

# The story of God's People

A Handbook to accompany the  
Coventry Diocese  
Bishop's Certificate in  
Discipleship Module:  
*Understanding the  
Bible*

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## Preface to 2010 Edition

This handbook was originally written for the Coventry Diocesan Reader Training Course. It has been given a new lease of life for the BCD Module *Understanding the Bible*. It was completed in 2005 and the book recommendations and web addresses in it have not been revised since then.

I hope it is a useful guide to the 'Story of God's People' and will encourage you to see how your own story is part of the 'big story' of God's salvation.

Richard Cooke

Pentecost 2010

## Preface

It is Epiphany-tide as I write this preface, a time when we remember the Magi journeying to find a Saviour. It was a long journey, guided by a star, which took them to Jerusalem and then on to Bethlehem before they found the child they sought and began the long journey home. Its significance in Matthew's Gospel is that he begins his story with Jesus being found by Gentiles. In this story in Matthew 2:1-12, we can see three sorts of knowledge at work. First there is the star, which required the ancient scientific and scholarly traditions of the Babylonians for interpretation. This is the knowledge, responding to a natural phenomenon, which first sets them on their journey. Then there is the ancient tradition of the Jews, the historic words of God revealed in the Scriptures, which gives the Magi further specific direction towards Bethlehem. Finally, there is a direct communication from God in a dream, with urgent instructions for them. The three sorts of knowledge here are:

- 'natural' knowledge, derived from creation, interpreted by the human intellect, and open to all, whether they are part of the community of faith or not;
- 'faith-tradition' knowledge, derived from the Biblical record of what God has said and done in the past and which the faith-community guards and hands on to future generations;
- 'experiential' knowledge, derived from a special and personal experience (in this case a dream), which God uses with those both outside the faith-community (the Magi) and those within (Joseph in Matthew 1:20 and 2:13).

Through this handbook I have tried to find ways in which you, the reader and learner, can journey into understanding the Bible better, using all three forms of knowledge: intellect, past revelation and personal experience. Unfortunately in the past couple of centuries the Western tradition of knowledge has tended to split them up, and as a result Christian thinking about the Bible has tended to be either dryly intellectual, or unbendingly rooted in the revelation of the past at the expense of the present, or focusing purely on personal experience and 'what God has to say to me now' at the expense of the faith-community as a whole. However, I believe strongly that all three forms can work together, leading to a deeper and richer understanding, and that is what we shall try to do on this journey into the 'World of the Bible'.

The handbooks have been written to accompany two modules of the Coventry Diocesan Reader Training Course over a period of eight years. As such they have been tested and tried by almost a hundred course participants of varying ages and experiences. The chief aim is for the material presented to be accessible to those meeting it for the first time, but also challenging and fresh for those who have a long-term acquaintance with it.

The approach is a distinctive one, which borrows 'web-browser' principles to help you to navigate your way through the material. The best way to explain how it works is by analogy with a restaurant menu. When you visit a restaurant and you like what is on the menu, you have to choose what you will eat, at the expense of other things which may look just as appetising. But do you feel like fish or meat today? How will you choose? How hungry are you? How much time do you have? How much money is there in your bank account?! After you have made your choice, if you like what is served you can always come back another time and sample some other delicacy on offer. So, with these handbooks, no-one is probably

going to be able to eat the whole of the material in one go. You'll get mental indigestion if you do! The idea is to use them as a collection of resources, which will give you information at a variety of levels. Some parts you will need to look at in preparation for the Group Learning Sessions. Other parts you can safely ignore. Others you may want to mark for closer reading at some point when you have a little more time. It's up to you. But remember what Sir Francis Bacon said:

'Some books are to be tasted,  
others to be swallowed,  
and some few to be chewed and digested.'

So I hope you will read what you can and come back for more! Because of this principle you will also find some occasional repetition, if I think you may not have read the point before.

The aim of these handbooks is to help you to understand and take in the story that the Bible tells. You may already know it well, but be prepared to be challenged by it again. Happy reading!

Richard Cooke

Epiphany 2003

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## Handbook Conventions

These conventions are also used in the other handbooks for 'The World of the Bible'.

### Numbering system

The numbering system used follows these conventions:

**A – Main Heading** – glancing through these should tell you where we are going.

**1 – Section heading** – this should make the structure of the argument clear.

**(a) – Subheading** – this should back up the argument in the section heading.

**(i) – Sub-point** – this should give you some detailed information, or point you to further opportunities for study.

It therefore should be possible for you to pursue the argument of the course without getting bogged down in the details. If the material we are looking at is very new to you, try just reading the main and section headings first, before re-reading the whole text.

### Footnotes

I have tried to identify the sources of all quotations used, though a few have escaped the net! When the words 'ibid.' or 'op.cit' are used they mean 'in the same place' and 'reference already given' respectively.

### Dates

BC dates always have 'BC' after them. Remember that they run backwards, so that 925BC is before 910BC! AD dates are generally shown just as the numbers: e.g. 55. When a date has a 'c.' before it, this is short for the Latin word *circa*, meaning 'around', and shows that the date in question is approximate.

In some other books, particularly recent academic ones, you will find the abbreviations 'B.C.E.' and 'C.E.', standing for 'Before the Common Era' and 'Common Era'. These mean the same as BC and AD.

### The Bible and Old and New Testaments

In these handbooks 'The Bible' refers to the Old and New Testaments (usually abbreviated to 'OT' and 'NT'), comprising the 66 books recognised as canonical by the Church of England (the apocryphal or 'Deuterocanonical' books are described by the 39 Articles as those 'which the Church doth read for example of life and instruction of manners; but yet doth it not apply them to establish any doctrine' (Article VI).

In some other books the Old Testament is referred to as 'the Hebrew Bible' which is of course what it is, though often known among Jews as 'TaNaKh', an abbreviation derived from the names of its three divisions: *Torah* (Law), *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and *Ketuvim* (Writings). Some (usually American) books speak of 'the Bible' when in fact they mean the Hebrew Bible (though since this was the book first called 'Bible', they are making a legitimate point that the Christian Bible is a later addition); so excellent books like Richard Elliott Friedman's *Who Wrote the Bible?*, Michael Fishbane's *Biblical Text and Texture* or Meir Sternberg's *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* are in fact solely concerned with the Old Testament. Some writers solve the problem by speaking of the 'Scriptures' – Hebrew and Christian – instead of Old and New Testaments.

### Gender-inclusive language

In recent years there has rightly been concern about whether the words 'man' or 'he' are inclusive when they apply to both men and women. This is a debate which passes some people by, but it does have important implications for a handbook like this. I have tried to remain neutral on issues of gender in what I have written, though quotations from other writers have been left unchanged. On the vexed question of how to speak in a gender-free way of God, I have no very obvious solutions. The substitution of 'Godself' for 'himself' sounds clumsy to me, so I prefer not to use it; I have tried to avoid speaking of God as 'he' unnecessarily, but not always successfully. On the whole I have tried to follow the lead of


the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible in its use of gendered language.

### Glossary

Words printed in **bold** may be ones with which you are unfamiliar. They are explained in the glossary which is at the back of the handbooks.

### Booklists

At the end of the Handbook you will find list of recommended reading. Do not feel that you have to read them all, or even most of them! The aim of the booklists is to make some recommendations of basic books first, then some others that you may want to follow up another time (possibly after you are admitted as a Reader). In addition you will occasionally find boxes like this in the text:


 See Drane *OT* pp.166-70 for more on this topic.

These give more guidance about specific issues, and usually give a reference in one of John Drane's books: *Introducing the Old Testament (OT)* or *Introducing the New Testament (NT)*.

### Web Links

If you have a computer and internet access, there is a wealth of resources available to you. The net is like a giant library which sits on your desk, and there is a great deal of good material about the Bible on it. The links in the text that follows are not guaranteed; web addresses change with bewildering frequency so those quoted here may not work. There are some things to be aware of:

- Don't trust everything you see or read. Try to check out the theological angle of the site (you can often do this by going to the author's home page).
- If you are downloading images or maps, be aware that they take up a lot of memory space on your hard disk.
- Copyright laws allow you to print one copy of a web page for your own personal use, but resist the temptation to do more than that!

 Boxes with this symbol in them give web addresses.

## Part 1 – Introducing the Story of God’s People

‘Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in stories; he did not say anything to them without using a story. So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet: “I will open my mouth in stories, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world.”’ Matthew 13: 34-5

### 1. Seeing the Bible as one story

We are very good at chopping the Bible up into small sections and failing to see the overall story. The way we read the Bible in church often encourages this. But we need to be able to see the ‘big picture’ to make sense of how it all fits together.

#### (a) On Stories

Although the Bible contains many different books, and is written in many different ways, its core is to be found in the story which it tells, a story which is nothing less than a cosmic history from creation to the end of the world. If we are to understand the Bible we must first understand the story it tells.

#### (i) The core of the Bible

Eugene Peterson writes:

Story is the primary way in which the revelation of God is given to us. The Holy Spirit’s literary genre of choice is story. Story isn’t a simple or naive form of speech from which we graduate to the more sophisticated, ‘higher’ languages of philosophy or mathematics, leaving the stories behind for children and the less educated. From beginning to end, our Scriptures are primarily written in the form of story. The biblical story comprises other literary forms – sermons, and genealogies, prayers and letters, poems and proverbs – but *story* carries them all in its capacious and organically intricate plot. Moses told stories; Jesus told stories; the four Gospel writers presented their good news in the form of stories. And the Holy Spirit weaves all this storytelling into the vast and holy literary architecture that reveals God to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the way that he chooses to make himself known. Story. To get this revelation right, we must enter the story.<sup>1</sup>

The first eleven books of the Old Testament, and the first five of the New, form a kind of narrative framework within which the other books can be accommodated. To put the matter a different way: if you took these sixteen books away from the other fifty, how would you understand what was left?

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Peterson *Leap over a Wall* (HarperSanFrancisco 1997) p.3.

## 2. Entering The Story

How do we find a way in to understanding the story? One means of doing so is to take a familiar story from the Bible and use it as a kind of lens through which to look at the whole story.

### (a) The Prodigal Son

Let us begin the process by listening to the familiar story of the Prodigal Son, told in Luke 15:11-32 once again, and using it as a doorway into the bigger story.

How would the first hearers have experienced this story, as Jesus told it? They would have received it, within their own context, as the story of a foolish father who is disgraced by son who he then forgives. Their sympathies would have been with the elder son, who on the face of it behaves impeccably.

Yet Jesus' story overturns this understanding, and his picture of the foolish father is designed to remind them of the God of the Old Testament and his reckless love for Israel. Not only that, but the story of a disgraced son who goes into exile is paralleled also by the experience of Israel. In the story Jesus was proclaiming a message about homecoming which his audience would have been ready to hear.

Through this doorway we get a glimpse of how Jesus himself interpreted the story told in the Bible: a people wandering in a strange country, whom their creator wants to bring home.

### (i) The Parable through peasant eyes

Kenneth Bailey, who has spent many years working with Lebanese peasants, suggests that Jesus' audience would have seen this story in terms of an oriental patriarch. His analysis of the story centres on the following points, which help us to see it afresh:

- v.12a - The request means 'Father, I want you to die – get on with it!' An unthinkable request – one which it is even more unthinkable for the patriarch to agree to.
- v. 12b-13 - The gift is given to the son – clearly this is a wealthy man, with lands, cattle and a substantial house (as the rest of the story makes plain). The son has no right to sell what he has been given until his father is dead. But after a short time he does so, and by turning it into cash brings shame (and potential disaster) on the family. Once again, though, the spotlight would be on the foolishness of the father, who is letting his son get away with (metaphorical) murder. No wonder the son heads for the hills!
- v.13b - The Pharisees amongst us want to translate v.13 as immorality – as the elder son does at the end of the story. But he wants to exaggerate his brother's failures, and the text actually doesn't say that. It just says 'irresponsible living'. The word echoes Proverbs 28:7, which emphasises that a 'companion of gluttons dishonours his father' – the father is still there in the background. Who knows what the younger son did with the money? We can't avoid identifying with the younger son by thinking that

### 'The Return of the Prodigal Son'

Sometimes, to enter the story, it's good to come by a route that is different from words. A powerful interpretation of the story is to be found in Rembrandt's painting of it.

His commentary is in the details: the bare, bruised feet of the son, explaining why the father tells the servants to put sandals on them; the elder son watching in the shadows and still waiting to be found by the father, because until he is, he cannot realise how lost, how far he is from the *shalom* the father wishes for him).

