

# **A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

By

**Revd John M Haley MA**

Creation

Patriarchs

Exodus

Conquest

Judges

Kingdom

Exile

Return

Poetry & Writings

Prophets

## BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Old Testament is a big and difficult book - but to grasp the major points is not impossible. The temptation is to get bogged down with particular difficulties while not getting an overview.

Method of study

Each study will take a major theme of the Old Testament.

This is worthwhile because:

1. These are the Scriptures that Jesus used.
2. These are the Scriptures he came to fulfil.
3. These are the Scriptures that spoke of him.
4. These are the Scriptures of the early Church.
5. It is the record of God's unfolding revelation.
6. It is the record of God's saving acts.
7. It contains material for worship and prayer.
8. Christians are heirs of its promises.
9. It gives the background to Christ's coming.
10. In it we meet people of faith in great stories.

Usually each major theme will be divided into four points.

## **STUDY 1**

## **THE CREATION**

### **Four main points**

1. Creation: Mankind created in the image of God
2. The Fall: Sin enters the world
3. The flood: Judgment upon sin
4. The tower: The international consequences of sin

### **1. Creation**

Reading: Genesis 1 - 2

Note how the creation story has two dimensions.

In what sense were Adam and Eve created in the 'image of God'?

### **2. The fall**

Reading: Genesis 3

Note that the root of disobedience is unbelief, doubting God.

What were the consequences of the fall into sin?

### **3. The flood**

Reading: Genesis 6 - 10

Note that though the animals have made this a children's favourite, the story is really about judgment.

What is the message and sign of hope in this story?

### **4. The tower**

Reading: Genesis 11

Note that the disruption of language was to do with humanity's determination to be self-sufficient.

How does the disruption of language show God's judgment?

## 1. Creation

The Creation Story is clearly very ancient. The vastness of the Universe where the unit of measurement is the light-year (light travels at 186,282 miles per second) causes us to wonder at the awesomeness of God and smallness of mankind. Genesis means 'origin'. The first eleven chapters give accounts of the origins of different things (aetiological stories). The Bible starts: 'In the beginning, God' (1: 1). The relationship between God and mankind is the great theme of the Bible. The creation story is hugely complex in its Hebrew form with the number seven dominating the number of words and repetition of phrases. It is simple, profound and perfectly clear. God creates by his powerful word. God is the mighty creator of heaven and earth. Much has been made of a supposed conflict between science and the creation account. It is interesting to note that according to science the order of creation in the Bible is right or, put another way, according to the Bible some of the findings of science are right. We must not make the Bible say what it is not saying or answer what it is not asking.

The Creation v. Evolution argument has been with us for over one hundred years. There are many difficulties with the Genesis account but the theory of evolution does not solve these (e.g. the origin of male/female). Evolution can at most suggest a method of procedure. It cannot answer the question 'Who did it?' We affirm that God is the creator.

'Image' (1: 27) is not easy to understand. The good qualities that distinguish mankind from animals perhaps point to the divine 'image'. Some of the most beautiful art in the world is used to encourage worship, music, painting, sculpture etc., but these are only a mere shadow of the symphony of creation, its colour, its majesty (NB original speech and the 'Word').

The revealed Old Testament name for God is YHWH (pronounced Yahweh; sometimes but mistakenly spelt Jehovah). The essence of idolatry is making YHWH part of creation. He is separate from it. The order of creation, its majesty, its splendour, all reflect his glory - but he is beyond all that we can perceive with our senses.

For convenience we speak of body and soul - but man is one. Also 'man' sometimes must be understood to mean all human beings (i.e. in the generic sense), though more and more people seem to find it helpful to avoid using 'man' to mean both men and women.

## 2. The fall

Genesis continues in a carefully constructed literary style. The New Testament assumes the historicity of this account and argues from it, but this need not force us into a woodenly unhelpful exegesis. Paul draws a parallel between Adam and Christ - so what we say about the historicity of the Adam story may have some bearing on our interpretation of the New Testament. The New Testament book of Revelation is sometimes described as 'apocalyptic' (a glimpse into that which is hidden). What kind of writing are the stories of the early chapters of Genesis? Are they some kind of 'retrospective apocalyptic', a glimpse into proto-history?

The tempter's first ploy was to cause the woman to doubt the Word of God (3: 1). The woman was on shaky ground when she misquoted the Word of God. The temptation seemed so reasonable, the commandment so unreasonable. Temptation often has as its basis humanity in the place of God (3: 1,4,5). Unbelief is soon followed by disobedience but disobedience is followed by broken relationships, deceit and judgment.

Temptation often looks attractive (3: 6) and those tempted readily find excuses for doing what they want (3: 6,12,13) and passing the blame (3: 12,13).

Though this chapter does not mention 'original sin' the theory of it is well grounded. The bias to sin has become hereditary. No one needs to teach us how to sin - it is inbred, as Genesis 4 proceeds to show (Romans 5: 12).

A broken relationship with God leads to rapid moral deterioration. The relationship between man and woman was also disrupted by the fall. As sin came into the world through the woman so the redeemer will also come through the woman (3: 15).

What is sin?

Where did sin come from?

Why do people die?

Why do people (in general) have to work hard to live?

These are all questions that are addressed in the story of the fall.

### 3. The flood

The familiar story of 'The flood' often misnamed 'Noah's ark' can be divided into three sections.

(a) Genesis 6: 8 reveals that Noah was set apart for deliverance by the grace of God. The world is so wicked that only one man, Noah, who walks with God, and his family will be spared from the flood that marks God's judgment. In obedience Noah builds a great boat (ark) and retains a pair of unclean animals and seven pairs of clean animals.

(b) 40 days of rain flood the earth and everything is drowned except that which is in the floating ark.

(c) After 150 days the water level drops and the ark is grounded. Noah sends out a raven that returns, a dove which first returns with an olive leaf but then does not come back. Noah sacrifices to God. God makes a covenant with Noah and his descendants of which the rainbow is a sign.

'Sons of God' (6: 2) is undoubtedly difficult. It could mean angels (more accurately spiritual beings), or descendants of the godly Seth, as opposed to the wicked Cain. The first view has not been widely held since it appears to contradict the statement in Matthew 22: 30: *At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.* The commonly accepted view is that the *sons of God* refer to the godly, pious line of Seth (Calvin: 'It was, therefore, base ingratitude in the posterity of Seth, to mingle themselves with the children of Cain'). The passage is a little summary of what has gone before (Matthew 24: 38-39).

'Nephilim' (6: 4) is untranslated but probably means 'very tall'.

Much ink has been spilled over the extent of the flood. The emphasis is on that group of cultures from which Abraham came. More than that cannot be said in such a brief space.

There is inevitability about divine judgment on persistent sin. Even after the flood mankind is still depraved and still misusing God's gifts. But the story includes an account of the covenant promise of God (8: 21,22) and the sign of hope (9: 8 - 17).

#### **4. The tower**

In Genesis 11: 1 the people have settled in the plain of Shinar (modern Iraq). The people had discovered a new technology (the ability to make bricks and mortar). Believing they have the means of guaranteeing their own unity and security they set about the building of a great tower.

Remains have been found in Mesopotamia of ziggurats, or temple towers, several stories high with a temple on top. The tower, to which this story refers, may have been something like that. The idea seems to be to build your way to heaven, with men and women becoming the means of their own salvation.

The grandiose plan is typical of human pride. The builders thought their work was very splendid but even the materials were particularly prone to decay. In the sight of God it was all really rather small.

Babylon was the heart of the ancient world and the centre of its power. To Babylonians 'Babel' meant the gate of the gods.

The divine disruption of language is a sign of judgment at a deep level. Language is fundamental to society. Even very primitive societies have very complex languages. As a general rule the older a language is the more complicated it is. Though there are about fifty 'language families' in the world they seem to bear no relation to each other. Though anthropologists agree about the essential oneness of the human race, there is no evidence that there was a common language. Babel offers an explanation.

The story of the tower of Babel is a sad description of the fracture of community, of a breakdown of fellowship, of a failure in communication, of a growth in isolation and confusion. It shows the folly of giving pride of place to human achievements, an insistence on trying to reach the heavens, rather than for trusting God, living in obedience to his commands and walking with him in righteousness.

## STUDY 2

## THE PATRIARCHS

### Four main points

1. Abraham: Father of the Hebrew people
2. Isaac: Second father of the promise
3. Jacob: Father of the nation of Israel
4. Joseph: Leader in Egypt

### 1. Abraham

Reading: Genesis 12: 1 - 3; 17: 1 - 27; 21: 1 - 7

God chooses Abraham to found a people to proclaim redemption.  
How will God's promises be fulfilled?

### 2. Isaac

Reading: Genesis 25: 19 - 34

Isaac becomes the successor of the promise made to Abraham.  
What similarities are there in the lives of Abraham and Isaac?

