jerusalem in the 20th year of Artaxerxes' reign (Neh.1:1). Cross-checking with Elephantine documents from Egypt, it is certain that Nehemiah was cupbearer of

Artaxerxes I (465-525) and the date of his journey was 445 BC. Traditionally it has been believed that Ezra's journey was in the reign of the same monarch,[115] i.e. in 458. But there are several problems with accepting this; one being that in the book of Nehemiah Ezra's activity is mentioned *after* Nehemiah's. Various alternatives have been proposed: first that Ezra's journey was in the 7th year of Artaxerxes II (404-359), i.e. in 398, but this would mean there was no contact at all between the two men.[116] But both men were deeply concerned with establishing and maintaining the racial purity of the returned exile community, and their stories *are* now intertwined (cf. 8:8, 12:26), so a third possibility that has been suggested is that the word 'twenty' somehow dropped out of the Hebrew text and Ezra's journey was really in the 27th year of Artaxerxes I, i.e. 438. This conjecture will be followed here as it seems to enable the most coherent account of what really happened, though it is only a possibility. In the end our job is to make best sense of what we read in the two books.

Structure of Ezra

(1) The Decree of Cyrus (ch.1)
(2) List of the Returning Exiles (2)
(3) The Altar Dedicated and the Temple's Foundation Laid (3)
(4) Discouragement then Eventual Building of the Second Temple (4-6)
(5) The Return of Ezra (7-8)
(6) Ezra's Confession (9)
(7) Ezra's Reforms (10)

Structure of Nehemiah

(1) Nehemiah's Call and Prayer (1)
(2) Nehemiah's Return to Jerusalem (2)
(3) Building the City Walls despite Opposition (3-4)
(4) Dealing with the Problem of Poverty (5)
(5) Completion of the Walls and Attempts to Intimidate Nehemiah (6)
(6) List of the Population (7)
(7) Ezra's Public Reading of the Law and the Consequences (8-10)
(8) Repopulation of Jerusalem by Lot (11)
(9) The Dedication of the Walls (12)
(10) Nehemiah's Second Term as Governor (13)

Chronological Summary of Events

- 539 BC the edict of Cyrus of Persia encouraging Judean exiles to return to rebuild the temple at Jerusalem (Ez.1:2-4). The general policy of repatriating the gods of exile communities that they may pray for Cyrus is stated on the Cyrus cylinder (see above p.68). This statement at the beginning of Ezra is simply an application of that policy to

[115] LaSor is amongst those who think that this is still the most plausible account, *Old Testament Survey*, p.561.
[116] Peter Ackroyd believes indeed that their missions were entirely separate, joined later in people's memory; see his arguments *I & II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah* (London: SCM Press, 1973), pp.25-26.

the Jews. Sheshbazzar, son of Jehoiachin,[117] is entrusted with the silver and gold vessels Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in 597 (2 Ki.24:13) and returned with certain exiles of the tribes of Judah, Benjamin and Levi (i.e. priests and Levites, Ez.1:5-11).

- Soon after, 42,360 exiles with their servants and livestock returned under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Jeshua (= Joshua) the priest (Ez.2, the same list appears in Neh.7).
- 537 the altar is built, the feast of Tabernacles celebrated, daily sacrifices started, and the foundation of the temple laid to mixed joy and sorrow (Ez.3); discouragement from foreign adversaries brings a halt to the building (4:1-5)
- 520-515 building of the Second Temple (Ez.5-6, cf. Hag.1).
- 448? abortive attempt to rebuild the city walls (Ez.4:7-23).
- 445-433 Nehemiah's first term as Governor including the building of the city walls in 52 days and their dedication (Neh.2-6, 12).
- 438? Ezra's mission to Jerusalem (Ez.7-10, Neh.8-10).
- 430? Nehemiah's second term as Governor (Neh.13).

Please read the chapters mentioned in the order listed to get a more or less coherent picture of what happened.

Various general points are noteworthy from Ezra-Nehemiah:

- Both Ezra and Nehemiah had a strong faith and personal relationship with God. This is very evident in their personal prayers drawn it seems from their own journals (Ez.7:27-28, 8:21-23, 9:5-15; Neh.1:4-11 etc).
- Both believed Yahweh was the God of the whole world. He had raised up Cyrus to fulfill the prophecy of Jeremiah (Ez.1:1, Jer.29:10). He caused Artaxerxes to be gracious to the Jewish exiles (Ez.7:27-28, Neh.2:7-8).
- The temple and the Law were the twin pillars of renewed Israel. This is evident from the daily sacrifices and festivals re-established, Ezra's reading the Law to the people, and Nehemiah's concern about tithes, Sabbath and other matters (Ez.3, Neh.8:1-3, ch.13).
- The insistence on racial purity in the renewed community and the forcing of Jewish men to renounce their foreign wives (Ez.9-10, Neh.13:23-30; cf. Deut.23:3-6). The measures taken seem to us drastic and painful, but the object was to stop the people of Israel from worshipping foreign gods. The authors of Jonah and Ruth appear to have taken a different view of salvation for other races.