The picture was one of the few left unfinished by Rembrandt at his death. You can find it at <http://www.christusrex.org/www2/art/images/rembrandt06.jpg>

at least we don't squander our money. Maybe it was just unwise investments of some sort – and which of us has never made a mistake in that kind of area? All we know is that the money got lost somehow – and then came the famine; with it would come a general economic downturn, so there would be no chance of recouping the cash.

- v.15-16 - Obviously looking after pigs is a bad occupation for a good Jewish boy! And, of course, this too will reflect on the family and, most of all, the father. Maybe the plan is to regain what he has lost in order to return home with it. But, says the story: 'No one gave him anything'.
- v.17-19 – there's a problem with the way this verse is usually understood. In the two stories which Jesus tells in Luke just before this one, the lost sheep and the lost coin, the active agents are not (of course) the sheep and the coin, but the shepherd and the woman (Luke 15:3 says Jesus spoke in *a* parable, singular, in introducing these three stories). Their owners seek them out, just as God seeks us out, by his grace. But what of this story? Does the younger son decide, of his own accord, to come back. And if he does, don't we have a theological problem here – can we just make a decision to come back of our own free will – don't we need (as the other stories in this chapter emphasise) God to seek us out? In the Bible those who say 'I have sinned' are, almost without exception, those who come to a sticky end – this is the storytelling convention that a group of Pharisees (who are the audience here, see 15:1-3) will expect. Pharaoh says it to Moses in an attempt to get him to call off the plagues (Exodus 9 and 10); Achan uses the phrase of his sin in disobeying God at the capture of Ai during the conquest (Joshua 7); Saul confesses it to Samuel, but his behaviour does not really change, and we are told that God ceases to favour him (1 Sam 15 and 26); last, and most chillingly, Judas uses it in Matthew's gospel, in remorse after his betrayal of Jesus (Matthew 27:4). It is only in the stories associated with David that we really see the phrase used of heartfelt and true repentance and remorse. In all the other cases, the people who use it come to a bad end. Bearing this in mind, it seems likely, given what we know of the character of the younger son already, and the fact that he is at a dead end and facing starvation, that this is not really a repentance; it's a way of getting back home and making the best of a bad job. In fact the phrase in v.17 says just 'coming to himself', i.e. he worked it out. In other words, the son thinks how he manipulated his father, foolish man that we have already established him to be. The son wants to repair their relationship by offering a deal – 'Why don't I come back as your servant, dad?'
- v.20 – 25 - What kind of homecoming had the son projected for himself? A return as a successful businessman, in a few years' time, sweeping in, able to dispense largesse liberally to his aged father and stick-in-the-mud brother? It's certainly not going to be like that. Clearly the story expects a humiliating return – that would be justice. A preacher once altered the details of the story so that the elder brother had the ring and the robe of the father given to him, and the fatted calf killed in honour of his years of faithfulness and service on the farm, with the younger son squirming in the background as a servant, having forfeited his place at the family table. A woman at the back shouted out, 'That's the way it should have been written!' – presumably she was an elder sister! That's the way the story should be for an audience of Pharisees, 'it's only right' they would say. Surely now the father who was such a fool earlier in the story will regain his rightful role as the oriental patriarch we might expect him to be. But of course he doesn't. In the greatest scandal of the story, he comes out to meet the son. Just as in the two previous stories, in fact, this one where the active agent looks for and finds what is lost. The father has been waiting, and he comes, which is bad enough to the audience, but running, too, which is even worse. Lifting up the skirts of his robe in a way that it is utterly undignified and a disgrace to the family and the

village (you can almost hear the villagers, watching in the street, saying 'Well, you can see why the son is like he is, with a father like *that!*'). The indignity is made worse because the father here is behaving in a feminine way. It would have been fine for the boy's *mother* to do this (have you ever wondered where she is in the story?), and so the father here shows himself to be like a mother. Notice that the son's confession is not complete. It's a moot point whether he simply can't get any further with the prepared speech because he's genuinely contrite at being found, or whether the father stops and interrupts him. If you like your theology tidy you'll go for the first option! But the point here is that only when he is found by the seeking father can the son truly articulate his confession. Only when he is truly found does he see how truly lost he was.

- v.25-32 – Now the older son comes into the story. He picks a fight with his father, and refuses to go in. And once again, for the last time, the father acts in a way that no patriarch should. He leaves the party and goes out to look for another son who is lost. It's not so hard to find this one, perhaps, but it still requires an active pursuit of him. 'Come and join the banquet', pleads the old man. And he explains that the banquet is not for the younger brother himself – it's a party of joy at the lost being found, and that peace has been restored to the family. When the boy in verse 27 (usually translated servant, but who could more likely be another son of the family, or possibly the older brother's own son, v.27) gives the older son the news of his brother's return, the phrase he uses is that he has returned 'in peace' (though it is usually translated 'in health'. The underlying Hebrew concept here is *shalom*. *Shalom* has returned to the house, and that is what the older brother is invited to celebrate.

 K.E.Bailey *Jacob and the Prodigal* (Bible Reading Fellowship, Oxford, 2003) has more material on this.

### (ii) The prodigal father

Looking beyond the details of the parable, the image of the father comes into focus. This father is not the standard father of the ancient middle east or even of contemporary England. He doesn't correspond, in this tale of Jesus', to the fathers (or mothers, perhaps) that we know or, in some cases, are. But he does correspond to the passionate and apparently often foolish God of Israel (see Paul's comments on the 'foolishness of God' in 1 Cor 1:25). In Isaiah 57:17-19 he says: 'I was enraged by his sinful greed; I punished him, and hid my face in anger, yet he kept on in his wilful ways. I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will guide him and restore comfort to him, creating praise on the lips of the mourners in Israel. Peace, peace, to those far and near,' says the LORD. "And I will heal them." He also corresponds to the picture of a father with the compassion of a mother that the Old Testament gives, too: Deuteronomy 32:18, the God who gave birth (language used in John 3:5 and several times in 1 John); Ps 131, with its image of the God who feeds the baby at the breast; Is 42:14, and 66:13, which describes God as like a woman in childbirth, and one who comforts her young. And he corresponds to the creator in Genesis 2:9, who comes walking in the garden to look for the children who are in the process of running away from him. The story turns the Pharisees' expectation of natural justice on its head, but does so by weaving in the threads of Old Testament images.

### (iii) The prodigal Israel

There is also another story in the background. Tom Wright summarises Jesus' story like this: 'here is a son who goes off in disgrace into a far country and then comes back, only to find the welcome challenged by another son who has stayed put.' This is the story of Jesus' parable, but it is also, suggests Wright, the story of Israel itself: 'The exodus...is the ultimate backdrop: Israel goes off into a pagan country, becomes a slave, and then is brought back to her own land. But exile and restoration is the main theme. This is what the parable is about.'<sup>2</sup> Though the people had returned in a physical sense to the promised land, in another sense they were still in exile; the great prophecies of restoration had not come true (as an example, see Zechariah 3, which was probably intended by the prophet to refer to the restoration of king Zerubbabel, but which shares many striking details with the parable of the prodigal son). Wright comments that 'Israel went into exile because of her own folly and disobedience, and is now returning simply because of the fantastically generous, indeed prodigal, love of her god.'<sup>3</sup> But the parable is not just a story *about* the God whom Jesus proclaims. It is also a story that claims to *reveal* what God is doing, through his servant, who is none other than the one who tells the story. By telling the story as he does, Jesus leaves a stark choice with his hearers: will they join the feast, by going down the route of repentance, admitting their disgrace? Or will they put themselves beyond the orbit of the Father's influence and stay righteously outside the banquet, and therefore what God is doing through Jesus?

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<sup>2</sup> N.T.Wright *Jesus and the Victory of God* (SPCK London 1996) p.126.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* p.127.

## (b) The Big Story

We can use the story of the prodigal son as a point of entry into the big story that the Bible tells. But a further passage gives us the opportunity to watch how Luke shows us Jesus as interpreting the 'big story'. This is the story of an encounter on the road to Emmaus between Jesus and two of his disciples in Luke 24:13-49. During it, Luke tells us, Jesus, 'beginning with Moses and all the Prophets...explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself' (v.27).

Luke is pretty clear about what Jesus did in the forty days between Easter and Ascension: he ate and he taught, as he had done before, but he taught a little differently. He seems to have spent time showing the disciples how everything fitted together. He moves from telling stories to showing them how the stories, and above all his story, fit with The Story (see also vv.44-6). This is the story which God had told from the beginning of creation, of a family through whom he would bring back to himself the world which had run off to a far country and wasted its resources in wild living. A family which became a nation and ran away again; a nation which Jesus in his stories and actions had called back to God, and which now, he taught, would be revived by God through a message of repentance and forgiveness, by the Holy Spirit. This is what Jesus handed on to the disciples, beginning on the Emmaus Road and continuing for the weeks after it, and which they in turn handed on to others like Paul (see 1 Cor 11:23). Jesus taught them the 'big story' into which their own stories and the stories he had told, fitted.

### (i) Stories in a postmodern world

'Big stories' are out of fashion today, it is sometimes suggested. The 'postmodern' era is defined by its 'incredulity towards metanarratives', which is to say, its disbelief in any 'big stories' or frameworks through which we can organise and understand our experiences. But though 'big stories' are allegedly out of fashion, stories themselves are not; the continuing and growing popularity of the cinema, for example, suggests that there is an appetite for stories still in our culture, and not just for children either. But what these stories do not have is one story behind them, a context which can give meaning to the bits of reality they represent. Perhaps the cinema experience, which can insulate you from the real world, helps us to avoid that larger context; it cuts us off from the question.

There is a good deal of sense in the postmodern diagnosis of our culture; the 'big stories' of scientific progress, Marxism, liberal capitalism or whatever are hard to live by today. But the difference between these big stories and the Christian Story is that they are human constructions, while the gospel-story

#### Seeing the Full Picture

Imagine an art exhibition that only has pictures from Monet's 'yellow' period (when he was suffering from a cataract: 1913-20). The day before you go to see it, vandals break in and ruin the pictures, tearing some, spray painting others, breaking the frames. When you see that exhibition, would you see the true Monet? No, because (a) you would see only a small part of his work, during a time that was not representative; (b) what you did see would be ruined.

Often that is the way in which we judge God, though, from a small segment of experience which is not necessarily representative of the whole. Only by putting our own experiences in the context of the 'big story' which the Bible tells and the church has repeated and continued down the centuries, can we truly understand.

(Adapted from Philip Yancey on Picasso's 'blue' period in M.Cusick 'A Conversation with Philip Yancey' *Mars Hill Review* 1 (1994) pp.89-102.)

in the final analysis is something given to us and revealed. It is the story God tells of his journey to the far country to find those who had run away from him.

The whole of the Bible is one story, made up of many smaller ones. Jesus after his resurrection does not stop by explaining what has happened to him: there is a cosmic scope to his teaching at this stage, as he shows to the disciples that the denouement of this story is the good news going out to all nations, fulfilling the prophecy of Habakkuk 2:14, 'That the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.' The story runs from Genesis to Revelation, from a garden with trees and a river to a garden city with trees and a river. And all that happens in between is the story of how God is going to get the world to be as he wants it to be; Revelation is a final promise that one day all the tears will be wiped away, but that the world is not as God wants it now. The *shalom* of the final kingdom is like the final shalom of the restored household in the story of the prodigal son.

### **(ii) Getting the whole story**

The disciples on the road to Emmaus say 'We had hoped' (v.21). Jesus' approach is to help them to see the big story, in order to put their disappointment into perspective. Only when they see how their (small) experience fits into context do they arrive at a position where it is possible for them to see Jesus – who had been with them all along. Until then their thoughts are so fixed on themselves, so self-absorbed, that they cannot see what (or who) is staring them in the face.

The church of God is a community with a story and a major function of worship is for us to remind each other of the story, in teaching, and to praise God in worship by reminding him of the story (though he doesn't need reminding, of course). The church is therefore a primarily a story-telling community.

The word which Paul uses to describe this 'big story' is 'tradition'. Tradition simply means what is handed on or handed over. Retelling the story in many ways is important, because that is what we hand on to the next generation. In a postmodern world that is sceptical of 'big stories', keeping the narrative line alive is important.

## Part 2 - Letting the Story of God's People Out

### 1. Why Translate?

The Bible is written in two ancient languages – the Old Testament in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek. To understand the story it tells, we must translate.