### 3. Jacob

Reading: Genesis 27: 1 - 29; 28: 10 - 18; 32: 22 - 32

Jacob becomes the Father of Israel.  
What is the significance for Israel of the sons of Jacob?

### 4. Joseph

Reading: Genesis 37: 1 - 11

By the grace of God Joseph rises to authority.  
How is God's judgment shown upon the unrighteous in Israel?

## 1. Abraham

Abraham was born in Ur. After his father's death he moved to Palestine (Canaan) near Bethel, to Mamre near Hebron, and to Beersheba. At each place he set up a tent shrine. In a human sense, he was the founder of the Hebrew religion. The stories are largely what have come to be called 'salvation history' (i.e. their primary if not exclusive interest is God's saving relationship with Abraham, his family and the world).

Abraham is raised up to found a people who will be the means of the proclamation of God's plan of redemption to the world. God promises Abraham a country (land), descendants (seed), and a worldwide and timeless impact (blessing).

The theme of COVENANT is important throughout the Bible, and it must be distinguished from a contract. Basically a contract (offer, acceptance, agreement) is between equals and involves goods or services, for consideration (normally money). A covenant is not negotiable. It is not necessarily between equals. It carries with it promise and privilege but also responsibility.

Abraham came from a background of polytheism. He was probably a donkey caravaneer. Though his coming to faith in the one true God is important it is not emphasised. Rather what is stressed is his walking by faith. He showed obedience (not knowing his destination); trust (depending on God - not taking refuge in the fortified settlements, 'cities'); and was willing to believe in God's promises for the future (See Hebrews 11). The Bible stories of Abraham and the other patriarchs (fathers) are a record of faith and doubt, obedience and disobedience.

Fulfilment of the divine promise came to Abraham in the birth of a son, Isaac, a child born to Abraham and Sarah in their old age. Abraham obeyed God even when he had been commanded to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah. God himself provided a substitute. Israel was considered the 'seed of Abraham'.

**TYPOLOGY:** It is true to say that all men (and women) of faith, particularly in the Old Testament record, have pre-figured Christ in some measure. The mistake is to take all of these too far and read things into the stories, which are just not there. If something points to Christ it is all right to say so - but it is unnecessary and unbiblical to make everything point to him.

## 2. Isaac

The name Isaac means 'he laughs' which recalls the laughter of his parents who thought they were too old to have a child. After Isaac is born his mother, Sarah, declares that God has made her laugh.

When we actually come down to how much we know about the patriarchs it is surprising how sketchy our knowledge is. Isaac is similar to Abraham insofar as he is the successor (seed) and stands under the divine promise made to his father. But whereas Abraham is a giant of the faith and the founder of the Hebrew religion, Isaac seems, in comparison, to be a rather ordinary man.

The famous story of Abraham's intended sacrifice of Isaac shows that the faith of Abraham was no less than that of the pagans who offered human sacrifice. However, such human sacrifice is nowhere approved of in the Bible. It should be noticed that the clear implication of the story is that Isaac was as willing to be sacrificed as Abraham was to offer him and that the Lord in fact refused such an offering, providing a substitute. (The warning over typology definitely applies to Isaac.)

Isaac shows a great range of human emotions. Abraham commissioned his servant to find a wife for Isaac from his kinsfolk near Harran, for it is through Isaac that the promised descendants of Abraham must flourish. Isaac marries his father's great-niece, Rebekah.

Isaac and Rebekah's love grows as a result of Isaac's considerate and courteous actions. For twenty years Rebekah bears no children, a reminder of God's powerful hand to act at the right time. Rebekah eventually gives birth to twins, Esau and Jacob, who will each become fathers of great nations. The two boys follow mutually hostile courses, which causes tension between their parents.

Before his death, having been deceived, Isaac pronounces his paternal blessing on the younger son, Jacob.

### 3. Jacob

Almost a quarter of the book of Genesis is devoted to the life of Jacob, the father of the chosen people, but younger son of Isaac. Esau (the elder of the twins) sold Jacob his birthright (albeit for a knock-down price - a lentil stew) but with his mother's help Jacob tricked Esau out of his father Jacob's blessing.

Fearful of his brother, Jacob fled to Paddanaram with the excuse that he needed to marry someone from his own clan. At the end of a day's journey Jacob arrived at Bethel, where, as he slept, he was granted a vision of a ladder between heaven and earth. This shows that the God of his fathers, Yahweh, is not a local deity but he is with Jacob along the way. It is a ladder of mercy down from heaven rather than achievement up to heaven (cf. Tower of Babel).

In Harran Jacob meets a beautiful girl, Rachel, daughter of his Uncle Laban. Laban tricks Jacob into marrying Leah, the elder daughter, before Rachel. Jacob becomes father of children through Leah and the servants Bilhah and Zilpah but Rachel has no children until much later when Joseph is born.

Jacob is guilty of trying to help God by using every means fair or foul. God has his own means of fulfilling his promises. Jacob's growing prosperity as manager of Laban's flocks and herds caused jealousy among Laban's sons. Under divine command Jacob fled from Laban and managed to get to Gilead before Laban caught up with him. Laban and Jacob eventually parted company with goodwill having made an agreement.

Jacob continued to travel back towards Canaan with a large gift for his brother, Esau. As he was about to cross the ford of the River Jabbok he was engaged in a struggle with a stranger. After his time of wrestling Jacob, who had lied to his father about his name, is blessed with a new name 'Israel' and his twelve sons become the heads of the twelve tribes of the new nation.

Even after Esau's friendly greeting Jacob moves on to Bethel to worship, eventually settling in the region of Hebron. Before his death Jacob adopted the two sons of Joseph and gave them a special blessing, preferring the younger over the elder.

Jacob's descendants called themselves by his name, Israel. As the chosen people they had the privilege of striving with God.

## 4. Joseph

The eleventh of the twelve sons of Jacob was Joseph. Joseph was the elder of the two sons of Rachel, the other being Benjamin. Joseph was his father's favourite and he became a spoilt boy who was given a special coat of many colours.

Eventually Joseph's jealous brothers had planned to kill him but at the intervention of Reuben the brothers first threw him into a cistern and then sold him to Ishmaelite merchants who sold him to Potiphar as a household servant. The unwelcome attentions of Potiphar's wife resulted in Joseph's imprisonment.

In prison Joseph interprets the dreams of the baker and the butler and hopes that the butler (more accurately cup-bearer), when restored, will use his influence to set him free. When Pharaoh has extraordinary dreams his cup-bearer remembers Joseph and Joseph interprets the dreams and rises to high office in Egypt.

Though God is with him Joseph experiences temptation, prejudice, suffering but also can draw on the strength and courage which God gives. His familiar life-story is a reminder of the promise that in everything God works for good for those who love him.

Joseph showed a willingness to see God's will in the opportunities that were offered and patiently waited for God's will to be fulfilled.

Rather than fall into the obvious temptation of over indulgence in typology, for the life of Joseph clearly has elements which pre-figure Christ, we should instead measure our own lives against the life of Joseph, who because of his righteousness rises to his position and consistently attributes his success to God.

In the patriarchs we see the record of the people of faith with their strengths and weaknesses.

For reflection:

Do we seek to fulfil our plans with God's help?

Do we seek to fulfil the divine plan with our ideas?

Do we seek to fulfil the divine plan with our obedience?

## STUDY 3

## THE EXODUS

### Four main points

1. Deliverance: Freedom from slavery in Egypt
2. The Law: God's commandments at Mount Sinai
3. Kadesh Barnea: Place of rebellion against God
4. 40 Years wandering: Consequence of rebellion

### 1. Deliverance

Reading: Exodus 12: 1 - 32

God delivers the Israelites led by Moses from slavery.  
How does this relate to the promises given to Abraham?

### 2. The Law

Reading: Exodus 20: 1 - 17

At Mount Sinai the Law is given through Moses.  
What is the relationship between the Law and the Covenant?

### 3. Kadesh Barnea

Reading: Numbers 14: 1 - 45

10 of 12 spies say Israel will be unable to enter the land.  
What place is there for the faithful minority?

### 4. 40 Years wandering

Reading: Numbers 27: 12 - 23

Time must pass until all the responsible adults have died.  
In what senses does God withhold his blessing on the faithless?

## 1. Deliverance

The Hebrews have been in Egypt since the time of Joseph but in time he is forgotten. The 400 years in Egypt serve to remind us that God operates on his time-scale not ours. In the latter part of this period the Hebrew people were in slavery but this was not slavery of the kind that we associate with more recent times. They had their own homes (in which to shelter on Passover night) and left Egypt with their flocks and herds. The situation was more like that of the Irish people of the 19<sup>th</sup> century under repressive Penal Laws passed at Westminster or of a people subjugated to punitive taxation and racial discrimination.

Moses has been saved from the slaughter of Hebrew boys in an 'ark' (made of reeds) and is brought up partly by his own Mother and partly by Pharaoh's daughter in the Palace. This gives him useful experience without losing his own identity. God reveals himself to Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3). He is the Covenant God of his forefathers.