How far do you think the emphases of Ezra and Nehemiah were correct?

Daniel

The book of Daniel has been a firm favorite for many of us from childhood – at least the stories of the 'burning fiery furnace' and 'Daniel in the lions' den'! Although it does not come last among the Writings of the Hebrew Bible, we study it last as it was probably the last to be written. It consists of two parts: chs.1-6 are stories, some of which include dreams interpreted by Daniel; chs.7-12 purport to be visions of Daniel. As with Ezra, some of the book is written in

[117] Assuming Sheshbazzar is Shenazzar, 1 Chron.3:16-18.

Hebrew, some in Aramaic and this does not neatly match the two halves. The introduction (1:1-2:3) is in Hebrew (probably the book would not have been accepted into the Old Testament canon if it were not), 2:4-7:28 is in Aramaic, and 8:1-12:12 is again in Hebrew. 2:4 marks the beginning of the Chaldeans' speech; the author no doubt thinks this regional language more appropriate for stories in countries where it was widely spoken. The return to Hebrew for the last five chapters would seem to be because the author's focus here is on what is happening in Judea. The later Hebrew used resembles that of Ecclesiastes, Esther and Chronicles; it contains a number of Persian and Greek loan words.

The name Daniel means 'God is my judge'. The Septuagint contains other material featuring him: The Song of the Three Young Men (inserted there after our 3:23), Susannah as ch.13 and Bel and the Dragon as ch.14. The Dead Sea Scrolls has other material including a Prayer of Nabonidus which is parallel to our ch.4. But who was Daniel? Outside our book the only mention in the Old Testament is of a Danel in the book of Ezekiel. Ezek.14:14, 20 speak of him as an outstanding example of righteousness. In Ezek.28:3 he is mentioned as a man of outstanding wisdom. As in Ezek.14 he is mentioned alongside Noah (and Job) he would seem to be a figure of antiquity, not a contemporary of Ezekiel as our book of Daniel implies. The Canaanite Ras Shamra tablets from c.1400 BC, found at Ugarit in Syria, speak of a wise king Danel. They also have a lot to say about Baal, so share the thought world of the Old Testament. It is possible then that this was the original Daniel. Our book belongs to a genre of literature called 'apocalyptic', conveying messages by means of symbols, dreams and numbers.[118] There are other examples amongst Jewish literature of the 1st century AD and indeed Revelation in the New Testament. All, with the exception perhaps of the last, are 'pseudonymous', i.e. attributed to a venerable figure from the past. Our Daniel may indeed be the same.

So when was the book written? This has been much debated. If its author was a contemporary of Ezekiel, then he must have written in the 6th century. He does have a great interest in the Babylonian and Medo-Persian empires, but he also makes a number of historical blunders:

- In 1:1 the year 606/5 is given for Nebuchadnezzar's siege and capture of Jerusalem. But the correct date is 597. Further, Jehoiakim is said to be king of Judah whereas 2 Kings 24:12 tells us it was his son Jehoiachin.
- In 5:11 Belshazzar is represented as the son of Nebuchadnezzar whereas other sources tell us he was the son of Nabonidus.
- 5:31, 6:28, 11:1 speak of 'Darius the Mede', but no such figure is known from other sources and Darius is a Persian name. Indeed the author is probably influenced by the fact there were three kings of Persia called Darius, while he knew the Medes had an empire of their own, which merged with the Persians in 550; but it was actually a Persian general who overthrew Babylon in 539.

So our author's knowledge of the details of the 6th century is somewhat hazy. In contrast his knowledge of the period 300-164 revealed in the later chapters of the book is very accurate. What he says in ch.11 about the activities of the 'king of the north' and the 'king of the south' tallies closely with what the Greek historians say of the campaigns of the Ptolomies and Seleucids through the 'beautiful land' of Judah. In particular the little horn who spoke and acted

[118] See above p.69.