#### (a) Christianity – a translating faith

Christian faith is about a God who values communication with human beings so highly that he was prepared to become one of them – to translate himself, so to say. Therefore its sacred documents have been readily translated into many languages, in order to communicate the message contained in them.

##### (i) The Septuagint

The process of translation began as far back as the third century BC, when the Jewish community in Egypt made a Greek version of the Hebrew scriptures. This was known as the 'Septuagint' (in Latin numbering, 'LXX', which remains the abbreviation for this translation), because it was thought to have been made by 72 scholars. The Septuagint was the version which New Testament writers quoted from.

##### (ii) Early Christian Translations

As Christianity spread, versions of the New Testament were made into the Coptic (c.250), Ethiopian (c.300), and Gothic (c.350) languages. In 405 Jerome completed a Latin 'Vulgate' version to enable the common ('vulgar') people to read the Bible. In England the first versions of the gospels in the local languages were made around 660, but the first to have widespread use was the translation of John's gospel made by the Venerable Bede on his deathbed in 735.

#### (b) Contrast with other faiths

In Islam it is clearly understood that the Qur'an is only authoritative in its Arabic form. To understand it fully, therefore, you must learn Arabic. The same applies to the sacred books of most other faiths. The contrast with Christianity is a marked one. Christians are not required to read Hebrew or Greek to understand the scriptures. While the Bible has an important place in the Christian faith, the message is more important than the book itself. The task of translation is to liberate the message.

## 2. Types of Translation

There are different ways of translating, and it is useful to understand why, for example, the 'Good News' Bible is written in simpler English than the NIV or NRSV. You may gain in understanding from the 'Good News', but lose the accuracy of translation.

### (a) Accuracy and Communication

If you have ever been abroad on holiday you will know how hard it can be to make yourself understood, because words translated directly into another language do not have quite the same meaning. This is true even if you go to another English-speaking country like the USA! Translators always have to make some sort of compromise between maximum accuracy and maximum communication. Their translations will lie at some point on this line:

Maximum accuracy ----- Maximum Communication  
 Literal Translation-----'Dynamic Equivalent' Translation-----Paraphrase

### (b) Biblical Translation in Action – 1 Corinthians 13:1

As an example of translation in action, and the differences between various types of translation, consider the following versions of 1 Cor 13:1:

<i>Literal</i>	<i>Dynamic Equivalent</i>	<i>Paraphrase</i>
If in the tongues of men I speak and of angels but I do not have love I have become sounding brass or tinkling cymbal.  (Alfred Marshall)	If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.  (NRSV)	If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate.  (Eugene Peterson)

Can you see how different aims may result in different renderings of the same Greek original?

#### (i) Literal Translation

This feels a bit stilted. The phrase (which is directly taken from the Greek) of 'sounding brass' is hard for us to understand without knowing some historical background.

#### (ii) 'dynamic equivalence'

This approach tries not to go too far from the literal rendering. This translation makes some things a bit clearer, such as the 'noisy gong'. But it is also at pains to make sure we don't think that the Greek 'men' excludes women, so 'mortals' is substituted to recognise the range of the Greek term *anthropos*. It is looking not for a 'direct' equivalent but a 'dynamic' one which conveys the meaning. A 'dynamic equivalent' translation reads better than a literal one, but it is still clearly a translation - you wouldn't come up with these phrases in English. The 'dynamic equivalent' approach is a compromise which tries to make meaning clear without departing too far from the original.

#### (iii) The Paraphrase

This could have been written in English, but it substitutes an English (or American!) idiom about a rusty gate for the Greek comparison with noisy musical instruments. 'Human eloquence' is strictly an interpretation rather than a translation of 'tongues [languages] of men'. The paraphrase may speak


more directly to us today, but at the price of possibly losing the concept which Paul was trying to convey.

### **(c) The Gulf of Language and Time**

As we can see from the example of 1 Cor 13:1, the Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible not only present us with a gulf of language, but one of time as well. We need to know some things about the time as well as the language in which these books were written.

#### **(i) Problems of Literalism**

The Islamic canonisation of the Arabic text of the Qur'an means that Muslims can always refer back to a definitive text. The problem for Christians is that the definitive text of the Bible is hard to get back to, and the fact that the OT is written in Hebrew gives a further difficulty. Ancient Hebrew is a language written without vowels or spaces between words, which means that the reader has to add them to find out what the text says. Much of the time this is not too difficult; a certain combination of consonants can yield only one meaning. But at other times it can be deeply frustrating. Cullen Murphy points out that the English consonants GDSNWHR could mean 'God is now here' or 'God is nowhere'<sup>4</sup>: there's rather a contrast between the two! This is why some verses have a footnote saying 'Hebrew obscure' or 'probable reading'.

 The New International Version has a comprehensive website devoted to it, which gives fascinating insights into the principles of translation if you are interested. See <http://www.gospelcom.net/ibs/niv/>

### **(d) The Task of Translation**

Anyone with a public role of preaching is a translator. Their job is to translate the stories, ideas and concepts of the Bible so that they can be understood today. You may not be able to read Greek or Hebrew, but the task of translation remains: how will you interpret the passage which you must preach from? This module is designed to help you understand the Bible with a view to translating and interpreting it for yourself. Look at the way your own Bible translates 1 Cor 13:1. Where would you place it on the line between literal translation and paraphrase? How would you 'translate' what it says for your home congregation? What might its message for them be?

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<sup>4</sup> C.Murphy *The Word According to Eve* (London 1999) p.45

**(i) Hermeneutics**

Hermeneutics is a name used for the process of translation of concepts and thoughts from one culture to another. Interestingly, the Greek word used in Luke 24:27 for 'explained' is *hermeneuein*, from which 'hermeneutics' is derived. Hermeneutics centres on the interplay between three parties in the exchange of information: the *author*, the *text* and the *reader*, or the *sender*, the *message* and the *receiver*. Any three-way transaction like this is complex, but especially so when the text is regarded as in some sense inspired and therefore authoritative. What are the respective contributions of the three parties, and what weight do they have?


**Jesus goes to Hollywood?**


The paintings of great artists of the past helped to bring biblical stories alive, but today the medium which people experience most often is film or video. There is a growing number of visual 'translations' of the Bible.


The contemporary approach probably began with Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St Matthew* (1964) which follows the text of Matthew in a documentary style. Since then Franco Zeffirelli's TV film *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977) has given a 'straight' retelling of the story. Recently S4C has produced a splendid animated Old Testament series of 30 minute videos, as well as the animated feature film *The Miracle Maker* (2000) which sees the story of Jesus through the eyes of Jairus' daughter. Hollywood has also retold the story of Moses as *Moses; Prince of Egypt* (1999). These films may not follow the biblical text directly (though it is surprising how faithful to it they often are) but they are translating the stories for a contemporary audience.

In a category of its own is Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). It attempted to give a realistic portrayal and uses Aramaic and Latin with subtitles. It's worth asking how much of a 'translation' it is.

For more on this theme see

 'The text this week' web-site offers a movie index suggesting film scenes which are illustrations of biblical passages. You can find it at [www.textweek.com/movies/movies.htm](http://www.textweek.com/movies/movies.htm). Mel Gibson's *Passion* has a whole page of links to itself.

 'The Messianic figure in film' by Matthew McEver is for real film buffs looks at Christ-like figures in contemporary cinema. It is at [www.unomaha.edu/~wwwjrf/McEverMessiah.htm](http://www.unomaha.edu/~wwwjrf/McEverMessiah.htm);

 Drane *Introducing the New Testament* pp.458-469 is a good basic introduction to hermeneutical issues. A simple introduction is Richard Briggs *Reading the Bible Wisely* (London 2003). Much more detailed is R.H.Stein *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible* (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1994) Chapter 1.

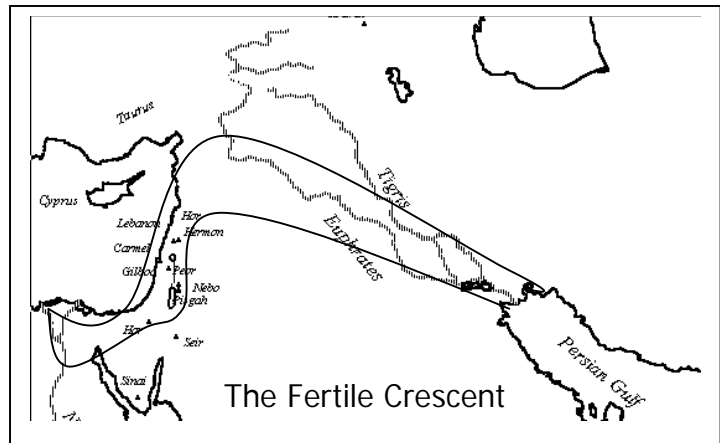
## Part 3 – Telling the Story of God’s People

### 1. Prologue – ‘In the Beginning’

The first book of the Bible takes its name from the Greek meaning of ‘Genesis’ – ‘in the beginning’. These stories are the ones which the people of Israel told to account for how the world came to be the way that it is.

#### (a) The Old Testament in Context

The Bible relates the story of the world from ‘the beginning’; but when Israel began to develop an identity of its own, between 1400-1200BC, it was part of a world and a civilisation that was already old. The ‘fertile crescent’ which extends from the Nile delta round to the Persian Gulf, following low-lying land surrounded by mountains, was the cradle of civilisation, which began with the development of agriculture, towns and a settled economy between 5000-3000 BC.



#### (i) Jericho


Jericho, nestling in the valley of the River Jordan, is based on a natural spring. It has the longest record so far uncovered of continuous occupation, being first settled around 9000 BC. It was surrounded by a stone wall about 8000BC, and became a site of grain cultivation from about 7000BC. Although periods of occupation alternated with periods of abandonment, the city which the Israelites attacked during Joshua’s conquest around 1300-1200BC already had a settlement history of over seven millennia.

#### (ii) Ancient Civilisations

Writing, architecture, sculpture and metal-working all reached a high level of sophistication around 3000BC, a period when agriculture had developed sufficiently to yield a surplus, releasing part of the population for other tasks. Major civilisations developed in the region of the Nile delta southwards, and across the flood plain created between the Tigris and Euphrates. Egypt, largely isolated from the rest of the civilised world at this stage by the Sinai and Arabian deserts, developed peacefully. On the ‘great plain’ of Mesopotamia, the Sumerians were the first group of people to develop an urban culture, to exploit the potential of the wheel, and to lay the foundations for mathematics and astronomy (the 360° circle and the 60 minute hour were invented by the Sumerians). As the Sumerian city states (which included Ur) grew, they fell into territorial disputes. Around 2300BC the Akkadians, led by King Sargon, moved south and conquered the Sumerian cities. On Akkadian military supremacy, Sargon founded an empire inherited by his sons and their descendants, which became a wealthy magnet to other civilisations surrounding the ‘great plain’ of Mesopotamia. Sargon’s family was later overthrown, and by the end of the third millennium BC Ur had become the major centre of power.

**(iii) Ur**

Ur in the early second millennium BC was a centre of intellectual and artistic achievement. It was close to the Persian gulf (the coastline at the time being further inland than it is now), and this gave access to the sea routes which connected the city to the civilisations of the Indus to the east and the Nile (via the red Sea) to the West. It was a highly cosmopolitan city, from which Abraham came (Gen 11:31).

 The high quality British Museum web-site has many exhibits pictured from Ur. Go to [www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/compass/](http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/compass/) and type 'Ur' into the search engine. Pictures of 59 exhibits from ancient Ur will appear, and by clicking on each one you can find a commentary about them. The 'Ram caught in a thicket' is worth looking at first.

**(b) Creation and Flood – the 'primeval history'**

The stories of Genesis 1-11 were not finally completed in their present form until after the exile to Babylon, perhaps as late as 400BC. Although this has led some to consider these to be very late compositions, source-criticism suggests that the traditions underlying the stories were much older. There are significant differences between Genesis 1-11 and the other stories of creation and flood which have been found in Sumerian literature, but there are also strong similarities. Few doubt that the Sumerian stories originate around 1600-2000 BC, and if this is so, it seems reasonable to assume that their counterparts in Genesis may have been circulating orally by that time.


If we see these chapters in this Sumerian context, some of the scientific issues which have dominated discussion of them since Darwin seem to lose their impact. Genesis 1-11 retells what may have been a commonly-understood ancient Near Eastern primeval history, but in such a way as to make it clear that history is not primarily made by humans, but by God. It also emphasises that what is wrong with the world results from human sin, not divine mischief; and that God is engaged in a rescue attempt to restore the good creation he has made (Gen 8:22). Thus by the end of Genesis 11 we find the stage is set for the first figure whose historical context we can recognise: Abraham.