Moses is forced to flee to Jethro and the Midianites after his slaying of the Egyptian is exposed but this too turns out to be useful experience. He gains knowledge of a new way of life and strength from his work as a shepherd.

Moses asks Pharaoh for spiritual freedom but Pharaoh refuses. Ten plagues of increasing severity are sent upon Egypt. The Hebrews are protected from the 'smiting of the first-born' through the 'Passover'. (For the Christian significance of the Passover see 1 Corinthians 5: 7; John 1: 29 and the narratives concerning the institution of the Lord's Supper.)

Pharaoh lets the Hebrews go but later changes his mind and chases them to the Red Sea (possibly Reed Sea). Here with Pharaoh's chariots in pursuit the Hebrews look back, Moses stands firm, but God calls them onward (A useful lesson?). God parts the Red Sea and the Hebrews cross, heading toward their destination, the Promised Land. Pharaoh's forces perish (See Psalm 105).

The salvation history that we have here does not ask the same questions as our history books. God is all-important. The deliverance of the Hebrews was a foreshadowing of what was to come. We have often lost our sense of dependence upon God.

## 2. The Law

The Hebrews take on the national identity of Israel. They are to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19: 6). It is very important to note that although Israel is the nation chosen or elected by God, the whole earth is his. Election of one does not automatically mean rejection of another. The Law is not a way to acquire merit with God and 'get into his good books' by good works. It is a divinely revealed way of life for those he has redeemed.

The Covenant Promise of God is that he will bless the people for obedience but curse them for disobedience. Unlike the earlier covenants this is with a nation and not just with individuals. God's promise is conditional upon the acceptance of his will. First the Ten Commandments (called by some the Decalogue) are given, later the National and ceremonial law. It is helpful to divide 'The Law' into three categories moral, criminal, ceremonial. Scholars often categorise the commandments according to the way that they are phrased ('casuistic' what we would call 'do's and don'ts', dealing with certain cases and 'apodeictic' which, broadly speaking, are Laws concerned with the absolute demands of the will of God).

'Law' is often used in a vague way. 'Torah' (the Hebrew word translated 'Law') really means 'body of teaching or instruction' which has a rather wider meaning than our 'law'.

The powerlessness of the Israelites to keep the Law not only shows the completeness of the fall but also demonstrates quite clearly that salvation can never come through legalism or good-works (both forms of self-righteousness).

The Ten Commandments contain the great principles of law on which the rest is commentary. The first four commandments concern attitudes to God, the remaining six attitudes to others. Covenant renewal (Deuteronomy 29: 1; Joshua 24: 25) was probably a regular part of Israel's worship (See also Lev. 16).

### 3. Kadesh Barnea

Kadesh Barnea was an oasis and the Southern Gateway to the Promised Land. When the Israelites reached this point Moses sent twelve spies to see the land of Canaan, one from each of the historic tribes. They returned with good news, it was a beautiful land flowing with milk and honey and with plentiful fruit, and bad news, the cities were large and fortified and the people of the hostile armies were giants making the children of Israel look like grasshoppers.

The two spies who believed that the Israelites would be victorious in their attempt to take the land were Caleb and Joshua. They pleaded with the people:

*The land we passed through and explored was exceedingly good. If the LORD is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us.*

The sins of the people were clearly unbelief and disobedience - we have noted how these two are often found together. (For a further discussion see Hebrews 3 & 4.)

Unbelief and pessimism are infectious. The same is similar with regard to faith and optimism. (A majority vote of the elected people of God still proved to be the wrong decision - we must be careful not to fall into the same trap. There is a place for realism but it must not exclude faith and hope in God.)

After Kadesh Barnea the children of Israel decided that they would go up to the land in their own strength - there the Canaanites and the Amalekites defeated them.

#### **4. Forty Years Wandering**

The 'Exodus-generation' was condemned for its rebellion against God and those who were twenty-one years or more at the time of the rebellion would not enter the Promised Land. The wanderings took place in 'wilderness' rather than desert, what the Geographer calls 'steppe' country. Additional information is given in the book of Deuteronomy. The five books Genesis to Deuteronomy make up 'The Pentateuch' (Penta = five, e.g. pentagon), the 'five-fold' book.

Moses himself displeases God (Numbers 20: 1 – 13) by striking the rock instead of speaking to it - using his staff as a tool, rather than trusting in God. Certainly, he is judged for not trusting enough in God that is by exercising the obedience of faith.

On the way to the Promised Land the Israelites encounter Balak, a Moabite King. Balak sends for Balaam, who is well known for the effectiveness of his blessings and cursings. Balak wants Balaam to curse Israel, but God forbids Balaam to do it. Balaam is only allowed to journey to Balak under certain conditions. When he tries to go his way is blocked by an angel, which is seen by his donkey, but not at first by him. Only after he has confessed his sin is Balaam allowed to proceed. Balaam ends up giving the Israelites three blessings (Numbers 22 - 24). The Lord protects his people from unseen spiritual dangers of which they were not aware until afterwards. He turns the hostile curse into a blessing. Reference is made to this fascinating story in 2 Pet 2: 15; Jude 11; Rev 2: 14.

Slaughter in Old Testament is very difficult to understand. To say that the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath and war and the God of the New Testament is a God of love and peace is to over-simplify for there is much teaching of love and peace in the Old Testament and vice versa in the new. If passages give a faulty idea about God how do we know which are the faulty passages? Survival of the nation is vital if it is to be the medium of God's revelation. Therefore, the purity of its religion is important. The Eastern idea is for the whole nation to be responsible for its acts. Most importantly we must take into account the just wrath of a holy God against sin (Genesis 15: 16).

## **STUDY 4**

## **THE CONQUEST**

### **Four main points**

1. Crossing the River Jordan
2. Capturing Jericho
3. Conquering Canaan
4. Complete dominion

### **1. Crossing the River Jordan**

*Reading: Joshua 3 (or Chapters 1 - 5)*

Joshua leads the Israelites over the River Jordan.  
What is the significance of crossing Jordan?

### **2. Capturing Jericho**

*Reading: Joshua 6*

Jericho is an oasis city, fortified and strategic.  
How important is the manner of its capture?

### **3. Conquering Canaan**

*Reading: Joshua 10: 29 - 11: 23*

Joshua drives a wedge through the centre of Canaan and conquers.  
What is learned from the sin of Achan (Joshua 7)?

### **4. Complete Dominion**

*Reading: Joshua 24*

Each of the twelve tribes is given a particular area.  
What is the relationship between Joshua and Moses?

## 1. Crossing the River Jordan

Joshua has been chosen by God to succeed Moses and to lead the Israelites across the River Jordan into the Promised Land. Joshua was one of the two spies that Moses had sent to spy out the land before the rebellion at Kadesh Barnea who believed that it could be conquered over against the ten who did not. This time Joshua sends just two spies, who are taken in by Rahab the prostitute (see Hebrews 11: 31). Joshua is told to have strength and courage, which are necessary following a great man like Moses. The Israelites are told to expect amazing things. A miracle happens for when the priests who are leading the ceremonial procession set foot in the River Jordan the waters are cut off.

There are obvious similarities to the crossing of the Red Sea. In July 1927 the Jordan was blocked for 21 hours by a landslide. This does not explain away the miracle - for it needed to happen when it did - but it is a point to note.

If we limit the book of Joshua to the record of entering Canaan we are missing some of its outstanding teaching. The Jews regarded the book of Joshua as 'a former prophet'. Its history has something to say to us about God.

The book bears testimony to the faithfulness of God, and the 'now and not yet' of his promises. Clearly what we have in Joshua is not the full story with every last detail of the campaign. Our attention is drawn to what may be called 'highlights' - though at least on two occasions we note the sins of Israel (Achan and the pact with the Gibeonites). Canaan is also used in Christian teaching to symbolise the rest of heavenly glory.

Caution must always be exercised in using the Old Testament stories typologically. That does not mean it is never appropriate to do so for the New Testament (Hebrews 4: 8) points out the similarities between Joshua and Jesus.

## 2. Capturing Jericho

Through the appearance of the 'man' (theophany - cf. wrestling Jacob) Joshua is made aware of the presence of one greater than man whose drawn sword clearly speaks of combat readiness, and whose army is nothing less than that of the Lord himself. This is sufficient for Joshua to know that the conquest will begin.

Canaan was a land of fortified cities and Jericho stood at the eastern gateway to the Promised Land. The fall of Jericho is a decisive victory and is an outstanding instance of God giving the land to Israel, which is an idea that is crucial to the whole book of Joshua.

The fall of Jericho is hardly a military victory. Seven priests march around the city with the Ark of the Covenant once each day for the first six days and then seven times on the seventh day. At their shout of triumph the walls collapse.