with great arrogance (7:8, 8:9-12) and is referred to as a 'contemptible person' (11:21) is Antiochus IV Epiphanes who was 'king of the north' (the Seleucid empire) during 175-64, and very aggressively tried to Hellenize Judah. Chs.11 & 12 show the author knows of the desecration caused when, it seems, a statue of Zeus was set up in the temple and pigs, unclean to Jews, were offered on the altar – he speaks of this as the 'desolating abomination' (11:30-31) yet clearly he does not know of its removal and the purification of the temple by the Maccabees on 14th December 164 (an occasion celebrated annually at the feast of Hanukkah) nor that Antiocus IV died in 163. Much of this history is given in 1 & 2 Maccabees in the Apocrypha (see the next chapter of this coursebook).. On the strength of this knowledge the majority of scholars believe the book of Daniel was written c.165, though it may be the stories from the exile (ch.1-6) were composed earlier and incorporated by our author into his work. This dating receives further confirmation from the Apocrypha in that the list of Jewish heroes in Ecclesiasticus 44-49 (c.180) does not mention Daniel, while that in 1 Maccabees 2:51-60 (c.100) does.[119]

Structure of the Book

(1) Stories from the Babylonian Exile (1:1-6:28)
- The rise to favor of Daniel and his three friends (ch.1)
- The dream of the colossal statue (ch.2)
- The fiery furnace (ch.3)
- Nebuchadnezzar's madness (ch.4)
- The writing on the wall (ch.5)
- Daniel in the lion's den (ch.6)

(2) Daniel's Visions and Prayer (7:1-12:12)
- Vision of God's judgment (ch.7)
- Vision of the ram and the he-goat (ch.8)
- Daniel's prayer of repentance (ch.9)
- The message of the glorious one (ch.10)
- Blasphemous activities in the 'beautiful land' (ch.11)
- Resurrection for due rewards after a period of waiting (ch.12)

(1) Stories from the Babylonian Exile (1:1-6:28)

These dramatic stories are beautifully written. Each records an event or dream, consequent amazement, then a royal decree that no-one should speak against the God of heaven (clearly Yahweh) but rather live in awe of him. Those of the fiery furnace and lions' den are clearly to encourage persecuted Jews to remain faithful for God is with them and will soon deliver them. These actual stories are quite straightforward to read so there is no need to give further details of them here.

(2) Daniel's Visions and Prayer (7:1-12:12)

The visions are less easy to interpret:

[119] If this date is right, the fact that Daniel is found in the Septuagint among the prophetic books surely says that that part of the Septuagint was written after 165, perhaps around 100 to allow the additions we find in the Apocrypha.

- Ch.7 depicts God as a majestic, venerable judge from whom peoples will receive their just treatment. The four terrifying beasts probably stand for the Babylonian, Mede, Persian and Greek empires (symbolized by the different types of metal in ch.2). They are quickly dispatched or their powers curbed (vv.11-12). Then a human-like figure ('one like a son of man' in Aramaic) comes with the clouds of heaven and is given universal, eternal dominion (vv.13-14); this figure is later explained to be 'the people of the holy ones of the most high' (v.27). Some 200 years on Jesus chose this designation 'Son of Man' for himself (Mk.13:26, 14:62). There is also quite a lot in this chapter about the fourth beast, because Antiochus' persecution was just then confronting the Jews.
- In ch.8 the Medo-Persian and Greek empires are referred to (vv.3-5). The author clearly knows of the death of Alexander the Great in 323 (vv.8-9), and the fact that his kingdom was immediately taken over by four of his generals based in: Macedonia, Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt (vv.11-12). Antiochus IV is expected to reign just 3½ more years (v.14).
- Ch.9 gives Daniel's prayer of repentance for the sins of his people, which is similar in tone to Ezra's (Ez.9). Ch.10 tell us of a shining angel (v.6), whose description owes something to Ezek.1:26-27. Ch.11 recounts the maneuvers of the Ptolemies and Seleucids through Judah. Just a few details: v.15 tells of Sidon captured by Antiochus III in 198; in v.17 it is that same king who gave his daughter to Ptolemy V in 194/3 hoping to gain Egypt, but she encouraged her husband to turn for support to the Romans! The 'ships of Kittim' in v.30 are Roman ships.
- Ch.12 speaks of a time of anguish, unknown before, but then resurrection of both evil and good to receive their just reward (vv.1-3). For the Jews, who could not conceive humans as just invisible souls, the bodies of the dead had to be raised if they were to have real life after death. This and Isaiah 26:19 are the only such references in the Bible. The general belief throughout the Old Testament was that only the shade (ghost?) of a person survived death, a miserable prospect (Ps.88); the unfairness that only death awaited all provoked repeated laments from the author of Ecclesiastes (Eccles.2:16, 6:1-6, 9:1-6).

Who were the intended recipients of this book? Those faithful to Yahweh's covenant with Israel, it seems. These are referred to in 1 Maccabees 2:42, 7:13-17 as the 'Hasidim' (righteous; cf. Dan.11:33-35, 12:3). They were lukewarm to the Maccabean armed rebellion, which our author thinks will achieve 'a little good' (11:34), but he has obviously not yet experienced the climax of their campaign. The overall message of the book for us is surely that, whatever the appearances, God rules the empires of the world. His faithful followers will one day inherit a kingdom that will never be destroyed – a prophecy ultimately fulfilled through Jesus Christ.