**(i) Creation or evolution?**

We noted in 2 (a) (i) the two creation accounts, and of course these have been a source of bitter argument since Darwin's day. The dispute between different views of creation raises questions which the writers of Genesis were not asking, however. Gordon Wenham, a British Old Testament scholar, looks at the issue this way:

The ancient oriental background to Gen 1-11 shows it to be concerned with rather different issues from those that tend to preoccupy modern readers. It is affirming the unity of God in the face of polytheism, his justice rather than his caprice, his power as opposed to his impotence, his concern for mankind rather than his exploitation. And whereas Mesopotamia clung to the wisdom of primeval man, Genesis records his sinful disobedience. Because as Christians we tend to assume these points in our theology, we often fail to recognize the striking originality of the message of Gen 1-11 and concentrate on subsidiary points that may well be of less moment....Though historical and scientific questions may be uppermost in our minds as we approach the text, it is doubtful that they were in the writer's mind, and we should therefore be cautious about looking for answers to questions he was not concerned with. Genesis is primarily about God's character and his purposes for sinful mankind. Let us beware of allowing our interests to divert us from the central thrust of the book, so that we

miss what the Lord, our creator and redeemer is saying to us.<sup>5</sup>


 The Internet History Sourcebook has links to many ancient creation stories. The index is at [www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/asbook03.html#Babylonia](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/asbook03.html#Babylonia)

### (ii) Men and Women in the Creation Stories

In the past the creation narratives of Genesis 2-3 have been used to justify subordination of women, especially in the light of 3:16: 'he shall rule over you.' Many in the Christian era have set up a 'God-men-women-children' hierarchy on the basis of this verse, following the fourth-century Augustine of Hippo. This in turn has led in recent years to feminists rejecting a church which is founded, apparently, on such sexist and patriarchal texts. But is this really what Genesis 2-3 is about? Phyllis Trible, an American feminist biblical scholar, suggests otherwise, in a close reading of the creation story which disputes traditional interpretation. In particular, Trible argues that in Gen 2:7 the word '*adham*' means 'human' and is not referring to a being of male gender. The text uses a different word ('*ish*') as the creature from which the rib is taken to form the woman ('*ishshah*'). Only in the differentiation of woman from human is the identity of man created. Therefore Eve is no afterthought, but in a sense the crown of creation. And though she is presented as the one who falls into temptation first, she is also seen in this passage in Genesis 3 as being intelligent and perceptive in contrast to Adam's rather passive and dull role. The command that the man will rule over the woman is part of the curse put on Eve after the fall (Gen 3:16). It is not part of the creation God intended. Even as conservative a commentator as John Stott writes:

From the beginning 'man' was 'male and female', and men and women were equal beneficiaries both of the divine image and of the earthly rule. There is no suggestion in the text that either sex is more like God than the other. No. Their resemblance to God and their stewardship of his earth (which must not be confused, although they are closely related) were from the beginning shared equally, since both sexes were equally created by God and like God.<sup>6</sup>

From this recognition flows the view that men and women were created by God to be equal, and that the church as a redeemed community should be a place of sexual equality.

 On the creation stories in general, see Drane *OT* pp.258-65, D. Atkinson *The Message of Genesis 1-11* (IVP, Leicester, 1990) and E. Lucas *Can We Believe Genesis Today?* (Leicester 2001). On men and women see C. Murphy *The Word according to Eve* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1999) pp.52-5 and E. Storkey *What's Right With Feminism* (SPCK, London, 1985) pp.153-4.

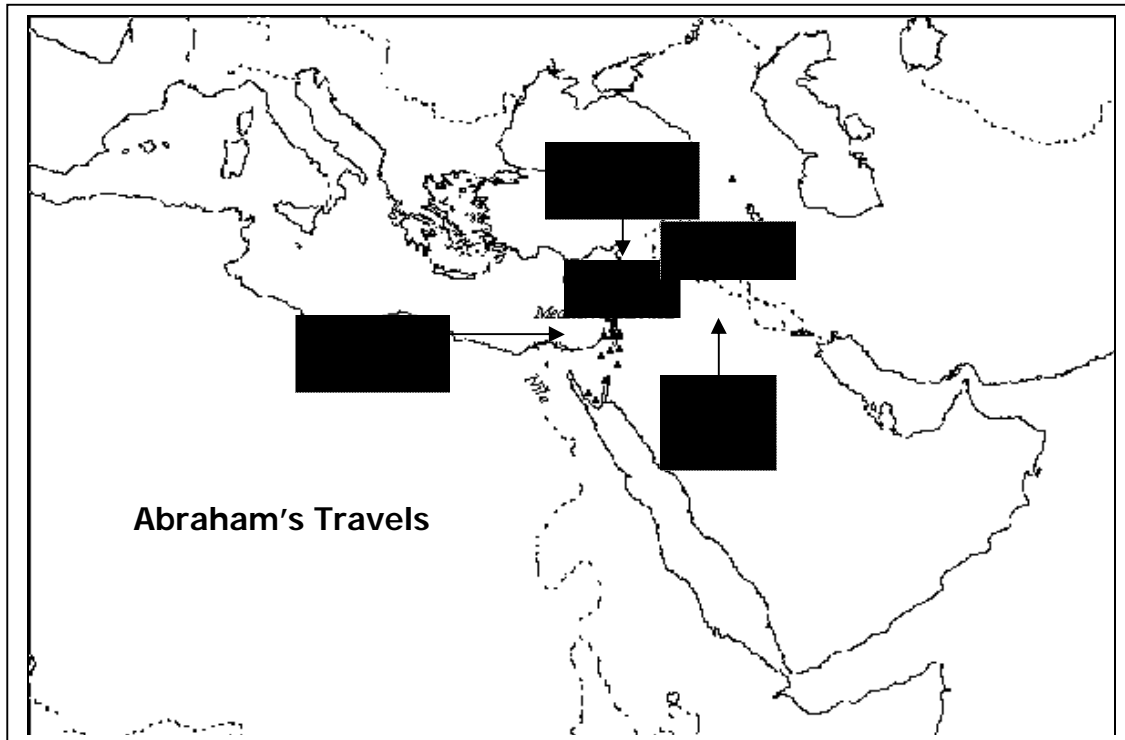
<sup>5</sup> Gordon Wenham *Genesis 1-15* (Word, Milton Keynes 1987) pp.i, liii.

<sup>6</sup> J. Stott *Issues Facing Christians Today* (HarperCollins, London, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1999) pp.289-90.

## 2. The story begins

Abraham is the 'father of faith' (see Romans 4 for Paul's explanation of this), but not just for Christians – Jews and Muslims also revere him as their founder. The story of Israel really begins with him, and his response to the call of God (Gen 12:1-3). The section of the Old Testament dealing with Abraham covers Genesis 12-25.

### (a) 'Go to the land that I will show you' (Gen 12:1)



The map above shows the extent of Abraham's travels. Beginning in Ur, he settled with his father in Haran, a city on a major trade route between Syria and Assyria. He later travelled down to Egypt, and finally died in Machpelah near Hebron, in the hill country between the Eastern Mediterranean coastal plain and the Dead Sea. A curve linking these four points on the map gives a clear picture of the 'fertile crescent' which connects the major civilisations of around 2000 BC.

### (i) A Historical Figure?

Nineteenth-century scholarship tended to view the Abraham stories as a 'mythical' attempt to create an identity for Israel, and of little historical value. Archaeology since the First World War has uncovered a great deal of the background to the era of Abraham, however, and shows the biblical text as a broadly accurate reflection of life in those times. There is no historical evidence of Abraham himself, but some of a travelling group which inhabited Haran. Given the strong traditional link between Abraham and Hebron (where his tomb is reckoned to lie beneath the Mosque), a strong argument for Abraham's historicity can be made. But since there is no direct evidence, some scholars continue to maintain that Abraham may be a largely fictitious character.

**(ii) Traditions Preserved**

Whatever the historical roots of these stories, it is clear that for the later people of Israel Abraham was the first truly to worship the God who would reveal himself to them as Yahweh (see Joshua 24:2-3). Therefore the stories about him were carefully told and retold, sometimes in a form that developed beyond the Genesis narratives (e.g. Acts 7:2-8).

**(b) A Journey to a Promised Home and Family**

The promise given to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3, and several times later in the story, centres on two things: a land to live in, and a family to occupy it. Conquering and holding on to the land, and identifying and holding together the people are themes that dominated the history of Israel (and continue to do so today). Connected with these two promises is the fact that Abraham is also called to embark on a journey: he becomes a pilgrim. The story of Israel in the Old Testament is largely one of a journey to a home and a family, following the pattern of Abraham, the 'father of faith.'

 On Abraham, see Drane *OT* pp.42-46.

### 3. Egypt and Exodus

Abraham's grandson Jacob took his family to Egypt as a result of famine in Canaan. There the family grew over centuries into a large people, who became slave labour for the Egyptians. Under the leadership of Moses, the people left Egypt for freedom in the promised land of Canaan.

#### (a) 'A Wandering Aramean' (Deuteronomy 26:5)

The ancient harvest liturgy of Israel preserved the story of Jacob's journey from the north ('Aram') to Egypt and the subsequent events there. Jacob is the figure first given the name 'Israel' (Gen 32:28 – the name means 'one who struggles with God'). From his twelve sons come the twelve tribes of Israel.

#### (i) Wanderers

During the period in which Jacob is to be located (c.1600-1400 BC) many families or groups of families, like Jacob's, were on the move across the ancient Near East. These wanderers (who would have been similar to the Bedouin of later times), found Egypt a likely refuge in times of famine. The Egyptians were superior in both the natural resources of water available to them, and also their irrigation systems. The story of Jacob and his family's search for grain in Egypt (see Gen 42), and their subsequent settlement to see out the hard times in the Nile delta at the instigation of a government official (Gen 45:10) fits with what we know of conditions at the time.

#### (ii) Arameans

The *Aram Naharain* ('field of the rivers') was the ancient term for the North Syrian plain, between the Orontes and Euphrates, and possibly reaching farther south into Palestine. The traditional formula of Deuteronomy 26 preserves the sense that Jacob, though dwelling in the land that had been promised to Abraham, was not settled there. He was still a wanderer, but Aram was his homeland.

### (b) The Joseph story

The summary of the story of Israel quoted above does not mention Joseph, which is why some scholars regard the stories about him as created independently from the rest of the Genesis narratives. The Joseph story (Genesis 37-50) is a single dramatic plot, and the success of *Joseph and his Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* shows that the story can still easily stand on its own. Nevertheless, it is significant that while the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob fit the general picture of ancient Near Eastern society in the second millennium BC, with Joseph the story seems to come into closer focus as we encounter Egyptian culture. Here is a tale of a man in a society which we can recognise easily from the historical remains of Egypt which survive. And there is also evidence of a significant number of 'foreigners' who rose to occupy positions of power in Egypt, just as the Joseph story claims Joseph himself did.

#### (i) A Story with a Moral

Elements of the Joseph story seem to have been shared with contemporary Egyptian literature (the story of Joseph's attempted seduction by Potiphar's wife, for example, is very similar to *The Tale of Two Brothers*, c.1250 BC). But while the literary art employed in the Joseph story matches or surpasses other ancient stories, the really significant point about it is the way in which there is a moral woven in to the plot. In gentle ways throughout the story (e.g. Gen 39:2, 3, 5, 21, 23) the narrator tells us that 'the Lord was with Joseph'. Joseph himself always makes it clear that God is in control of what happens (e.g. Gen 41). There is no sign of the characteristic Egyptian elements of magic and mystery in this story; God's actions are explicable to those, like Joseph, who seek to serve him. Once again there is a major contrast between the God of the Israelites and the capricious gods of the rest of the ancient world. Finally, Joseph concludes the story as he says to his brothers 'You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives' (Gen 50:20), an affirmation that God has been working to draw good consequences out of evil.