There has been much debate about the falling of the walls of Jericho including the attractive theory that so many inhabitants of Jericho gathered on the thick mud-built walls of the city to watch the activities of the Israelites that they could stand the weight no longer. (But as with science so with archaeology - we do not look for the findings of archaeology to prove or disprove the Bible, neither getting too troubled by the unresolved contradictions or too excited by the apparent confirmations.) The writer to the Hebrews (11: 30) again points out that the key to the proper understanding of these events is faith. Jericho is destroyed but Rahab the prostitute is saved.

Joshua is clearly a strong and courageous leader, a man of his word, loyal, stern and uncompromising. He feared none but God alone. Yet he also had weaknesses and these are clearly noted (7: 7; despair after the defeat at Ai; 9: 14, 15 The pact with the Gibeonites).

### **3. Conquering Canaan**

The land of Canaan was made up of several city-states but the religion was agricultural, that is it was largely based on fertility. The Canaanite gods were the Baalim (singular Baal) whose consort was Ashtaroth. The fertility rites included prostitution and homosexuality. The worship of the fertility cult took place around a wooden pole (Asherah pole), which was often sited, on top of a hill (high-place).

Syncretism (i.e. the mixing up of elements from different religions) was a very real problem and a lot of the commandments are to do with keeping the religion of the Israelite nation pure from the corruption of pagan religions and superstition.

After success at Jericho there is failure at Ai because of the sin of Achan. Achan took for himself some of the things from Jericho that should have been devoted to God. The story is a reminder that in the Bible there is a stronger notion of corporate responsibility. When judgment has been passed Ai is destroyed under the command of Joshua by brilliant military strategy.

An interesting insight into the story of the sun standing still is that Chinese and Hindu writings also refer to a long day.

#### **4. Complete Dominion**

The twelve tribes of Israel are allocated the Promised Land by lot. The rallying place is Shiloh where the tent of meeting is kept (18: 1; 19: 51; 22: 9, 12).

Joshua tells the people that they must chose which god they will serve, though there is really no alternative to serving Yahweh, the God who brought them out of Egypt and gave them the Promised Land. Joshua is the successor to all that is promised to Moses and he and his household will serve the LORD (24: 15).

## STUDY 5 THE JUDGES

Four main points

1. Judges: The leaders of Israel
2. Rebellion: The breaking of God's law
3. Cycles: The repetition of Israel's misfortunes
4. Ruth: A model woman

### 1. **Judges: The leaders of Israel**

Reading: Judges Chapters 2: 4 - 7; 16

The 'judges' were more highly gifted leaders than judges in a judicial sense.  
What was the main purpose of the judges?

### 2. **Rebellion: The breaking of God's law**

Reading: Deuteronomy 7: 1 - 11

The Israelites break the commandments given to them.  
Why are these commandments of God so important?

### 3. **Cycles: The repetition of Israel's misfortunes**

Reading: Judges 3: 7 - 30

Much of the era of the judges is a repeated cycle of events.  
What is that cycle and what do we learn from it?

### 4. **Ruth: A model woman**

Reading: Ruth 1 - 4

A homely story set against the background of the Judges.  
About whom is the book named 'Ruth' written?

## **1. Judges: The leaders of Israel**

The judges were special leaders. They knew in their heads what God (YHWH) had done for them but they did not allow this to dominate their lives and the nation went astray (2: 10). The four most important are Deborah, Gideon, Samson and Samuel.

The Israelites did not have a strong national identity. They were divided by tribal jealousies; only belief in Yahweh bound them together. It was easy for the Israelites to adopt the agricultural way of life and the practices of the pagan Canaanite fertility cult.

In the time of Deborah the Israelites suffered oppression from a Canaanite King Jabin whose captain was Sisera. They were lawless and leaderless (Judges 5: 6 - 8). Some tribes did not help in the fight against Sisera but by the help of God victory was given to the Israelites for the chariots of Sisera were bogged down.

Gideon led the Israelites against the Midianite raiders. When he is working in the winepress, Gideon is called by the angel of God. God promises to be with Gideon and he cuts down the pagan Asherah pole at night. Gideon looks to God for guidance by laying the fleece. Gideon gathers an army for God but there was to be no room for the faint-hearted (Judges 7: 3). After 300 of Gideon's men defeat the Midianites the people want him to be king but he refuses. Yahweh is the victorious King of Israel.

The horrible story of Jephthah (Judges 10) shows the foolishness both of selfish ambition and making a rash vow. Jephthah regards his vow as binding but the Old Testament, which never endorses human sacrifice, tells the story without comment as part of its testimony to the low moral and spiritual state of the people.

Samson was rude and crude yet recognised God as the source of his strength. Samuel was a prophet (religious) and judge (secular).

## **2. Rebellion: The breaking of God's law**

Just before his death Moses instructs the people to destroy the inhabitants of Canaan, to avoid inter-marriage with Canaanites and to shun the worship of Canaanite gods. These commands had the purpose of preserving the religious purity of Israel, the covenant nation, as well as executing well-merited divine wrath (Genesis 15: 16).

It was God's command that the altars of Baal and the Asherah poles should be taken down and burned. Inter-marriage with the Canaanite people is vigorously opposed for it was said that the Canaanite women would turn the Israelite men away from Yahweh to serve other God's.

Israel under Joshua fell for the Gibeonite deception and, because they did not consult the LORD (Joshua 9: 14), made a treaty with the Gibeonites. The Israelites loss of incentive to possess the whole land and consequent mixed marriages led either to syncretism (that is a confusing of religious beliefs and practices) or the notion that Yahweh, the God of Israel, was just one god in a pantheon of gods. Samson, himself, is compromised by his marriage to a Philistine. But the most unlikely people may be agents who fulfil God's total plan.

It is because of Israel's place in the divine plan for the redemption of the world that its dedication and uncorrupted purity are important.

Israel failed to keep the command of God on all three counts. So after one of the brightest periods in the history of Israel there follows one of the darkest periods, during the time of the judges.

### **3. Cycles: The repetition of Israel's misfortunes**

Much of the era of Judges involves a series of seven cycles that are recorded in the Book of Judges.

- (a) Israel sins by breaking the commandments of God.
- (b) God therefore disciplines Israel through military defeats at the hands of the army of a neighbouring country.
- (c) Under this discipline Israel repents and cries out to God for deliverance.
- (d) When God hears Israel's cry he raises up a highly gifted leader (judge) who delivers Israel from the hands of its oppressor.
- (e) This deliverance endures for the rest of the life of that particular judge.

This recurring theme shows the danger of apostasy and the misery due to forsaking a Holy God. God's sovereign and saving power are very much in evidence. He is still on the throne.

#### **4. Ruth: A model woman**

The book of Ruth is a simple love story set against the background of the judges. In one way it is a tale of two women. It tells how one of them, Naomi, underwent much hardship but eventually won through to peace and security. The other, Ruth, attached herself firmly to her mother-in-law and to her mother-in-law's God and how she received the blessing of that God.

At a deeper level the book of Ruth is about God. It deals with unimportant people and unimportant matters. But it deals with them to show that God is active in the lives of ordinary people. He works his purposes out and blesses them that trust him. Ruth is a living illustration of the blessings that God showers upon those who live in faithful obedience. One of those blessings is that Ruth, a Moabite woman, is King David's great-grandmother (2: 10).

The book also introduces us to the idea of the kinsman-redeemer (Leviticus 25: 25).

## STUDY 6 THE KINGDOM

Four main points

1. United Kingdom: A new monarchy
2. Division of the Kingdom: Civil war
3. Northern Kingdom: The unrighteous kingdom
4. Southern Kingdom: The inconsistent kingdom

### 1. United Kingdom: A new monarchy

Reading: 1 Samuel 8

The Israelites demand a king for their nation  
What does the contrast between David as King and man show?

### 2. Divided Kingdom: A Civil War

Reading: 1 Kings 11: 1 - 13

Solomon drifts spiritually and civil war results  
What can we learn about the effect of one person's waywardness?

### 3. Northern Kingdom: The unrighteous kingdom

Reading: 1 Kings 17 - 18

The kingdom is led astray by a series of unrighteous kings  
What is the significance of the confrontation on Mount Carmel?

### 4. Southern Kingdom: The inconsistent kingdom

Reading: 2 Kings 24: 8 - 25: 1

The spiritual life of Judah varies under a succession of kings  
What do we learn from Judah's history about inconsistency?

## **1. United Kingdom: A new monarchy**

In the book of Samuel we see how corrupt the nation of Israel became. Corrupt religion spilled over into the area of sexual misconduct, as it often does. With a loss of respect for the priests came also a loss of respect of God. In a last desperate attempt to save the nation the Ark of the Covenant is brought into the camp. This does not represent an appeal to God's grace but an effort to force God to save Israel. The Israelites suffered the worst defeat of their history, the Ark of the Covenant was taken, and the sanctuary at Shiloh was destroyed by fire. God's honour remained untouched for he triumphed over the gods of the Philistines by sending a plague among them, and met the needs of Israel by raising up Samuel.