Choose one of the stories in chs.1-6, and look for its message.

What is the message of ch.7? The Jews have not been given universal rule, but has the Son of Man?

Chapter 8

The Apocrypha

Article 6 of our Articles of Religion states, after giving details of the books in the Old and New Testaments:

> And the other books (as Hierome saith) the Church doth read for example of life and instruction of manners; but yet doth it not apply them to establish any doctrine. Such are these following:
>
> The Third Book of Esdras
> The Fourth Book of Esdras
> The Book of Tobias
> The Book of Judith
> The rest of the Book of Esther
> The Book of Wisdom
> Jesus the Son of Sirach
> Baruch the Prophet
> The Song of the Three Children
> The Story of Susanna
> Of Bel and the Dragon
> The Prayer of Manasses
> The First Book of Maccabees
> The Second Book of Maccabees

'Hierome' is St. Jerome who, in 382, was commissioned by Pope Damasus to begin an official translation of the Bible into Latin from the Greek and Hebrew. He completed his work by AD 405 and his translation, known generally as the Vulgate, has been accepted as the authorized translation of the Western (Roman Catholic) Church until modern times. Besides the books of the Hebrew Old Testament it contains also those listed above. Because they were not in the rabbis' Hebrew canon of Scripture but were later works in Greek (all but the Fourth Book of Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh are found in the Septuagint), Jerome regarded them as of secondary importance, and called them 'Apocrypha' (Gk. 'hidden things'). This title is not really appropriate; more suitable is the Roman Catholics' term for them 'deuterocanonical', meaning 'belonging to a second level of the canon'. Article 6 declares they have value in that they provide examples of and instruction in godly living, but they should not be used to establish Christian doctrine. Almost all these books were written in the inter-testamental period and therefore provide valuable information about Judaism during that time. Let us look at them briefly in turn.

3 Esdras (1 Esdras)

'Esdras' is the Greek for 'Ezra', so this book is attributed to Ezra (our Ezra and Nehemiah may be regarded as the first and second books of Esdras). In fact, after recounting the Passover celebrated by Josiah in 621 and subsequent Jewish history up to the fall of Jerusalem as found in 2 Chron.35:1-36:23, it contains the material of the book of Ezra (though starting with Ez.4:7-24) with the addition of Neh.7:73-8:12. The wording is slightly different from that of our Old Testament books. It was put together perhaps by 100 BC for it was used by Josephus (1st C AD).

4 Esdras (2 Esdras)

The heart of this book is a series of seven visions purportedly given to Ezra (chs.3-14). They are apocalyptic - symbolic revelations needing interpretation, which is often provided by the angel Uriel. Ezra questions God as to why, while Israel has been punished for her sins, evil Gentile

nations who 'domineer over us and devour us' (6:57), prosper. As with other apocalyptic works this points to the future for the rectifying of all present injustice. Ezra is unhappy with this when he learns that only a few righteous people will be saved, though he admits that, in life generally, what is plentiful is of less worth, what is rare is precious. This book was written long after the historical Ezra, by a Jew perhaps near the close of the 1st century AD. The introductory and concluding chapters appear to have been added later still by Christians. In words reminiscent of the book of Revelation we hear of Christian martyrs who have confessed the Son of God in the world (2:42-48).

Tobias (**Tobit**)

This is a little novel, clearly written by a Jew. Its central character Tobit, of the tribe of Naphtali, is taken captive with his family to Nineveh when the Assyrians overrun Galilee. Yet he remains true to his ancestral faith and devoted to good works - which tragically lead to his blindness. He sends his son Tobias with a companion (later revealed to be the angel Raphael) to Media to collect a debt and to find a wife for himself from his kinsfolk. At Ecbatana in Media they find a relative Raguel who has a beautiful daughter Sarah, but she is under the power of a demon. By burning the heart and liver of a fish upon incense the demon is driven away and Tobias can have his bride. The debt is reclaimed and they return home to the delight of his parents; through anointing with the gall of the fish Tobit's eyesight is restored. On his deathbed Tobit warns the family to flee to Media to escape God's punishment of Assyria. They return to Ecbatana.
What do you think was the author's purpose in writing this story?