#### (ii) Egyptian Culture

In the words of Herodotus, a Greek historian of the fifth century BC, Egypt is 'the gift of the Nile.' In effect it is a six-hundred mile long oasis. From 3100 BC, when Lower Egypt (the Nile delta) and Upper Egypt (from Memphis south to the first cataract of the Nile at Aswan), were united under one ruler, Egypt was the most sophisticated civilisation on earth, and a major power in the Eastern Mediterranean; this situation lasted until the conquest by Alexander in 332 BC. Egypt was also a remarkably stable society. Isolated by desert to the west, south and east, and sea to the north, Egypt was easy to defend. Trade was important, for there is little timber available in Egypt, but sea routes across the Mediterranean and down the Red Sea enabled the Egyptians to be in contact with other parts of the fertile crescent on their own terms. The cyclical rhythm of Egyptian life was governed by the annual seasons of flood, growth and drought, and the religious system similarly by the daily cycle of the sun, and the annual cycle of natural death and rebirth. The architectural achievements of ancient Egypt have arguably not been surpassed: the pyramids and the Valley of the Kings continue to astonish.

Egypt's rulers for the earlier 1400 years of its history largely concentrated on their own lands, and avoided costly and dangerous foreign wars. The 'New Kingdom' (c.1500-1000BC) represented a new expansionist approach, and during this era most of Palestine and Syria, as well as Nubia to the south, came under Egyptian rule. The first half of the New Kingdom period was a time of unprecedented wealth, reaching its peak in the time of Akhenaten

(c.1360 BC). The tomb of his successor, the boy king Tutankhamun (c.1350 BC), shows the riches and splendour of Ancient Egypt. Ramses II reigned for over sixty years (c.1279-1213 BC). Early military defeats led him to resume the old policy of Egyptian isolationism, though peace treaties with the Hittites, a growing warlike power expanding from their base in Asia Minor, kept a token Egyptian presence in Syria. Egypt continued to be a major power, occasionally sending armies out into Palestine (1 Kings 14:25 records one of the last of these expeditions), but the heroic period of Egyptian domination was over. It was some time in the middle of the era of the New Kingdom that Moses was born.

 There are many excellent Ancient Egypt web-sites. [www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/asbook04.html](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/asbook04.html) is a good place to start, while there is an excellent web-site of the British Museum collections, at [www.ancientegypt.co.uk/menu.html](http://www.ancientegypt.co.uk/menu.html). You can even find out about ancient Egyptian plumbing at [www.theplumber.com/egypt.html](http://www.theplumber.com/egypt.html)!

### (c) Moses and the Exodus


The early life of Moses is a Hebrew tradition set against an Egyptian background. His name is basically an Egyptian one, which comes from the same root, *msy* ('born of'), as Ramses (which means 'son of Ra', and could be written Ra-moses). Yet it has lost its first part, and is interpreted in Exodus 2:10 as a play on Hebrew words - by an Egyptian princess! Certainly if Moses did have the kind of upbringing suggested in Exodus, he would have been a highly educated man, bred to expect leadership. After killing a man in an attempt to protect some Hebrew workers, Moses fled from the Egyptian authorities, and encountered God while working as a shepherd in Sinai. His subsequent return to court to demand the release of his people led to series of plagues in Egypt, culminating in the death of the first-born, which the Israelites escaped by the Passover ritual. The people of Israel escaped from Egypt, and were dramatically delivered as they crossed the Red Sea to freedom. On these events the faith of the Old Testament is based.

#### (i) I AM WHO I AM – the Name of God

In Gen 3:14, God reveals himself to Moses as 'I am who I am.' The disclosure of the divine name Yahweh in this enigmatic phrase has generated a great deal of discussion down the centuries. The Hebrew phrase may equally well mean 'I will be who I will be', as many have pointed out – but that doesn't really move the discussion very far! The fact that Moses asks what God's name is (Ex 3:13) is significant. Names only apply to people in Old Testament times, so the implication is that Moses knows he is talking here to a personal god; and the clue which names gave to people and their past history or character is seen in Moses' own name (Ex 2:10). So in learning the name of God, Moses will find out what sort of person he is. There are at least three points which emerge from this:

- The root verb of the phrase is 'to be'. This is a claim that the God encountered by Moses is the source of all that is, all that has been created.
- The verb can also mean 'will be'. This God is also the source of all that is to come, he is the power of the future.
- The verb is also personal and present. It can mean 'I am - here and now.' This is perhaps the most important meaning, because it emphasises that Moses is encountering in a living form the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who for a long time seemed to have forgotten them, but has now remembered them (cf. Ex 2:24.; 3:7-9). Moses' message is that the God of their ancestors is back in business – in contrast to the gods they have recently been worshipping in Egypt, who have done nothing to help them (cf. Joshua 24:14).

Theodore Vriezen has suggested a translation which sums up these points like this: 'I will be there, as I am here.' That is, as the people trust the promise, they will find God going ahead of them in his mighty acts of deliverance.

 On the name of God, see Drane *OT* pp.49, 243-5.

#### (ii) The Plagues and the Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart

The sequence of ten plagues which are visited on Egypt forms the content Exodus 8-12. Here too we see evidence of detailed Egyptian background to the story: the ten plagues form a critique of Egyptian religion. The first plague repudiates the power of Ha'pi, the god of the Nile floods, by turning the river-water to blood. The ninth plague demonstrates the powerlessness of Ra, the sun god, as darkness lies across the land for three days. Symbols of other, lesser gods (such as Heqit, a fertility goddess whose symbol was the frog) also crop up among the plagues. The final plague, the death of the first-born,


represents 'judgement on all the gods of Egypt' (Ex 12:12). Yet the power and magic of the Egyptian gods is not regarded as empty (see Ex 7:11, 22, 8:7). Rather, the story seeks to show that the God of Israel is a greater god than the Egyptian ones, that he is able to work a 'deeper magic' in C. S. Lewis' words, but a magic that ultimately saves and rescues his people.


Some scientists have concluded that the sequence of plagues could be the logical result of an exceptionally high flooding of the Nile. Demonstrating that this is so does not answer the question of timing, however: Moses would have been a pretty good scientist to have predicted these natural phenomena at the precise time when he wished to speak to Pharaoh!

Perhaps more of a problem is the repeated refrain through these chapters that God 'hardened Pharaoh's heart' (Ex 4:21, 7:3, 10:20, 27, 11:10, 14:4, 8, 17). What is the point of these plagues falling on the people of Egypt, if God had already determined that Pharaoh would not react favourably to them? On some occasions Pharaoh hardens his heart himself (8:15, 32, 9:12, 34). From this it would seem that the idea about a hard heart answers the question, why did the signs of Yahweh's presence and power not convince the Egyptian court of his existence (see Ex 5:1-2)? Their reaction to the signs is a refusal to listen or to see what is in front of their eyes. Perhaps it is a pride in their own gods which makes them fail to recognise what God is doing. These passages remain as a puzzle to us; the theme of hardening appears nowhere else in the Old Testament, and is perhaps a reminder of the way the editors/writers preserved traditions even when they themselves may not have been wholly sure of what they meant. The hardening of Pharaoh's heart may be an argument in favour of the antiquity of the text.

### (iii) The Exodus

It is clear from the way that the Exodus is referred to in the rest of the Old Testament that it was the foundational event for Israel. At the heart of the identity of Israel was the conviction that God had rescued them from Egypt: 'the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders' (Deut 26:8). But as research into the ancient world developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, scholars noted that there was no evidence in any other written source of these events. They were highly sceptical about their truth, concluding that the biblical narrative could not be taken at face value. While it might have a historical core, they thought, it had been so embroidered as to make that core impossible to reconstruct. The apparent biblical date of the Exodus, 1440 BC, was therefore rejected in favour of a date around 1250 BC (which is the date most textbooks still use), which seems to fit some other details of the story better. We shall consider this matter in more detail in the next handbook, but it is enough to note here that although the weight of scholarly opinion points one way, there are significant problems with its methods.

 On the problems of dating the Exodus, see Drane *OT* pp.58-61.

 Web-pages dealing with the general issues of ancient Near-Eastern chronology are indexed at [www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/asbook03.html#Common Issues](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/asbook03.html#Common%20Issues)

### (iv) Miriam's Song

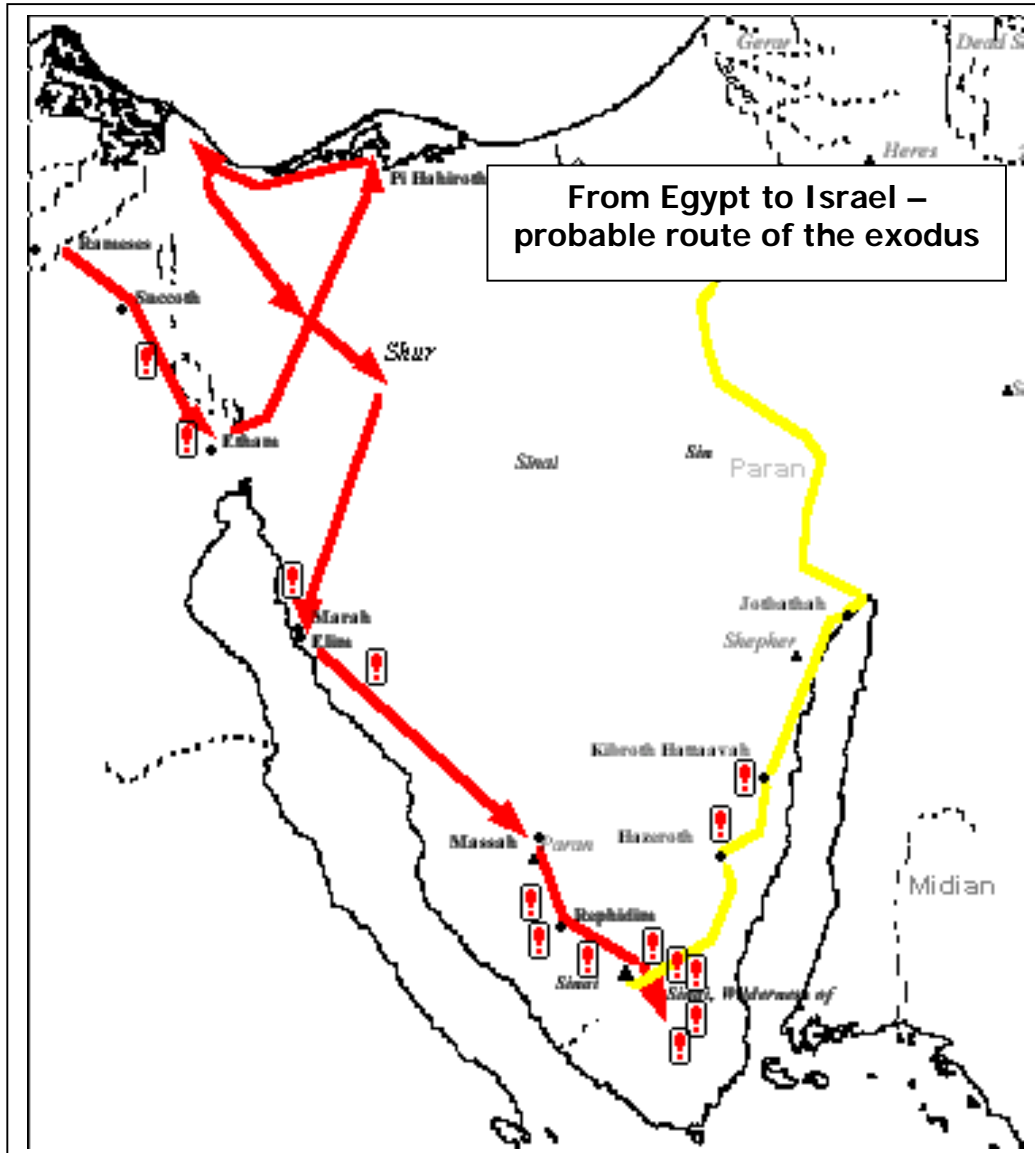
Tucked away at the end of the story of the deliverance from Egypt is a brief postscript to the Exodus. Following Moses and the Israelites' song of triumph, we read that 'Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her, with tambourines and dancing. Miriam sang to them: "Sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea" (Exodus 15:20-1). This song repeats the first line of Moses' song, but it has been suggested that this is because that line has been incorporated as the title of the first song, which otherwise shares all the characteristics of a psalm. It is intriguing that Moses' song elsewhere refers to 'Pharaoh and his chariots', while this fragment speaks of the 'horse and his rider'. One suggested solution is that Miriam's words are the original song, which has been expanded by a later writer into Moses' song of triumph. If this is so, and there is evidence that these words may be older than the rest of the text, Miriam's song may indeed be the song which the women of Israel sang after their deliverance. Hans Walter Wolff writes, 'We can feel the breath of those who have been rescued. They do not sing the power or cunning of the men of Israel, or Moses' skill as leader. Yahweh alone is the one they rejoice in, the one who rescues the oppressed.'<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> H.W.Wolff *The Old Testament – A Guide to its Writings* (London 1974) p.8.