The twelve tribes of Israel, jealous of other nations around them, are united in their demand to God for a king. The people do not trust God to raise up a suitable successor to Samuel. They demand a king who would ensure a firm and certain succession. God allows Samuel, the last of the Judges, to anoint Saul to be the first king, beginning a new monarchy.

God does not honour the reign of King Saul for Saul is disobedient. Saul's family are consequently not established on the throne of Israel. His successor, David, despite his many shortcomings is basically a devoted king; and Israel prospers under him. The contrast of David the successful King and David the tragic man teaches that no man is fit to represent God in the way that Israel had hoped a king would. The trust, humility and genuine repentance shown by David are honoured by God's blessing.

On David's death his son Solomon became king. At first Solomon ruled righteously with wisdom but then he forgot the fear of the Lord, married foreign princesses, and went after foreign gods.

## **2. Divided Kingdom: Civil War**

During his reign Solomon embarked on a great building programme, including the building of a great Temple, which lasted for 400 years until its destruction by the Babylonians (970 - 586 BC). (Zerubbabel built the Second Temple in about 537 BC and Herod the Great replaced this temple in about 20 BC.) He also built a hall of judgment and a palace for him and his chief wife, the daughter of Pharaoh.

As a result of Solomon's spiritual drifting, a civil war erupts when he dies, and the kingdom is divided. Solomon is succeeded by his son, Rehoboam. Rehoboam's unwise rough handling of complaints from the Northern Tribes led by Jeroboam (who had previously rebelled against Solomon) results in civil war. The Northern Kingdom, consisting of ten tribes retains the name Israel while the Southern Kingdom, made up of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, adopt the name of Judah, the larger of the two component tribes.

There were ancient differences between the north and the south. The burden of the glories of Solomon, the palace, the temple and so on, had fallen on the tribes of the North who least benefited from them. The Israelites had been angered having been made to do forced labour on these great schemes.

Though the principle of a hereditary monarchy is well accepted among us, and indeed was known among the Canaanites, it still did not have total acceptance in the Kingdom of Israel. The contrast between south (Judah) and north (Israel) is between constitutional, covenant monarch and government by strong, naturally gifted leaders.

### **3. Northern Kingdom: The unrighteous kingdom**

In the civil war that split the kingdom, Jeroboam was commander of Israel. He is unrighteous, and every other of the nineteen kings who succeeded him in the next 250 years was also unrighteous. Israel became rich and powerful and politically more important than the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The capital of Israel was Samaria (from Omri onwards) while the religious centres were Bethel and Dan.

Jeroboam was afraid of people going to Jerusalem to sacrifice and made two golden calves, before which Israel worshipped at Bethel and Dan. The idea may have been that the calves were a throne for Yahweh but as is often the case the ordinary worshipper does not always comprehend the difference.

Jeroboam's policies are continued by his successors. Ahab marries Jezebel a Phœnician princess and builds a temple for her god, Baal, in Samaria. The prophet Elijah who saw that Ahab's idolatry was leading the nation away from God denounces this. The confrontation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel was critical if the religion of Israel was to survive.

Elijah is followed by Elisha. Elisha sends one of the sons of the prophets to anoint Jehu as king. The messenger takes it upon himself to embellish what he was told to say by directing Jehu what to do, but telling him that he is to overthrow the house of Ahab (2Kings 9). Jehu shoots Jehoram and the house of Ahab comes to an end. Jezebel is also killed, as are Ahab's sons. Jehu stamps out the worship of Baal. Israel prospers for a time, and is greatest in the reign of Jeroboam II. During this reign Amos and Hosea are raised up and denounce the oppression of the poor and the emphasis on ceremonial rather than ethics. God's judgment is upon the Kingdom of Israel because of the unrighteousness of its kings. When Israel is defeated by Assyria (722 BC) its peoples are scattered to the four winds and the kingdom is never restored.

#### **4. Southern Kingdom: The inconsistent kingdom**

Rehoboam, Solomon's son, was commander of Judah and unrighteous. Judah has twenty kings of whom eight are righteous, so Judah fares rather better than Israel. Having the Temple at Jerusalem, the capital, helped the religious life of Judah.

The extent of the breach between the North and South is evidenced by the alliance between Syria and Judah against Israel. One King, Jehoram marries Ahab's daughter Athaliah who corrupts Judah. She successfully plots to seize the throne. Only Joash survives her slaughter and, after six years, Jehoiada the priest proclaims him King. Athaliah is killed and Baal worship is stamped out. Joash's grandson Uzziah reigns for a long time and brings stability to Judah. Uzziah is succeeded by Jotham but when Jotham dies his son, Ahaz, adopts the ways of the Kings of Israel - and once even practices human sacrifice. For political ends, Ahaz makes concessions to Assyrian worship. Hezekiah succeeds his Father Ahaz and proves to be the best ever King of Judah. He and his great-grandson Josiah are two of Judah's great reforming kings.

Under Hezekiah, Judah is threatened by Assyria but he eventually listens to the statesman-prophet Isaiah who tells him that the Assyrian leader, Sennacherib, will fall in his own land. This comes to pass. Manasseh and Amon are unrighteous but Josiah reforms Judah. During the reign of Josiah Jeremiah, Zephaniah and Nahum prophesy. Josiah's son Jehoahaz reverts to unrighteous ways and is replaced by Jehoiakim a puppet of Egypt. Jehoiachin succeeds him. After 400 years Judah's sins catch up with her and divine judgment is brought upon the inconsistent kingdom through the nation of Babylon. Babylon had already conquered Assyria and the Babylonians gather all the leaders, artisans, musicians, and promising children and carry them away to captivity in Babylonia.

## **STUDY 7 THE EXILE**

### **Four main points**

1. Prophecy: Warning of impending captivity
2. Prophets: Encouraging faithfulness of exiles
3. Exiles: Assimilated into culture
4. Power change: Persian Empire expands

#### **1. Prophecy: Warning of impending captivity**

Reading: Jeremiah 7: 1 - 15; 26: 1 - 19

Jeremiah warns the Southern Kingdom of the Babylonian captivity  
What lesson must we learn from Jeremiah 'the weeping prophet'?

#### **2. Prophets: Encouraging faithfulness of exiles**

Reading: Ezekiel 16; 28; 34; 36: 24 - 27

Ezekiel foretells the restoration and encourages faithfulness  
How does the message of Ezekiel have present day relevance?

#### **3. Exiles: Assimilated into culture**

Reading: Daniel 1 - 6

Even with discrimination some Judahites come to prominent positions  
What is the major thrust of Daniel's prophetic message?

#### **4. Power change: Persian Empire expands**

Reading: Daniel 7 - 12; (Esther)

Persia conquers Assyria, Babylonia and their territories  
What will this shift in power mean to the exiles?

## **1. Prophecy: Warning of impending captivity**

Jeremiah's life forms an important part of his book and in that way his prophecy is unique. The people of the Southern Kingdom of Judah have been able to watch what has been happening to their Northern neighbour Israel as Israelites have been carried off into the Assyrian exile.

The Southern Kingdom of Judah had something that the Northern Kingdom of Israel did not have, namely the Temple at Jerusalem. The services at the sanctuary of Jerusalem had carried on without interruption. But practices at the Temple were corrupt. There were times when the idols and altars erected (by Manasseh) hid the true furniture but the Temple still seemed the one sure, unshaken central point amid all the troubles of life. It is not surprising that the people, led by their priests and prophets wanted to kill Jeremiah when he foretold the destruction of the Temple.

In the first five-year's of Jehoiakim's reign we see Jeremiah suffering blow after blow. The people rejected him and his message (26: 1 - 19), the people of his own village led by his own family wanted to murder him (11: 18 - 12: 6), he was bitterly maligned (15: 10 - 18), unmarried and alone (16: 1 - 4) and those who listened to him did so only to find fault (18: 18 - 23). In the face of all this Jeremiah did not forsake his calling.

Jeremiah was not above the message that he brought to the people, even though they persecuted him for bringing it. He clung to his people and went with them into exile in Egypt where he probably died.

It is against this background that we must see the precious promise of the New Covenant (31: 31 - 34). The people were able to believe this wonderful promise because Jeremiah, by his life, made it real to them.

## **2. Prophets: Encouraging faithfulness of exiles**

Jeremiah prophesied to those who would go into exile. Ezekiel prophesied to those who were already there. His task was largely to convince them that their being exiled was an act of grace on God's part. It was not God's harshest punishment upon them but the only way that he could save them from the inevitable doom that would fall upon Jerusalem. The destruction of the Temple by Nebuchadnezzar is God's verdict on the past history of the nation.

Ezekiel's appreciation of the sins of the nation is much deeper than Jeremiah's but so is his understanding of the New Covenant (36: 24 - 27). Ezekiel teaches us that even repentance is, at the end of the day, not the 'good works' of human beings, but a mark of the grace of God.