Judith

'Judith' means Jewess. This book presents a dramatic story of a pious Jewess who delivered her people. Nebuchadnezzar, the 'Assyrian' king, calls on the western provinces of his empire to assist him in defeating Arphaxad of Media. They do not respond, so after defeating Arphaxad without their aid, he sends a large army under his general Holofernes to punish them. Many nations sue for peace, but not the Judeans. They take their stand at Bethulia in the hill country of Judah. When their water supply is nearly exhausted Judith, a Jewish widow of great beauty, goes to Holofernes promising to show him how to defeat the Judeans. She wins his admiration and confidence, but on the night they are intended to sleep together he is dead drunk, and being alone with him in his tent, she draws his sword and cuts off his head. Her maid, who is stationed outside the tent, puts it in her bag and together they escape to the Jews. With their leader dead the 'Assyrian' army flees in panic before the rejuvenated Jews and never again invades Judea in Judith's lifetime. Judith becomes a great national hero, but never remarries.

The historical details of the story are questionable. Nebuchadnezzar was a Babylonian not Assyrian leader. Arphaxad is unknown as a king of Media, and Holofernes as a general of Nebuchadnezzar - his name belongs to a much later period. Clearly, like Tobit, this is a novel, but it has captured many people's imagination and inspired numerous works of painting, sculpture and literature. *What is there in it to inspire us?*

Rest of the Book of Esther

The Septuagint version of Esther has 107 verses more than the Hebrew. These are found in six blocks and are clearly additions as they sometimes contradict the Hebrew. Jerome, in making

the Vulgate, placed all the additions together at the end of the book of Esther. They are as follows:

- The first is in two parts: a dream of Mordecai telling in symbolic language of the world nations preparing for war on God's people, who are then delivered by God; and an enhanced account of Mordecai's discovery of the plot of the two eunuchs to harm king Artaxerxes (cf. Esth.2:21-23).
- The second follows Esth.3:13, supplying wording for the king's edict to exterminate the Jews.
- The third follows Esth.4:17 and gives personal prayers by Mordecai and Esther for God's mercy on his people and, in the case of Esther, for courage to speak on behalf of her people to the king.
- The fourth follows Esth.5:2, bringing drama to Esther's encounter with the king: first he is angry that she has dared to approach him uninvited; in consequence she collapses onto her maid; then he relents and comforts her.
- The fifth follows Esth.8:12 and gives the wording of Artaxerxes' edict in favor of the Jews.
- In the last, which follows the end of the Hebrew version, Mordecai reviews God's care for his people and is able to interpret his dream (in the first addition).

Do these additions improve the story of Esther? Clearly they fill it out and make it more dramatic, but above all they take a story which never mentions the name of God and supply a religious dimension.

Wisdom

In the Septuagint this book is called 'The Wisdom of Solomon' and certain parts hint that it is Solomon's work but, from close study of the book, scholars have concluded it was written in Greek, probably in Alexandria in the 1st century BC. It mixes Jewish theology and Greek philosophy. The first five chapters declare emphatically that righteous people are, through God's power, immortal and it is only the unrighteous who will perish eternally. Particularly memorable is 3:1-9 beginning with the words, 'But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them…' a passage used sometimes at funerals. The book goes on to praise wisdom, declaring it essential to life and illustrating this from history (chs.6-12); it then shows the folly of idolatry which it views as the beginning, cause and end of every evil (13-15); and finally makes an idealized contrast between Israel, God's holy people who experience his blessing, and her enemies, especially the Egyptians, who have experienced terrible woes.

Sirach (**Ecclesiasticus**)

The Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach, written c.180 BC, is the longest book of the Apocrypha. From its prologue and 50:27 we learn it contains the teaching of a Jewish scribe Jesus (Joshua) Ben Sira which was translated from Hebrew into Greek in Egypt by his grandson shortly after 132 BC. Clearly the latter believed his grandfather's teaching deserved a wide audience. This the Church facilitated when it adopted the Septuagint as the authoritative version of the Old Testament. The book's popularity among Christians surely led to the title 'Ecclesiasticus' meaning 'belonging to the church'.

Ecclesiasticus is very much in the vein of Proverbs. It too praises wisdom (firmly based on the Torah) as the secret to success in life. None of the questioning and skepticism of Job,

Ecclesiastes or 4 Esdras is found here. Unlike the book of Wisdom Ben Sira sees death as God's decree for all flesh which should be accepted positively even though no communion with God will be possible from Hades. Like Proverbs Ben Sira flits from subject to subject. He praises humility, urges that children should be brought up with discipline and kindness be shown to the poor and slaves. He stresses the importance of hard work and avoidance of begging, and speaks of the value of a good wife, though cautioning against the temptations posed by women! In contrast to the Old Testament as a whole he shows a very positive attitude to physicians and medicine, though he instructs the sick to pray to God and turn away from evil first before resorting to them (38:1-15). Chs.44-50 give praise to the heroes of the Jewish faith, the last mentioned being the high priest Simon, son of Onias (he was high priest 219-196). In the final chapter Ben Sira bares his heart in a personal prayer. Clearly there is much that is valuable in this book.