#### (d) Forty Years in the Wilderness


During a period of wandering in the desert the people received the law from Yahweh, and the promise of entry into the promised land of Canaan (which until recently had been under Egyptian rule). During the wandering came the realisation that through the deliverance of the slaves from Egypt, God had created a new nation of Israel. They were his new creation, redeemed from the waters of death. In the law they had both instructions for worship, but also instructions of how to live together. All was ready for them to enter the promised land.



#### (i) Law Codes and Covenants

The giving of the law by Yahweh at Mount Sinai (Ex 20-24) was a defining moment for Israel after the Exodus. It revealed how God wanted them to live, and how they should act as the people known by his name. There are other law codes from the ancient world: the laws of Hammurabi of Babylon (c.1750 BC) are the oldest surviving attempt to collect the laws and customs of a land (in this case, Sumer) into a single code. Though there are similarities with the law of Moses (Hammurabi's law 196 establishes the 'eye for an eye' principle, for example), the really distinctive aspect of Israelite law was its basis in a covenant between Yahweh and his people. The covenant was similar in

pattern to legal treaties made between peoples in the ancient Near East: in these one king would make a contract with another, promising protection in return for exclusive loyalty. Often such treaties were inscribed on stone tablets, and cancellation of the treaty was enacted by smashing them (cf. Ex 32:19). The making of the covenant at Sinai uses elements of the treaty-tradition, but recasts it into a partnership between God and his people. It bound the people exclusively to their God, as other peoples were bound to their kings. There had, of course, been previous covenants: with Noah and the whole of creation (Gen 9:11-17), and with Abraham (Gen 15). But where the primary focus of these covenants is between individuals and God, the Sinai covenant involves the whole people of Israel: 'When Moses went and told the people all the Lord's words and laws, they responded with one voice, "Everything the LORD has said we will do."' (Ex 24:3)

 See Drane *OT* pp.55-6 for more on the covenant.

### (ii) 'Justice and righteousness'

The Ten Commandments were traditionally understood as having been given on two tablets. This made it possible for interpreters to distinguish between the first five and the last five:

1. Worship no other gods	6. Do not commit murder
2. Make no images	7. Do not commit adultery
3. Do not misuse the name of God	8. Do not commit theft
4. Keep the Sabbath	9. Do not bear false witness
5. Honour your father and mother	10. Do not covet others' possessions

The first five relate to righteousness or piety towards God, the second five to justice towards others. The 'shorthand' of 'righteousness and justice' can be found in many places in the Old Testament (e.g. Ps 33:5, 89:14, 97:2, 103:6, Isaiah 9:7, 33:5, Jeremiah 9:24, Hosea 2:19). When Jesus summarised the Law as 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength,' and 'Love your neighbour as yourself' (Mark 12:30-31), it was probably this distinction that he had in mind. The ten commandments form a kind of reminder of the character of the obedient life, and can be easily counted on the fingers, with the two sections divided between the hands.

### (iii) Why Did Moses Not Enter the Promised Land?

Deuteronomy records Moses' farewell to the Israelites, and his encouragement to them to obey all the laws that they had been given. After forty years' wandering in the desert, they now stand ready to enter the land promised to them for so long. Moses himself stands at the top of Mount Nebo, the hills and deserts behind him, looking down across the fertile Jordan valley, the land 'flowing with milk and honey'. Yet this is a land which, despite his faithful leadership of Israel out of Egypt and into the desert, he himself is never to enter. Why? The answer is in a short episode in Numbers 20:7-12. There the people are, as usual, grumbling about the lack of the good things they used to have in Egypt. The Lord tells Moses to go out and address a rock in his name, and water will be provided for them. Instead, Moses, in anger, strikes the rock with his staff (as he had done before, at Horeb, Ex

17:5-6). Water pours forth, but God is angry, because his power has not been acknowledged: Moses and Aaron spoke to the people as if their own power makes the miracle possible. Moses' disobedience angers God, who determines that he shall not enter the promised land, because 'you did not trust me enough to honour me as holy in the sight of the Israelites' (Num 20:12). This may seem harsh to us, but the key lies in the word 'holy'. Holiness in the Old Testament means something that is different, coming from the root meaning 'cut off' or 'separate'. Moses first encounter with God in Exodus 3:5 is a command to take off his shoes, for the ground on which he stands is holy. The commands of Leviticus are concerned with the people's holiness, which should reflect the holiness of their God (cf. Lev 19:2). Moses' attempt, however understandable, to put himself in the place of God when providing water from the rock, was an act of disobedience and unbelief. Thus even Moses was not holy enough to match up to the standards of Yahweh. Our last glimpse of Moses is the prophet standing on the mountain, seeing the sun glint off the western sea, as the promised land lies before him (Deut 34). But after his death the story goes on. Though Moses is a major figure, the plan of God will continue to unfold without him.

#### **(iv) The 'Essential Wilderness'**

In the Bible it is often in the desert that profound encounters with God took place, a tradition continued in the Christian era by the 'desert fathers' amongst others. The 'wilderness wanderings' after the exodus from Egypt were one of these occasions, though we should remember that Moses encountered God in the burning bush while he was out in the desert. Why does the desert seem to be a place where God communicates? Eugene Peterson writes:

When we're in the wilderness we aren't in control, we have no assignment, no appointments to keep. Stay alert, stay alive – that's it. When we're in the wilderness, we commonly feel our lives simplifying and deepening. Many people, after a few days in the wilderness (sometimes after only a few hours), feel themselves to be more themselves, uncluttered and spontaneous. Very often, even though otherwise unaccustomed to it, they say the name *God*. There's something wonderfully attractive about wilderness...But there's also something frightening about wilderness. The wild, while it's breathtakingly beautiful, is also dangerously unpredictable.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> E.Peterson *Leap over a wall* (San Francisco 1997) p.73.

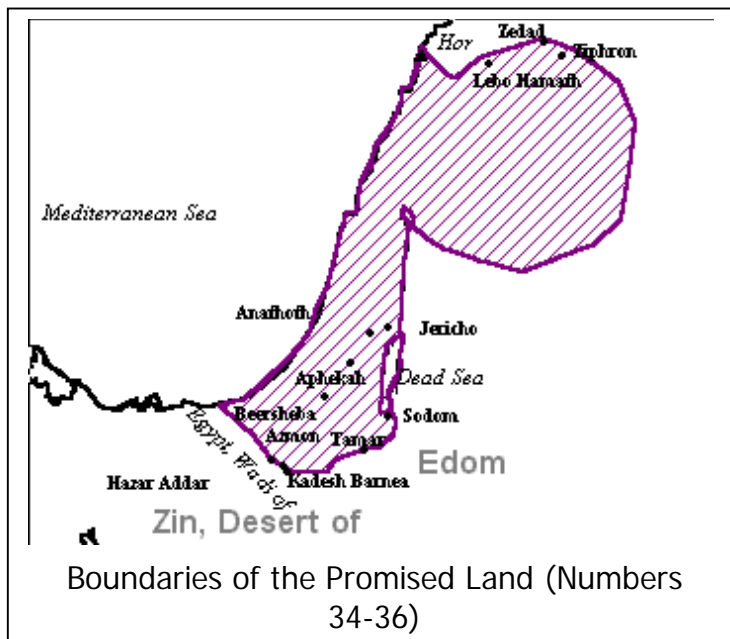
## 4. Conquest, Kings and Empire

The period between the conquest of the promised land and its division into two separate kingdoms after Solomon's death was a long one, lasting between two and four hundred years. During this time the basis for the future of Israel was laid, as the land was gradually settled by the Israelites, as Saul and then David began to create a state owing allegiance to a king, and as Solomon took advantage of a period of weakness amongst the surrounding superpowers to preside over a 'golden age' when Israel seemed at the centre of the civilised world.

### (a) Entering the Promised Land

The land in which Abraham had died many centuries before had not remained empty since Jacob and his sons went down to Egypt to join Joseph.

For much of that time it had been under Egyptian rule, but by the time the Israelites arrived it was a land of many tribes and peoples, situated between the two major civilisations based respectively around the Euphrates and the Nile, and dominated by a number of major and independent cities. The coastal plain carried the major trade routes, but the fertile hill country on either side of the Jordan was relatively unsettled as the Israelites entered it. The Philistines seem to have been entering the land from the west and north (by sea as well as land)



rather than from the south-east, at the same time as the Israelites. Colonisation was going on from two distinct groups of people, both of which were displacing the existing inhabitants. Thus this period is one of significant confusion, reflected in the multiple theories of the conquest which scholars have produced. The period of conquest was succeeded by the period of the Judges.

### (i) The Conquest


According to the book of Joshua, the Israelites fought a relatively quick campaign to conquer Israel. With the battles won, the people settled down to life in the promised land. However, scholars have objected that there is no archaeological evidence of a single lightning conquest at the right time. The reasons behind this, and some of the problems with this view, will be dealt with at more length in handbook 2. Scholars have created three hypotheses to account for the apparent disparity between the biblical text and the archaeological evidence:

1. *Gradual Immigration and Assimilation* – in this theory the German scholar Albrecht Alt argued, in 1925, that the indigenous Canaanite culture was in decline when the Israelites entered the land. Over a period of years the vitality of faith in Yahweh and the social organisation that went with it won out and the Canaanite inhabitants were adopted into the people of Israel. The story of violent conquest was a later invention. This social-democratic model clearly appealed to the Zionist movement as it developed its case for a Jewish national home in Palestine between the

wars. Its hidden assumption was that the development of a 'nation-state' under a king was inevitable, a view hard to support from the biblical text.

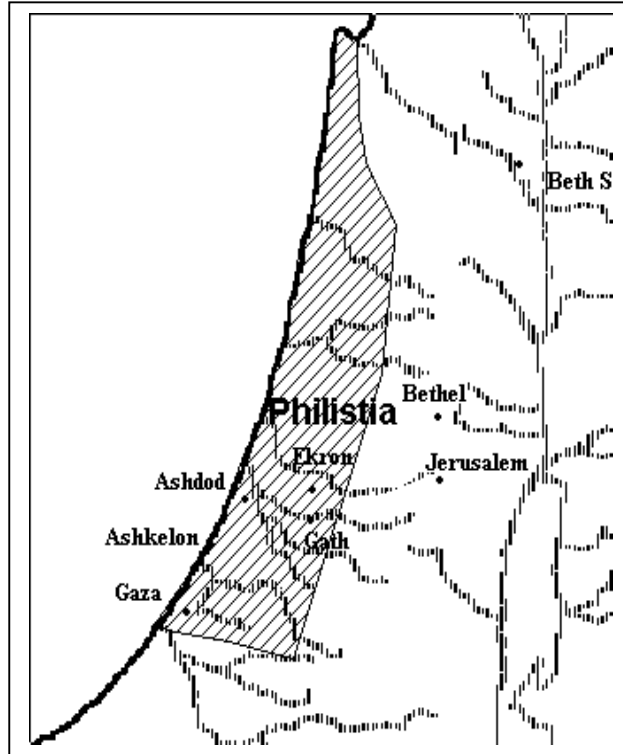
2. *Unified Conquest* – in this view the American scholar and archaeologist, William F. Albright (through the 1940s and 1950s) suggested that there was evidence of abrupt discontinuity of culture in much of Palestine at the relevant time. This he took to be confirmation of the Book of Joshua's narrative of the conquest, with the Israelites sweeping away the immoral and decadent Canaanite culture. Albright was much more open about his strong Christian commitment, and his conviction that the process of history was a matter of evolutionary progress guided by God than most biblical scholars. This has sometimes led to unfair criticism of him by those who prefer to keep their presuppositions hidden. Nevertheless, it is not hard to see the contemporary parallels between America in the 1940s and 1950s pursuing a moral crusade against Nazism and Communism by force, and the unified conquest theory's emphasis on the need to fight to achieve one's God-given destiny. Further archaeological work has largely discredited Albright's view of sudden and widespread discontinuity.
3. *Peasant Revolt* – in this model Albright's pupil George Mendenhall proposed (originally in 1962) that a small group of Israelite activists entered Canaan from the desert. Their story of release from oppression in Egypt attracted disaffected labourers and slaves from the city-states to join them in a revolutionary movement, which overthrew the existing order of society. This theory was revised by Norman Gottwald in 1979, using an explicitly Marxist social-scientific model of change. Gottwald maintained that the story of Yahweh's deliverance from Egypt was created by peasants who had risen against oppression, and who had not come from Egypt at all. There is, however, no real evidence for this view, which reflects the anti-establishment spirit of the 1960s and 70s.