There is no evidence that those who returned from the Babylonian exile in the time of Cyrus thought that they were fulfilling the prophecies of Ezekiel. The return spoken of in Ezekiel, even more so than several of the other prophets, has more to do with the last days, the days of the Messiah.

The concluding chapters of Ezekiel (40 - 48) point to what should probably be interpreted as a symbolic temple and its worship when Christ, the Messiah, reigns visibly after his return in glory. The transformation of mankind under the New Covenant is not something that happened after the return from the exile.

### **3. Exiles: Assimilated into culture**

The story of Daniel and his friends begins with four young Judahites taking a stand on eating and drinking. The King of Babylon sends for some able exiles in order to further their education. One of these, Daniel, unwilling to break the Levitical food laws refuses the royal food and wine. Daniel and his friends, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah (Babylonian names - Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego) are given permission for ten days to live on a vegetarian diet and water. When they are found to be in good health they are allowed to continue on this diet. Their wisdom surpasses the King's magicians and enchanters.

When King Nebuchadnezzar has a dream that he forgets he calls his wise men to interpret but they say they must know what it is. Daniel prays to God that the dream will be revealed to him and it is. Daniel tells the King his dream, which represents succeeding empires after which the God of heaven will set up his eternal kingdom. Daniel and his three friends are promoted.

Nebuchadnezzar calls all his officials to the dedication of a huge golden image, which they are either to worship or face being thrown into a fiery furnace. When Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refuse to worship the image they are thrown into the furnace where they are apparently joined by a fourth who, according to the King, looks like a son of the gods. The three come out unharmed and are given further promotion.

Daniel interprets another dream, which means that King will go mad for a time. When King Belshazzar uses vessels from the Jerusalem Temple to toast foreign gods human fingers appear and write on the wall. Only Daniel can interpret and says that the Kingdom will come to an end to be divided between the Medes and the Persians. Belshazzar is slain and under Darius the Mede Daniel is promoted. Daniel's enemies successfully plot against him and he is thrown in the lions' den - but miraculously delivered.

#### **4. Power change: Persian Empire expands**

While the Lord's people are in exile in Babylonia, Persia rises to become the dominant military power within the region. The Persians conquer the Babylonians who themselves had previously conquered the Assyrians. The Persian Empire therefore stretches from the River Tigris to the Mediterranean Sea.

The History of Israel and Judah may also be traced through the books of Chronicles. 2 Chronicles concludes with the statement that Cyrus, King of Persia, was appointed by Yahweh to build a Temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah and consequently the servants of Yahweh are released so that they, the Remnant of Israel, may return and build the Temple. Darius was in time succeeded by his son Xerxes (in whose reign the book of Esther is set). Artaxerxes succeeded Xerxes. The Empire was weakened by struggles on all fronts, especially with Greece. When Alexander the Great appeared on the scene the downfall of the Empire was complete.

The latter part of the book of Daniel consists of apocalyptic visions. Apocalyptic is a type of literature in which the hidden things of the future are revealed. Apocalyptic writings generally despair of the present, portray the forces working against God in symbolic terms and describe the future intervention of God when things will be put right.

There are important links between Daniel and Revelation. Though much of Daniel is difficult to understand the great theme is the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is stronger and more enduring than earthly kingdoms.

Ideas developed in the New Testament include the one like 'the Son of Man' (Daniel 7: 13), which gives important background to Jesus' use of the term (Mark 13: 26, 14: 62) and the teaching of the resurrection (12: 2, 3).

## STUDY 8 THE RETURN

Four main points

1. Disrepair: Destruction from war and neglect
2. Rebuilding: The rebuilding of the Temple
3. Renewal: A spiritual rebuilding of the people
4. Restoration: The rebuilding of the city walls

### **1. Disrepair: Destruction from war and neglect**

Reading: Nehemiah 1: 1 - 3

Over the period of the exile Jerusalem has fallen into disrepair  
What spiritual lesson is learned from this?

### **2. Rebuilding: The rebuilding of the Temple**

Reading: Ezra 1: 1 - 8; 3: 1 - 13; 6: 19 - 22

Under Zerubbabel the rebuilding work is begun  
What do Haggai and Zechariah teach us about right priorities?

### **3. Renewal: A spiritual rebuilding of the people**

Reading: Ezra 10: 1 - 17

Ezra sets out to teach God's laws to the remnant as they return  
What can we learn from this method of spiritual rebuilding?

### **4. Restoration: The rebuilding of the city walls**

Reading: Nehemiah 1: 1 - 6: 16

Nehemiah is burdened to rebuild Jerusalem's city walls  
What do we learn about leadership from Nehemiah?

## **1. Disrepair: Destruction from war and neglect**

Though the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are separate in our Bibles they are one in the Hebrew Scriptures. In a sense they are a continuation of the books of Chronicles. The last verses of 2 Chronicles are the same as the opening verses of Ezra. Ezra is an interesting book for it has some sections written in Aramaic, the language that Jesus and the disciples would have used.

During the years of the Babylonian captivity, the leadership of Judah has been taken into exile, and the city of Jerusalem has fallen into disrepair. Not only has the city suffered the ravages of the military campaign during the initial conquest, (under King Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BC) but also has fallen victim to the erosion of neglect. The destruction from war and neglect leaves Jerusalem in a state of ruin.

In 538 BC Cyrus sent some of the exiles home to rebuild their Temple. First there was the struggle to get the Temple rebuilt in the time of Zerubbabel (when Haggai and Zechariah were the prophets of the Lord) and then no more is said for sixty years until Ezra's expedition.

Nehemiah, cupbearer to Artaxerxes King of Persia, hears in the Palace at Susa of the sad condition of Jerusalem despite the return of so many exiles (some thirteen years earlier) - the wall is broken and the gates are burned down. Nehemiah weeps, mourns, fasts and prays (interesting order) both for the people and for himself.

An important theme is that of the 'remnant' - that little portion of Israel with which the future would lie. If we understand the dereliction of Jerusalem simply in terms of its overthrow by Nebuchadnezzar we are missing an important point. Ezra (4: 7 - 23 & 7: 21 - 26) records that an attempt to rebuild has been crushed. The Temple and the City represent the state of the religious and national life of Israel.

## **2. Rebuilding: The rebuilding of the Temple**

It is only fair to say that there is some debate about the traditional dating and chronology of these events which runs - Zerubbabel 537 BC, Ezra 458 BC, Nehemiah 445 BC but there is not space to recount the arguments here and we follow the traditional view.

Cyrus, King of Persia, having conquered Babylon, decrees that the exiles may return to Jerusalem and they take with them the Temple vessels that had been removed by Nebuchadnezzar. Zerubbabel (new governor) and Jeshua (the High-priest) build the altar of burnt offering and lay the foundations of the new Temple.

A dispute arose between the returned exiles and the Samaritans when the Samaritans' offer of help in rebuilding the Temple was rejected. The reason for the rejection of the Samaritan offer of help is not transparent but it is because their religion was not pure, for they also worshipped other gods. So they became the enemies of those who had returned.

Gentile opposition to the rebuilding of the Temple continues. The prophet Haggai urges the people not to delay the rebuilding because of wrong priorities (Haggai 1: 2) for it is because of this that God's blessing is not upon them. Zechariah, like Haggai, encouraged the rebuilding of the Temple. He reminds the Israelites that they should not be over-confident in human effort alone (see Zechariah 4: 6); most of all they must obey God. Zechariah also prophesies about the coming of the Messiah.

Inspired by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah the Temple (sometimes called the Second Temple to distinguish it from Solomon's rather more splendid Temple) is completed and dedicated in 516 BC and the Passover is observed.

### **3. Renewal: A spiritual rebuilding of the people**

Along with the physical rebuilding of the Temple, spiritual rebuilding is needed. These go hand in hand. Worship at the Temple has been discontinued for seventy years and most of the Jews have never seen or heard the Law of Moses. They have to be instructed in a national education programme. Ezra, a scribe, sets his heart to study the Law of the Lord, to practice it, and to teach God's statutes and ordinances in Israel so that the people may be rebuilt spiritually on their return from Israel. Under the authority of King Artaxerxes, Ezra is given considerable powers. Ezra uses these powers to counter the moral disarray, which he meets in Jerusalem. The way in which Ezra hears the news of inter-marriage with foreign (i.e. unbelieving) women has echoes of the problem of inter-marriage with the Canaanites. Ezra's campaign to spread the knowledge of Scripture was bearing the characteristic fruit of reform less than five months after his arrival. It had thrown new light not only on tolerated evil but also on the high calling of this community as a holy race, and heirs of the Exodus (which in a sense had been re-enacted in their own time).

Without prompting from Ezra the established leaders confess their awareness at the state which things have been allowed to reach or that they have tolerated. Ezra was more deeply ashamed of corporate national guilt than any of them and so was all the more fit to be their spokesman in confession. Ezra could not forget all that had happened to his people and yet more than others he was conscious that the very survival of a remnant of people was proof of God's mercy and that despite their sins their punishment had been light. God has every reason to wash his hands of this community and yet because of his many-sided, loving-kindness it is through the Israelites that God's covenant promises would be fulfilled. Divorce of the heathen wives seems harsh (the lesser of two evils?) but is probably set against a background where Judahite wives had been divorced for more liberal heathens.