Baruch

This book purports to be written by Baruch, the scribe of Jeremiah (Jer.32:12, 36:4), but scholars think it was written much later, sometime in the period 200-60 BC, and is the work of more than one author. It takes the form of a message read by Baruch to king Jeconiah (Jehoiachim or Coniah) and the other exiles in Babylon in the fifth year after Jerusalem's destruction, i.e. 592 BC (1:1-4). After speaking of a monetary offering donated by the exiles and sent to the remnant in Judea, 1:15-3:8 is an extended penitential prayer to Yahweh for Judah's sins that led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile. 3:9-4:4 exhorts Israel to learn wisdom which is to be found in God's commandments. 4:5-5:9 is devoted to the theme of Israel's restoration.

Article 6 does not mention the Letter of Jeremiah at all, probably because in some manuscripts it appears as ch.6 of the book of Baruch, no doubt due to Baruch's link with Jeremiah. In other manuscripts it is found as a separate book placed between Lamentations and Ezekiel. Indeed it has the feel of an independent composition, never mentioning Baruch. We know of Jeremiah's letter to the exiles in Babylon in Jer.29:4-23 and this purports to be another, though it is thought by scholars today to date from the 4th century or later. It is a pungent attack on the foolishness of idolatry. It warns the exiled Jews not to regard idols made of wood overlaid with gold and silver and dressed in purple and linen, as gods at all. They have to be carried on men's shoulders and are totally powerless before robbers, fire, moth or worm. Dust accumulates on them and has to be wiped off. They cannot speak, let alone influence anything that happens. What folly to worship them!

Additions to the Book of Daniel

In the Septuagint there are three major additions to the book of Daniel. They probably stem from the 2nd or 1st centuries BC. They are listed separately in Article 6 and we shall look at them in turn.

a) **Song of the Three Children** (**Young Men**)

This follows Dan.3:23 in the Hebrew and aims to fill out the story of the fiery furnace. Vv.1, 23-28 are narrative, vv.2-22 are the prayer of Azariah (Abednego – Dan.1:6-7), in reality a prayer for exiled Judah, and vv.28-68 are the song of all three young men in the furnace. This last is a fine hymn of praise to Yahweh (cf. Ps.148) only mentioning the men's plight (by then over) at

the end. This hymn has been used in Christian worship since ancient times and is often known by the opening word of the Latin version *Benedicite* (meaning 'Bless'). No less than four canticles from it are found in the BCP of the ECP.

b) **Susanna**

This little story has been called 'a model of artistic fiction' and 'one of the finest short stories in the world of literature'.[120] It is found in the Septuagint as ch.13 of the book of Daniel, but in the Greek translation of Theodotion it is placed at the beginning of the book. It is a story of the triumph of virtue over villainy. Susanna is the beautiful wife of the rich Jew Joakim. Two Jewish elders, who frequently visit their house, develop an erotic love for her. One hot day when she is about to have a bath and is alone in the garden the two, who have hidden themselves away, rush out and ask to lie with her or they will invent an incriminating story against her. She refuses and so at a trial convened in her house, they assert that they discovered her in the garden being intimate with a young man who ran off at their cries. About to be condemned to death Susanna prays fervently to God, who stirs up the wise young man Daniel to help her. Daniel says the trial has been unfair because the witnesses have not been examined. He is then allowed to examine them separately. The first says the youth was intimate with Susanna under a mastic tree, the other that it was under an evergreen oak. The falsity of their charge is evident and the elders are forthwith put to death (cf. Deut.19:16-21). Susanna's innocence is vindicated and Daniel's reputation enhanced.

c) **Bel and the Dragon**

Here are two short stories designed to show the falsehood of worshipping gods other than the one true God of the Jews. The setting is the Jewish exile in the time of the Persian Empire. In the Septuagint and Vulgate the stories are placed at the end of the book of Daniel.

(1) In vv.1-22 Daniel refuses to worship Bel, the head of the Babylonian pantheon. King Cyrus points to the large amount of food and drink put before the statue of the god daily which always disappears. Daniel scoffs, saying it is eaten by his priests and their families. So the king sets out another feast before Bel, leaving it in the temple overnight with the door shut and sealed. But Daniel has scattered ashes all around the table upon which the feast is laid. In the night 70 priests and their families emerge through a secret entrance under the table, consume the provisions, and return through the secret door. In the morning their footprints are clearly seen among the ashes! They are then put to death, and Bel and his temple are handed over to Daniel who destroys them