In contrast with these views, the text of the book of Joshua actually suggests a short campaign of conquest, but it also recognises that the whole of Israel was not subdued at once; there was much more work still to do (see Josh 13:1-7).

 On the theories about the conquest, see Drane *OT* pp.62-75. There is an over-stated but interesting critique of the theories about the conquest in Keith Whitelam *The Invention of Ancient Israel* (London 1996) pp.71-121.

### (ii) The Philistines

The Philistines seem to have come originally from Anatolia. Part of a marauding phenomenon which the Egyptians referred to as the 'Sea Peoples' (because they attacked from the sea), they settled on the coastal plain of Canaan, and established their supremacy around the five towns of Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gath and Ekron. Some of their distinctive cultural traits were shared with Greek (especially Mycenaean) civilisation of the same era, which is thought to be around the time of the Trojan War: the style of their pottery, for example, and the custom of mixing wine with water. Their chariots, like Greek ones, were technologically superior by virtue of their iron axles (cf. Judges 1:18-19, and Homer *Iliad* 5:723). The conflict with the Philistines continued into the time of King David, over two and perhaps even four centuries. Only with the consolidation of the Empire by David were the Philistines subdued, and after Solomon's death they emerged as a power again.



**The Five Philistine Cities**



The Philistines have a home page at [www.home.uleth.ca/geo/philhp.htm](http://www.home.uleth.ca/geo/philhp.htm)!

**(b) After the Conquest**


Following the Conquest, the people of Israel settled down to a long period of gradual consolidation. The book of Judges suggests that a major problem at this time was the attraction of the local cults of gods and goddesses, often known as the Baals (see Judges 2:21-23). Even a hero like Gideon was implicated (Judges 8:27). During this period times of anarchy, which brought Israel to the brink of disaster, alternated with times of restoration and rescue by God through 'Judges', who were military leaders.

**(i) The 'Judges Cycle'**

In Judges there is a repeating pattern which occurs at least thirteen times: it looks like this:

- ☞ Covenant agreed;
- ☞ God ignored;
- ☞ Judgement threatened;
- ☞ Disaster falls;
- ☞ People cry out;
- ☞ Rescue is made.

This pattern is clearly designed to make the reader recognise it. It seeks to drive home the point that disobedience leads to disaster, and that only Yahweh can rescue his people. Many scholars suggest that the pattern is clear evidence of the 'shaping' of the traditions of early Israel by a 'Deuteronomic Historian', so called because what he wrote was governed by the kind of theology seen in Deuteronomy. The Deuteronomic history forms the five books of Deuteronomy (which acts as a prologue), Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings. It tells the story of Israel from the conquest to the exile to Babylon. Some scholars have taken the shaping of the stories into a regular pattern to mean that theology, not history is in view in Judges. This dichotomy is one which the Deuteronomic historian would not have accepted. It is clear that he is working with traditional materials, but has told the stories in such a way as to bring out a message. This does not mean that he has no interest in the events themselves, or that he felt at liberty to change them.

 On the Deuteronomic History, see Drane *OT* pp.84-6. Laffin *The Duffer's Guide to the Old Testament* also has a good chapter on this issue, pp.85-102.

**(ii) The Judges' Background**

The social confusion and weak leadership of the Judges period also means that Judges themselves are often marginalised people: of the seven judges whose deeds are described in detail,

- Othniel (Judges 3) is young;
- Ehud (Judges 3) is disabled;
- Shamgar (Judges 3) is a foreigner;
- Deborah (Judges 4) is female;
- Jephthah (Judges 11-12) is the outcast son of a prostitute.

Only Gideon (Judges 5-8) and Samson (Judges 13-16) are ordinary Israelites, and both of them are flawed heroes – Gideon because he is lukewarm in his trust of God, Samson because of his sexual weaknesses. The message behind the highlighting of these characters is that Yahweh is the powerful one, who can work with even the most unpromising material.

**(iii) Merneptah's Tomb**

The Pharaoh Merneptah (whose reign is usually dated c.1213-1204 BC), successor to the great Pharaoh Ramses II, recorded on his tomb the greatest

campaigns of his reign. Amongst these he included details of victories in Palestine:

*Princes are prostrate, calling for peace...Canaan is plundered, suffering woe: Ashkelon overcome, Gezer imprisoned, Yanoam vanished; Israel is wasted and emptied of his seed, Hurru is widowed, at the hands of Egypt*

This inscription is the first certain identification of 'Israel' outside the Bible itself. Conventionally dated to c.1207 BC, it means that Israel was a known entity in the land of Canaan by that time. Ashkelon, Gezer and Yanoam were cities (the way the hieroglyphics of the inscription are written make this clear), the first two ruled by the Philistines, the third situated somewhere in the Galilee region. Israel, however, is paired with Hurru. Hurru was a general term for the whole of Syria-Palestine, and is written as a land; Israel is designated as a people, but in a pair with Hurru. The implication is that Hurru is the widowed land, deprived of her husband, Israel, who (in a customary victory phrase) is now impotent. Now this can be viewed two ways: for those who believe that Israel was not yet settled in the land, it can imply that the people of Israel were still wanderers, in contrast to the established city dwellers of Ashkelon, Gezer and Yanoam; but for those who believe that the conquest was largely completed by this time, it can imply that Israel was the major occupant of 'Hurru' by this time. One's view on this will largely depend on the prior judgement made on the question of the conquest. My own view would be that the sense of the last couplet of the quotation above implies that Israel was the majority people by the time of Merneptah's campaign.

#### (iv) Ruth

Classified in the Hebrew Bible as one of the 'writings', the short story of Ruth is set in the days of the Judges (Ruth 1:1). An evocative picture of life during this period, it tells of how the foreigner Ruth makes a place for herself amongst the people of Israel, by appeal to her (distant) kinsman Boaz; their great-grandson was David. Though often seen as a 'charming tale', the text actually has quite a subversive message hidden within it. The thrust of the story is that God looks after Ruth (Ruth 2:12), but the conditions of the time require her, at the instigation of her mother-in-law Naomi, to seduce Boaz (Ruth 3 – 'feet' is a euphemism for genitals). Ruth is one of a number of Old Testament women who act in ways that would have drawn the condemnation of later Hebrew moralists. The American Jewish writer Jonathan Kirsch notes that 'Tamar [Gen 38], Lot's daughters [Gen 19] and Ruth the Moabite woman deploy themselves in bed in order to secure children for themselves and survival for their distant descendants.'<sup>9</sup> But Yahweh, who redeemed the oppressed slaves from Egypt, is always on the side of the poor (like Ruth) who have no one else to speak for them or protect them. This attitude is reflected in the story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery (John 8:3-11). The only place in the Bible outside the book of Ruth where she is mentioned is in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus (Matt 1:5), along with four other women: Tamar, Rahab, Bathsheba and Mary. Matthew does not mention other women who might have figured in the family tree. Like Ruth, Tamar, Rahab and Bathsheba were foreigners. Like Ruth they were involved in sexual liaisons which might be seen to be scandalous. 'If God was at work in the past, even when there was good ground for suspicion, and the messianic line was preserved through these women, is it surprising, Matthew seems to be saying, if questions have been raised about the birth of the Messiah himself? But *if* God was at work in the past, even in these circumstances, then we can be sure that he is work in the birth of Jesus.'<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> J.Kirsch *The Harlot by the Side of the Road* (New York 1997) p.141.)

<sup>10</sup> ' (Morna Hooker *Beginnings: Keys that Open the Gospels* (London 1997) p.28.

**(c) Kings**

Throughout the Judges period there had been a fragile balance of power between the Israelites and the Philistines. At some point in the eleventh century BC, the Philistines regained the upper hand, and began to expand from the cities on the coastal plain into the hill country towards the Jordan. Their resurgent power threatened to destroy the hard-won settlement of Israel. Under Samuel, who is described as one of the Judges (1 Sam 7:15), the Philistines were held back, but Samuel's sons were not able to continue their father's work, and the people asked for a king 'like the other nations' (1 Sam 8:5). Saul took this role, but failed to live up to it. Like many of the Judges, he did not obey all God's instructions, and in time was supplanted by David. David became king in c.1000 BC. He subdued the Philistines, and took Jerusalem from the Jebusites (2 Sam 5), making it the capital from which he ruled. Further campaigns established the borders of Israelite influence, and laid the foundations for the 'golden age' of Solomon, who reigned in Jerusalem from c.970-930 BC.

**(i) Do You Really Want a King?**

Attitudes to kingship were ambivalent in ancient Israel. One of the hallmarks of the redeemed people of Israel was that it was Yahweh who had rescued them from Egypt, Yahweh who had made a covenant with them, Yahweh whom they had agreed to serve. Was it therefore right for them to have a king at all? The Judges had been raised up to deal with particular crises: Gideon refused to continue his leadership of Israel, and refused to allow his sons to follow him: 'The LORD will rule over you' (Judges 8:23). But because of the constant threat of the Philistines there was a need for a more consistent pattern of leadership. Samuel, who had attempted to pass his own responsibility as a Judge to his sons, wrestled with the people's desire for a king; but in the end God told him to 'listen to the voice of the people' (1 Sam 8:7, 9). In the passage that follows, Samuel outlines the oppression which kings will bring (1 Sam 8:11-22). The implication is clear: it will take a very special king to be able to rule righteously, because the temptation to abuse the power given will be ever-present. This realistic insight into the nature of political power enabled the later story of the kings to be written 'warts and all', and without idealisation. Because the kings of Israel and Judah answered to a higher power than themselves, the historians did not shirk the task of drawing a complete portrait, in a way that other historians in the ancient world would have feared to do.

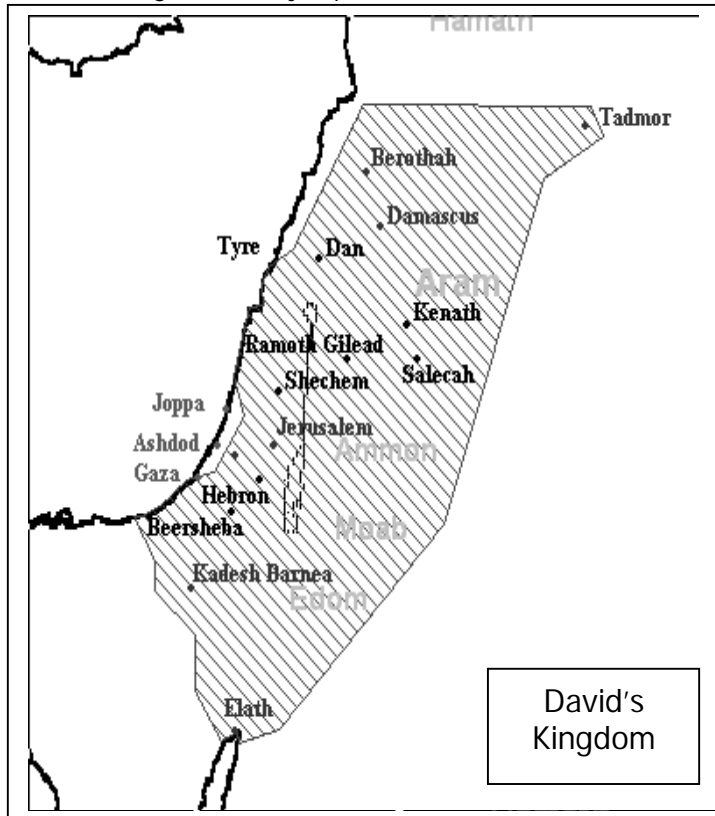
### (ii) David's Kingdom - Israel as the Buffer Zone

A period of relative weakness amongst the major powers of the ancient world enabled David to expand his kingdom and make it secure.

According to 2 Samuel 8, the Philistines were driven back to the coastal plain around Gaza, the Edomites to the south, the Moabites and Ammonites to the east, and the Arameans to the north were all kept at bay with the use of garrisons and a standing army which included mercenaries (of whom Uriah the Hittite may have been one: 2 Sam 11:3).


Some of the powerful nations made trade-treaties with David (see 2 Sam 5 for David's relationships

with Hiram of Tyre in Phoenicia). With control over both the inland and coastal trade routes through Palestine, David's kingdom was in a prime strategic position, which his son Solomon was able to take advantage of.