#### **4. Restoration: The rebuilding of the city walls**

Even though not all the exiles returned when they could have (see Esther) many are now back at home in Jerusalem. The Temple stands restored but the walls of the city are still broken down. This is both humiliating to the nation and a security threat. Nehemiah is burdened to rebuild the walls and after months of sorrow King Artaxerxes asks Nehemiah what the matter is and what he wants. With a quick prayer Nehemiah asks for permission to go and rebuild Jerusalem and leave is granted. Nehemiah takes letters assuring his safe passage and timber from the royal park.

Through caring, waiting, planning and praying and despite opposition to the work Nehemiah sets to work. Sanballat and others suggest that the work is to enable rebellion. He and his friends ridicule the efforts but are angered when work progresses and try force to prevent the building. Nehemiah responds by posting trumpeters to summon help along the wall.

Nehemiah is too wise to be taken in by the various ploys that Sanballat, Geshem and Tobiah try to use to compromise and so do away with him. When the walls and gates are completed the Law is read and the people rejoice. The Feast of Tabernacles is celebrated. The people promise, among other things, not to allow inter-marriage or Sabbath trade, to pay tax to the Temple and offer first fruits and tithes.

The walls are dedicated and Levites and singers are restored to the Temple and paid. Nehemiah deals with breaches of those things that the Israelites had promised. Nehemiah must be commended for his courage, for his restraint, for his persistence, for his insight, for his efficiency and for his hard work. He is trustworthy, unselfish, a great reformer and champion of the poor, fighting against evil. Though neither prophet nor priest he took a stand for what he believed in and was committed to the Law of God, to faith, and to prayer.

## **STUDY 9      POETRY**

Four main points

1. Job: Suffering and the Sovereignty of God
2. Psalms: Praise in public worship
3. Proverbs & Song of Songs: Wisdom for living
4. Ecclesiastes: The futility of temporal pursuits

### **1. Job: Suffering and the Sovereignty of God**

Reading: Job 1 - 5; 19; 29 - 31; 38: 1 - 11; 42

Job's life is a basis for a discussion of suffering  
What lessons can be learned from this story?

### **2. Psalms: Praise in public worship**

Reading: Psalms 8; 24; 46; 51; 95; 100; 122; 130; 137; 150

The Psalms contain a variety of material useful for worship  
What different types of Psalms can be described?

### **3. Proverbs & Song of Songs: Wisdom for living**

Reading: Proverbs 15: 1, 15, 17; Song of Songs

Proverbs deal wisely with a whole variety of life's situations  
What value are the Proverbs and Song of Songs today?

### **4. Ecclesiastes: The futility of temporal pursuits**

Reading: Ecclesiastes 3: 1 - 8; 12: 1 - 7

The Preacher shows the futility of happiness only in worldliness  
What must we conclude when shown the bankruptcy of worldliness?

## **1. Job: Suffering and the Sovereignty of God**

To most of us poetry is a fairly tight form of verse and rhyme. Hebrew poetry is much wider than this. It depends on literary devices (which distinguish it from prose) but these devices are not limited to the forms that we so commonly associate with poetry. Rhythm, reiteration and parallelism, of the sort that we may link with great oratory are important features. These forms appear in other biblical books (e.g. Isa 55: 8; Num 23: 19).

Job has been described as a masterpiece of world literature. It is a poetical book, with a prose prologue. It addresses the question of the relationship between suffering and a God who is believed to be righteous and good. It is a discussion of what happens when moral theory and reality meet.

Job is a good man, yet circumstances overwhelm him and prolonged suffering follows loss of possessions and family. The theory that such suffering only comes upon a wicked man is tested and proved to be wrong. The three friends ('comforters') represent three common interpretations - Eliphaz: Regards the most important thing as God-given experience rightly understood; Bildad: Venerates tradition believing that it will provide the answers; Zophar: Applies common sense at its most brutal. Their silent sympathy was rather better than their well-meaning but insensitive words (2: 13). Elihu's angry tirade produces more heat than light. Job thinks of what he would like to ask God but in their encounter it turns out to be God who is asking the questions. Job's questions largely remain unanswered but 'God is recognisably the faithful, righteous Lord whose ways, while they are past finding out, are to be trusted to the end. Job does not have to conclude, like one of the Babylonian sufferers, that what is evil on earth may be counted good in heaven; nor is there any question of placating God with gifts; still less of throwing in one's hand and renouncing him' (Kidner).

## **2. Psalms: Praise in public worship**

The Psalter is in effect a hymn-book. The Psalms are poems, and poems that were intended to be sung. In these 'poetry is put to work, to be the way to heaven's door in worship or in teaching, furnishing inspired words for public festivals and royal occasions, and for the individual who might come to confess his sins, or plead for healing, or rejoice over some deliverance or revelation' (Kidner).

Tradition has usually divided the Psalter into five books (1 - 41; 42 - 72; 73 - 89; 90 - 106; 107 - 150) though an alternative view is that it can be divided into three books according to authorship 1 - 41 (Davidic); 42 - 89 (Levitical); 90 - 150 (Anonymous).

If the Prophets are a record of God's speaking to Israel, the Psalms are a record of Israel's response to God. Sometimes the Psalms contain profoundly personal experiences and yet, as is the case with the best of this kind of writing, this is put in a general way so that it is usable by all.

The very best of all from the experiences of man or woman of God reflects or foreshadows Jesus, but very clearly not all experience does. In the Psalms therefore the highest of human virtue is a shadow of the reality that is found and known in Jesus Christ.

The Psalms can be grouped into the following main types:

- Hymns, in Praise of God's character and deeds
- Community laments, arising out of some national disaster
- Royal Psalms, marking some special occasion in the monarch's life
- Individual laments
- Individual thanksgivings

### **3. Proverbs & Song of Songs: Wisdom for living**

The starting point of the Proverbs is that the 'fear of the Lord' is the essence of all true wisdom. Folly (or the lack of wisdom) is not due to slowness of learning or lack of education but neglect of God. The principles of God's teaching are applied to the whole of life.

Proverbs are generally pithy statements in a parallel form and the book of Proverbs is a gathering of several collections of these sayings, probably in the era of Israel's first kings. There is a general introduction (1 - 9) and a poem about the perfect wife (31: 10 - 31) but the rest is six collections of sayings that are generally true. The main themes are the wise man and the fool; the righteous and the wicked; words and the tongue; the family; laziness and hard work.

1 Kings 4: 32 - 34 tells us that Solomon spoke 3000 proverbs and that he wrote 1005 songs. His part in the book of Proverbs and the Songs of Songs is not entirely clear. The opening of the Song of Songs may imply that Solomon wrote it or that it is about him but as this is unclear 'Song of Songs' is a better title. The poems clearly celebrate the beauty and wonder of human love. There is a frank and open delight in physical attraction, which underlines this dimension in God's creation.

The problem in interpretation is who is speaking. (The paragraph headings in the modern translations are interpretative and not part of the original text.) Some feel that there are only two speakers but the more popular interpretation is that there are three.

The earliest tradition has this series of poems as an allegorical picture of the love of God for Israel. The Song is also the Bible's statement about marriage and sex. Christian thought has also been inclined to see it as an allegory of Christ's love for the Church, but there is a need to avoid the obvious pitfalls.

#### **4. Ecclesiastes: The futility of temporal pursuits**

In Old Testament times this form of writing was much more familiar. Life 'under the sun' (i.e. the world seen from a wholly human standpoint) without God turns out to be meaningless, purposeless, futile and empty. The book takes atheism to its logical and realistic conclusion.

Ecclesiastes is the Greek word for 'Qoheleth' (which could be translated 'teacher', 'preacher', 'speaker', 'philosopher'). The outline of the book is that the cycles of nature and history are constantly repeating themselves. Men come and go and though wisdom is better than folly, death is the end result for us all. The conclusion is that the oppressions of life are such that it is better to be dead or never to have been born.

The way to live is to enjoy gifts that are from God. A long life is not valuable in itself unless it brings enjoyment. The wise man takes a serious outlook on matters of life and death, enjoys the good times and learns from the bad ones. No explanation can be found as to why the good sometimes die young and the wicked live to old age. Faith cannot resolve the problem of evil but hope asserts something that is beyond the immediate evidence of the world.

Death is inevitable. Wisdom without the fear of the Lord is of no value - it is vanity. The young should rejoice in their youth, always mindful of God who calls us all to account. We should all fear God, hold him in awe, and obey him.

Ecclesiastes reduces everything the world has to offer to a mere breath, but this is done precisely because man was made for something bigger. It is the fear of God, the idea that God is at the head of all creation that invests the whole of life with meaning.