(2) Vv.23-42 tell of a great dragon (or snake?) which the Babylonians worship. Daniel tells the king he can kill the dragon without sword or club. He then feeds it cakes made of tar, fat and hair. It eats them and bursts open! The king is impressed but the Babylonians are very angry and insist he hand Daniel over to them or face death himself. The king hands Daniel over and he is thrown into the lions' den and left there for six days. An angel delivers food to Daniel via the prophet Habakkuk and he lives. On the seventh day the king visits the den to mourn the dead Daniel. When he finds him alive the king declares Yahweh alone is God, and Daniel's

[120] *The Apocrypha of the Old Testament* (Revised Standard Version), ed. B.M. Metzger (Oxford: University Press, 1965), p. 213.

adversaries are themselves thrown into the lions' den and immediately devoured. Clearly this is an elaboration of the story in Daniel 6.

Manasses (**Manasseh**)

According to 2 Ki.21:1-18 Manasseh the son of Hezekiah, reigned 55 years over Judah (c.696-642) and did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. The passage lists the abominable practices he introduced to Judah from the surrounding nations on account of which Jerusalem would be fearfully plundered. He is also said to have shed much innocent blood. The later account of his reign in 2 Chron.33 adds, however, that he was captured by the Assyrians and taken in chains to Babylon where he prayed earnestly to God for forgiveness of his sins. He was then restored to Jerusalem a reformed character, undoing much of the harm he had done to the cause of Yahweh. His prayer of penitence is said to have been recorded in the 'Chronicles of the Seers' (33:19). Our Prayer of Manasseh purports to be that prayer, but clearly it is not for it is not even found in the Septuagint and must have been composed later. Article 6, it seems, knew it from the Vulgate where it is found in an appendix to the New Testament. It is in fact a fine penitential prayer, somewhat after the style of Psalm 51. The canticle 'A Song of Penitence' in the ECP's BCP is drawn from it.

The Books of Maccabees

The two books of Maccabees recount the history of the desecration of the Jerusalem temple in the reign of the Seleucid monarch Antiochus Epiphanes (175-164 BC), the subsequent cleansing and rededication of it by Judas Maccabaeus, and the military campaigns of the Maccabees that follow.

(1) **1 Maccabees**

In a straightforward style this chronicler recounts the history of Judea from the accession of Antiochus in 175 to the time of John Hyrcanus I, high priest 134-104. It is generally regarded as an accurate historical account, often in agreement with Polybius and the other Greek historians. It was probably written shortly after the death of John Hyrcanus in 104.

Alexander Epiphanes was intent on stamping out the distinctive religion of the Jews and imposing Hellenism on them instead. In 169 he arrogantly entered the sanctuary of the temple and plundered some of its golden furnishings. Two years later, after sending his chief collector of tribute to tighten his grip on the territory, he issued decrees forbidding the Torah's prescribed sacrifices, the observance of Sabbaths and festivals, and the practice of circumcision. Books of the Law were burnt. Shrines were built for idols and Jews were ordered to offer pigs and other unclean animals to these gods. Death was the penalty for refusing. Yet, while there were Jews who complied, many refused to do so preferring martyrdom instead (1 Macc.1:62-63). On 15th Chislev (December) 167 a 'desolating sacrifice' was erected upon the altar of burnt offerings in the temple (1:54). It seems to have been an altar to Olympian Zeus and perhaps a statue of him (cf. 2 Macc.6:2). On 25th Chislev sacrifice was offered on it. Such horrors provoked a military uprising. Mattathias, a priest who had moved from Jerusalem to Modein in the hills, declared he and his family would remain loyal to the covenant of their fathers and, when ordered to sacrifice on a local altar, slew a Jew who was sacrificing and the king's officer who was enforcing the practice, and tore down the altar. Then he and his five sons and their supporters took to the hills

to start guerilla warfare against the Hellenizers (2:1-28). They were joined by a number of others including the Hasidim ('righteous ones'), a party zealous for the Law. Mattathias died the next year after handing over leadership to his third son Judas. With prayer and careful planning their resistance proved effective and they were able to defeat armies larger than their own sent to stamp them out. They took Jerusalem and restored the temple, rededicating it on 25th Chislev 164 exactly three years after its desecration. Then they decreed that this event should be celebrated annually by an eight-day festival (4:59 – today known as Hanukkah). The Maccabees did achieve a real measure of independence for the Jews, but not without constant warfare and much bloodshed. After Judas died in battle, leadership fell to his brother Jonathan, who eventually was allowed by the Seleucid authorities to be high priest and governor ('ethnarch') of Judea. He too was later slain and the leadership fell to another brother Simon. Upon his murder his son John (Hyrcanus I) became leader.