## STUDY 10

## PROPHETS

Four main points

1. Prophets of Israel (the Northern Kingdom)
2. Prophets of Judah (the Southern Kingdom)
3. Prophets during the Exile
4. Prophets after the Exile (post-exilic)

### 1. Prophets of Israel (the Northern Kingdom)

Reading: Notes p 31; Amos 4: 1 – 5; Hosea 8: 1 – 6; Jonah 3

Amos and Hosea are the prophets of this era  
Jonah takes God's message to Nineveh

### 2. Prophets of Judah (the Southern Kingdom)

Reading: Notes p 32; Isa. 6: 1 – 13; Micah 2: 3 – 5; 7: 18 – 20; Nahum 1: 1 – 8; Hab. 2: 18 – 20; 3: 16 – 18; Zeph. 2: 1 – 3; 3: 14 – 17; Jer. 18: 1 – 12

Isaiah, Micah prophesy after King Uzziah's death  
Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah and Jeremiah follow

### 3. Prophets during the Exile

Reading: Notes pp 34 – 35; Ezekiel 37: 1 – 14; Obadiah 15 – 18

Ezekiel, Daniel prophesy in Babylonia  
Obadiah prophesies against Edom

### 4. Prophets after the Exile (post-exilic)

Reading: Notes pp 39 – 40; Zechariah 9: 9 – 13; Haggai 2: 1 – 9; Malachi 2: 17 – 3: 5

Zechariah and Haggai are on hand at the building of the Temple  
Malachi recalls people to their priorities (Joel may come in about here).

## **1. Prophets of Israel (The Northern Kingdom)**

Prophets are not necessarily people who predict the future. Rather they are called by God to proclaim (forth-tell) his word. The prophets proclaim that God is sovereign in history and it is necessary to be right with him. Individuals and nations are therefore called to live in obedience to God's standards. The message is of judgment and hope. God will save his people but judge those who disobey him. The Messiah's Kingdom will come.

After Solomon's death the Kingdom is divided. The name Israel is retained by the larger (Northern) part, which is ruled by a succession of unjust kings before its fall to the Assyrian Empire. The prophet Amos (a Southerner from Tekoa, near Jerusalem) lived at a time when although the nation was affluent beneath the surface it was morally rotten. Amos denounced the exploitation of the poor, bribery and corruption, the extravagant luxury of the rich and syncretism (the mixing of different religions). The privileges of Israel carried with them responsibilities. Amos says that when the day of the Lord comes it will be a day of judgment not vindication for Israel. Self-sufficiency and pride are the causes of Israel's downfall. Israel's only hope is to seek the Lord and live (5: 4).

Hosea was called by God at the end of Jeroboam II's reign. Jeroboam II was the last powerful king for six Kings succeeded him in 20 years, four of whom assassinated their predecessors. Hosea's message is learned through the unfaithfulness of his own wife whom he loves. God loves Israel with steadfast-love despite Israel's unfaithfulness in idolatry.

Jonah is also set in this period. If Jonah is not the author it may have been written later. The allegory/ history debate must not hide the message. God's concern is for the whole world (Assyrian Capital Nineveh). God's mercy and omnipresence require the response of obedience.

## **2. Prophets of Judah (the Southern Kingdom)**

Judah has twenty kings of whom two, Uzziah and Hezekiah, are outstanding. Hezekiah listens to the great prophet Isaiah and Judah is saved from Assyria. Isaiah proclaims that God is real, sovereign, holy and forgiving. The book of Isaiah is clearly a collection of prophecies and the order is not always easy to follow. Contemporary scholarly debate centres on authorship and whether the whole of the book belongs to the same era - but it is a debate that continues. Taken as a whole the book denounces the corruption of Judah and warns the nations of God's judgment. Yet this is in the context of God's unfailing love and care. The servant of God will bring about the redemption of his people.

Isaiah's contemporary Micah, though from the South, not only denounces the sins of Judah (Jerusalem) but also those of the North (Samaria). Dishonesty and violence will be punished. God requires right conduct rather than right ritual (6: 8). During the Assyrian siege Micah speaks of the deliverer, a King from Bethlehem, the Messiah.

Nahum tells of the destruction of Nineveh (1: 3). He regards this as evidence of the power and anger of God. Habakkuk struggles with the problem of suffering and comes through to the triumph of faith. Only the one who trusts God and remains loyal to him will live. Zephaniah announced God's judgment upon Judah for the sins of the princes, prophets and priests. Zephaniah dismissed the popular thinking that the day of the Lord would bring blessing. He told of God's judgment and punishment for Judah and the fall of Jerusalem but promised the survival of a righteous remnant.

Jeremiah lived through the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon. The book of Jeremiah is not arranged in historical order and this makes it difficult to set against the right background.

### **3. Prophets during the Exile**

After the surrender of Judah, Ezekiel, a younger contemporary of Jeremiah, was taken into exile. Ezekiel teaches that God sees and knows everything. The glory of God throws the sin of the people into an even starker contrast. The book of Ezekiel opens with his trying to convince the exiles that Jerusalem will fall, followed by oracles concerning foreign nations (25 - 32). Only after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple did Ezekiel begin to proclaim the restoration of God's people and the future temple and kingdom. Ezekiel's use of symbols, imagery and acted parables is, in places, very similar to the apocalyptic style of Revelation, which freely uses ideas from Ezekiel.

The book of Daniel contains apocalyptic passages but its great theme is the Kingdom of God. Daniel was an exile from Judah in the court of Babylon and the first part of the book relates to the events over a period of about 70 years.

In the second part of Daniel some interesting ideas are introduced. Daniel believes that God has angels who serve him. In a passage describing the final judgment God appears like an aged man on a throne (7: 9 - 14). One like a 'son of man' (in human form?) comes with the clouds of heaven. This is useful background to some of the sayings of Jesus.

Obadiah, whose little book is the shortest in the Old Testament, is probably not the same as any of the twelve other characters sharing that name in the Old Testament. The dating of the book is very difficult. Obadiah foretells the destruction of the Edomites who were the descendants of Esau. The Edomites lived in the mountains to the south-east of the Dead Sea and helped Babylon against Judah and then to have taken advantage of Judah's weakness during the exile. Obadiah believed in God's ultimate triumph. Judah would be restored but there would be no such future for Edom (18).

#### **4. Prophets after the Exile (post-exilic)**

Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi are the three prophets who go beyond the period of the Babylonian exile. Haggai urged the rebuilding of the ruined temple. Opposition and apathy were considerable enemies. Haggai pointed out that the ills from which the people were suffering were a result of their misplaced priorities. Though the new Temple may not have been quite up to the one that Solomon had built it was nevertheless a foretaste of the glory that was to come.

Zechariah was a contemporary of Haggai and similarly encouraged the rebuilding of the Temple. The book of Zechariah has similarities with Daniel and Ezekiel. There is a marked change between the earlier (1 - 8) and later (9 - 14) chapters but it is difficult to come to any firm conclusion as to why this should be. Zechariah looks forward to a coming ruler in the new coming age and many of the references have been linked with the New Testament account of the life of Jesus.

The name 'Malachi' means 'my messenger' which could mean that the prophet wished to remain anonymous. Malachi probably came about 40 years after Haggai and so would have been in Jerusalem when Nehemiah was governor. Malachi counters the disillusionment, rationalism and ritual-formalism that had set in among the people. Malachi reminds the people of God's love for Israel and that serving God is not without its blessings. Nevertheless that failure of the priests, the problem of mixed marriages and carelessness in meeting tithes and obligations all needed to be addressed. There is the promise that God will come to them.

The message of Joel has themes that occur in Isaiah, Amos and Ezekiel but as very little is known about the prophet it is impossible to date the book. The message of Joel is one of judgment, repentance and restoration and the outpouring of God's Spirit. It is a message not only for Israel but the entire world.

## **FURTHER READING**

Reading books about the Old Testament is no substitute for reading the Bible itself.

### **1. On the whole of the Old Testament**

*The New Lion Handbook to the Bible (Revised)* (Lion)

Motyer: *The Story of the Old Testament* (Candle)

Dillard & Longman: *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Apollos/IVP)

Benware: *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Moody Press)

Ellison: *The Message of the Old Testament* (Paternoster)

Motyer: *A Scenic Route through the Old Testament* (IVP)

Guthrie, Motyer et al: *New Bible Commentary: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Edition* (IVP)

### **2. On books of the Old Testament**

There is a bewildering array of books and commentaries on the Old Testament. Good non-technical commentaries are the best place to start.

A volume is available on most books in:

Bible Speaks Today Series (IVP)

Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (IVP)

The Welwyn Commentaries (Evangelical Press) also have some interesting volumes on many of the Old Testament books but these are arranged under a specific title and not the name of the Old Testament book itself.

The idea of the Bird's Eye View of the Old Testament was inspired by Max E Anders' *30 Days to Understanding the Bible* (Kingsway).

John M Haley  
April 2002