(2) **2 Maccabees**

This appears to be an entirely independent account of early Maccabaean history. Its author says his work is an abridgement of the 5-volume work of Jason of Cyrene (2:19-33). It runs parallel to 1 Macc.2:19-7:50, supplementing it but also at times differing from it. It is a more theological work than 1 Maccabees, emphasizing that history reflects God's divine plan. It also draws on legendary material (for instance in 2:1-18) and speaks of angelic interventions that ensured Jewish victories (10:29-31, 11:8), and so it tends to be viewed as less historically reliable than 1 Maccabees. But it would be foolish to set it aside as an historical source and it contains much of interest, for example, about corrupt high priests (chs.4-5) and heroic martyrdoms for the Jewish faith (6-7), and it embodies the strong conviction that those so dying will later rise from the dead (7:9, 23). Understandable yet questionable is the action of Judas Maccabaeus who, finding on the bodies of some of his soldiers who have died in battle the tokens of idolatry, sends a monetary offering to Jerusalem as a sin-offering and offers prayer that they too may rise again (12:39-45). The author ends his work by hoping it has delighted his readers but, if not, he says he has done his best (15:37-39).

So we conclude our brief look at the Apocrypha. Like the Hebrew Old Testament it contains a wide variety of literature, some instructive, some delightful, some perhaps too nationalistic for our taste, but it contains no book of prophecy, for the prophetic voice fell silent from Malachi until the coming of John the Baptist.

Choose one book and reflect on its message for Christians.

Some Key Words

ACROSTIC – a line or group of lines starting with consecutive letters of the alphabet; a favorite device of the Hebrew poets e.g. in Pss 34, 119.

APOCALYPTIC – revelation about divine things, often concerning the end times, by means of dreams, symbolic language and numbers.

APOCRYPHA – those books found in the Septuagint and Vulgate but which were not part of the Hebrew Old Testament.

APOSTASY – renunciation of one's faith, falling away.

ASSYRIA – an ancient country in upper Mesopotamia (today part of Iraq) which developed an empire that oppressed ancient Israel in the 1st millennium BC and in 722 brought to an end the kingdom of Israel by sacking Samaria.

BABYLON – an ancient country in lower Mesopotamia (today part of Iraq) which developed an empire that brought to an end the kingdom of Judah by sacking Jerusalem in 586 BC.

CANON (of Scripture) – the list of sacred books of the Old and New Testaments.

CONCUBINE – a secondary wife or mistress.

COVENANT – a binding agreement between two parties entailing promises and obligations; the most important ones in the Bible are between God and Israel and God and Christian believers.

CULT – religious system or group.

DIASPORA – the dispersion of the Jews among the other nations.

DOCTRINE – official teaching of the Church about its central beliefs, e.g. in the creeds.

DOXOLOGY – 'Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit…'

EXILE – generally refers to the exile of Jews to Babylon after the capture of Jerusalem in 597 and 586 BC.

ESCHATOLOGY – church teaching about the last days of the world as we know it.

HELLENISM – Greek civilization spread by the conquests of Alexander the Great in the 4th century BC.

HELLENIZATION – the process of spreading and enforcing Greek civilization among subject peoples.

LAW – 'the Law' generally refers to the Law of Moses, the first five books of the Old Testament.

LXX – the Roman numerals for 70; it is an abbreviation for the Septuagint, the official Greek translation of the Old Testament and much of the Apocrypha, a work begun in Alexandria in the 3rd century BC purportedly by 72 translators.

MANUSCRIPT – hand-written copies of ancient biblical and other documents on papyrus, parchment etc.

MESOPOTAMIA – the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in the ancient world.

MONOTHEISM – belief in only one God.

NAZIRITE – someone separated from others by consecration to God by a special vow (Num.6:1-8).

ORACLES – prophetic statements.

PANTHEON – all the gods of a particular nation or civilization.

PENTATEUCH – the first five books of the Bible – the 'Law of Moses'.

POLYTHEISM – belief in many gods.

PSALTER – the book of Psalms.

RIGHTEOUSNESS – that which is right, conforming to the will of God.

SELEUCID – belonging to the Hellenistic empire of the Seleucids centered on Syria after the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC.

SEPTUAGINT – see LXX above.

SYNCRETISM – mixing together often of the teaching of Yahweh with that of other religions.

TABERNACLE – the tent for the worship of Yahweh before the temple was built in Jerusalem.

TORAH – the Hebrew word for the Law of Moses, the first five books of the Old Testament.

VULGATE – the official Latin translation of the Bible from Hebrew and Greek made by St. Jerome, AD 382-405. The standard translation of the Bible for Roman Catholics until the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

'WRITING PROPHETS' – the Old Testament prophets from whom books of prophecies remain.

YAHWEH – the personal name of God revealed to Moses (Ex.3:13-15). It is closely related to the Hebrew for 'he is'.

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