### (iii) David's Dynasty

Of major importance for Israelite self-understanding was the covenant between God and David (2 Sam 7), in which God promised that David's throne would last for ever. The rest of Jewish history is in a sense a struggle to understand and hold on to the implications of this promise.

 David's kingdom is discussed in Drane *OT* pp.93-101.

**(d) Solomon's Empire**

With Solomon Israel enjoyed a rare period of peace. This enabled learning and wisdom to flourish, and provided resources for the building of the first temple in Jerusalem, and for other major building projects (1 Kings 9:15-19). Trading contacts spread far and wide; the building of a port at Ezion Geber (at the head of the Gulf of Aqaba: 1 Kings 9:26) and the employment of Phoenician sailors gave Solomon the ability to demand trading dues on goods being transported. The writer of Kings says: 'King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth. The whole world sought audience with Solomon to hear the wisdom God had put in his heart...The king made silver as common in Jerusalem as stones, and cedar as plentiful as sycamore-fig trees in the foothills.' (1 Kings 10:23-4, 27.) Under Solomon's successor, Rehoboam, the empire quickly fell apart. The speed with which it did so quickly created a powerful sense that Solomon's reign was a golden age, when the people had 'never had it so good'. This may be a misleading impression, as the seeds of decline had been planted towards the end of Solomon's reign.

**(i) Solomon's Temple**

The peace of Solomon's reign allowed the building of a temple for the first time. It provided a permanent home for the Ark of the Covenant, which the people had brought with them from the desert. As such, the temple symbolised God's permanent presence with his people, and after centuries of wandering, a settled state for the nation. It is possible that before this time, the Ark travelled around Israel – there is evidence that Shechem (Josh 24), Bethel (Judges 20:18), Shiloh (1 Sam 1:1-8) and Gibeon (1 Kings 3:4-15) were all places of worship and meeting. This may have had the positive effect of reminding the people that their God was not tied down to a particular shrine. The removal of the Ark to Jerusalem (in David's time) and the subsequent erection of the temple around it spoke eloquently of a centralised state, and may well have contributed to the dissatisfaction of the northern tribes towards the end of Solomon's reign (see 1 Kings 8).

**(ii) Solomon's Wisdom**

The reign of Solomon was also a time when learning flourished. Israel stood at the crossroads not only of international trade, but also of international wisdom. The range of Solomon's literary and scientific knowledge (1 Kings 4:30-33) rivalled or surpassed that of contemporary rulers in Egypt and Mesopotamia. During his time it seems that the first systematic recording of the traditions of Israel was made. The story of how Solomon himself succeeded to the throne of David was probably written down at this time: with slight alterations it was incorporated into the Deuteronomic history as 2 Samuel 9-20. This work is the first recognisable work of history, and was written around 910 BC, predating the Greek historians Herodotus and Thucydides who are often regarded as the 'fathers of history' by about five hundred years.

**(iii) Solomon's Decline**

The roots of decline seem to have grown towards the end of Solomon's reign: 'As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been.' (1 Kings 11:4.) Solomon's early loyalty to the faith of David seems to have faded as he became more like any other ancient Near Eastern potentate (see 1 Kings 11:5-7), with allegiance to a range of gods. The contrast with the rurally-based warrior-king Saul, just two generations before, is marked. The scale of consumption at the court was huge (1 Kings 10:21). The army was large and no longer able to bring in plunder from

conquered neighbours, as David's had done, to pay for its own upkeep; it concentrated rather on policing Israel. The lands of the northern tribes contributed to the costs of the court (1 Kings 4:7), but Judah, the royal family's homeland, was exempt. The building projects required huge labour supplies, provided by a system of conscription also from the northern tribes, which seems to have caused great resentment (see 1 Kings 5:13-14, 11:28). The twin bases of David's success in unifying the Israelites under his rule had been the external threat of the Philistines, and the internal strength provided by uniformity of faith. Solomon lived in an era of peace, and in his later years dissolved the religious tradition of David. Solomon's empire was thus a fragile one, and ripe for disintegration when the 'young Turks' of Rehoboam's court came to power (as is predicted in 1 Kings 11:9-13, 31-39).

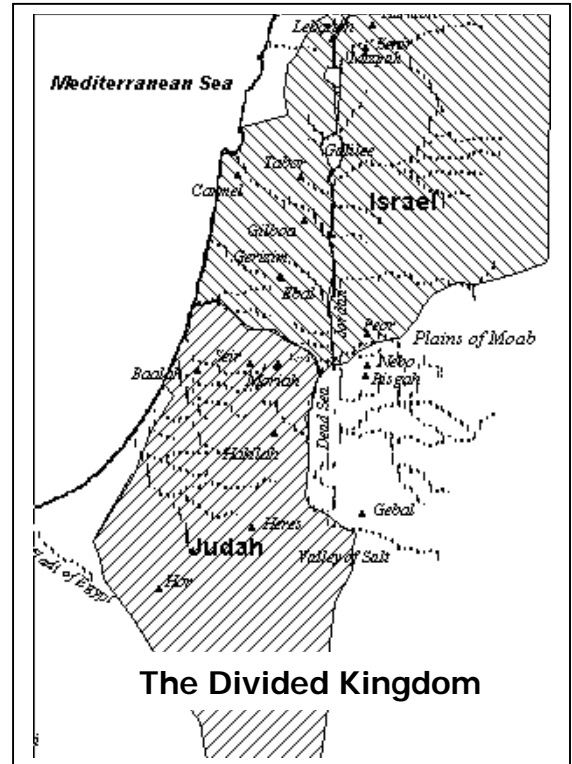
 On Solomon's empire, see Drane *OT* pp.101-9.

## 5. The split of the kingdoms

The division of Solomon's kingdom after his death began an unstable period of nearly four centuries, when Israel and Judah were prey to superpowers contending for sovereignty over strategic trade routes. Prophets proclaimed that the eventual demise of both kingdoms was God's judgement on them for their failure to live righteously and worship him alone.

### (a) Israel and Judah

The end of Solomon's reign also spelt the end of a united nation of Israel. The ten northern tribes split from the two southern ones of Judah and Benjamin, and though similarities of faith, language and tradition remained, the two nations of Israel (northern) and Judah (southern) went their separate ways, often waging war against each other. The division suited other powers in the ancient world, who were now able to send goods freely through what had been Solomon's empire. The two small kingdoms of Israel and Judah became prey to other nations, at first Egypt and later the rising power of Assyria, which had its capital at Nineveh, near the head of the Tigris river. After a period in the eighth century BC when both kingdoms were client-states of Assyria, Israel attempted to break free and was crushed in 722 BC. Most of the people were taken into exile in Assyria: the survivors became the forerunners of the Samaritans of the New Testament. Judah retained its independence for a further century, outliving the Assyrian empire. But the successor power of Babylon, embroiled in a campaign against Egypt, eventually swept Judah aside in 587 BC. The temple was destroyed, and the people taken off to exile in Babylon.



### (i) Rehoboam's Bravado

Rehoboam was the first among many kings who ruled badly in Judah and Israel. Others, such as Ahab, became bywords for harshness and apostasy. Rehoboam was Solomon's successor, but his unsubtle attempt to rule even more harshly than his father caused revolt in Israel. The reason for the revolt was resentment over the forced labour scheme which had provided the manpower for Solomon's building programme (1 Kings 12:4, 18; see also 'Solomon's Decline', above). Rehoboam's crude sexual boasts (1 Kings 12:10) and promise to act like any other ancient Near Eastern tyrant, rather than fulfil the servant role which kingship demanded (1 Kings 12:7), led the people of the northern tribes to utter an ancient battle cry (1 Kings 12:16) and set up the general Jeroboam as their king. But Jeroboam too was flawed: he set up golden calves for the people to worship, perhaps because of his time in Egypt (1 Kings 11:40), where the bull-calf Apis was worshipped.


### (ii) The Survival of Judah – Reform and Revival

Judah was just as vulnerable as Israel, but managed to survive longer than its northern counterpart. One of the reasons for this, according to the biblical narrative, was the fact that a number of the kings of Judah turned back to

Yahweh from the worship of false gods into which their predecessors had fallen. The two most significant of these were Hezekiah (reigned c.727-698 BC) and the boy king Josiah (reigned c.639-609 BC).

Hezekiah's accession coincided with the destruction of Israel. This may have been the spur to his policy of religious reformation: he is the king 'who did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, just as his father David had done' (2 Kings 18:3). Hezekiah's close adviser was the prophet Isaiah (2 Kings 19-20). His reign was also marked by fear and uncertainty in the face of threats by Sennacherib, king of Assyria, whose army laid waste to Judah in 701. However, Hezekiah's anguished prayer saved Jerusalem itself and Sennacherib returned to Nineveh.

Hezekiah's son Manasseh and grandson Amon did not continue his policies. They were severely constrained in their exercise of power by the shadow of Assyria, but during Manasseh's reign prophecies were received which declared judgement on Judah and Jerusalem.. Hezekiah's great-grandson Josiah, who became king at the tender age of eight after the assassination of his father, made no significant change at the beginning of his reign, but at the age of twenty-six his attempts to repair the temple led to the discovery of the forgotten 'Book of the Law' (2 Kings 22:8). This book, which seems to have been the book of Deuteronomy, spurred Josiah on to systematic reformation of Judah. The whole realm was cleansed of pagan practices (2 Kings 23:8-15), and the idols which Manasseh had introduced were removed from the temple (2 Kings 21:4-7; 23:4-7). Josiah reintroduced the national celebration of the Passover, something which not even David had done (2 Kings 23:21-25). Josiah's sudden death at the hands of the Pharaoh Neco at Megiddo (2 Kings 23:29, cf. 2 Chron 35:20-24) caused a shock wave to run through Judah: The lament composed by his friend and adviser, the prophet Jeremiah, was apparently still being sung publicly after the return from exile, two centuries later (2 Chron 35:25). The 'Deuteronomistic History' was a response to the ultimate failure of Josiah's reform to make a lasting difference to Judah. His successors failed to observe the 'Book of the Law', and for the remaining years of independence the kingdom swung uneasily between allegiance to Egypt and the new power of Babylon. The judgement of God was inexorable (as 2 Chron 35:21 implies), and not even the root-and-branch reforms of Josiah could turn it away. The tragedy of Josiah was that he was 'the best of all kings, but...a king come too late.'<sup>11</sup>

 See Drane *OT* pp.120-142 on the divided kingdom.

<sup>11</sup> I.Provan *1 & 2 Kings* (Carlisle 1995) p.270.

**(b) Prophets**


It was during the era of the divided kingdom that prophecy began to flourish as never before. There had been prophets before that time (Samuel and Nathan being the best known), but as Israel and Judah fell further away from the observance of the law, and their kings became progressively more oppressive, prophets occupied a dangerous but vital role as the conscience of the court. Roughly a third of the prophets mentioned by name in the Old Testament come from this period of the divided kingdoms.

**(i) Wandering Prophets**

Elijah and his successor Elisha in the mid seventh century BC occupy a role very similar to that of Samuel in the mid eleventh. But their task is not to act as leaders of Israel as Samuel had done, but to do battle with the Baals (see 1 Kings 17-18) and to ensure the survival of faith in Yahweh. Though based in the northern kingdom of Israel, both Elijah and Elisha operated at a distance from the court, and King Ahab considered Elijah his enemy (1 Ki 21:20).

**(ii) Writing Prophets**

A new phenomenon in the eighth century BC was the so-called 'latter prophets', that is, the prophets whose words were recorded in books under their names. The first of these were Amos and Hosea, who prophesied judgement against the northern kingdom of Israel during the forty year period before the Assyrians destroyed it. Isaiah of Jerusalem received his call c.742 BC, so he was a contemporary of Amos and Hosea, but different from them as he was a court prophet of the southern kingdom of Judah and an adviser to King Hezekiah. Jeremiah comes at the very end of this era: involved in the reforming reign of Josiah, he played an ambivalent role in the frenetic series of events which led to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 BC, and seems to have died in exile in Egypt.

 On the prophets and their role, see Drane *OT* pp.169-72.

**(c) The Destruction of Jerusalem**

The destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, in 587 BC was a cataclysmic event for the people of Judah. It truly was the end of the world as they had known it. With the temple destroyed and the kings of David's line deposed, there seemed no future for Yahweh or his people.


**(i) 587 – Year Zero**

After Josiah's death both the political and religious situation suggested that the kingdom's survival was balanced on a knife-edge. Caught, as so often before, in the midst of the conflicts between Egypt and Mesopotamia, the demise of the troublesome mountain kingdom of Judah was only a matter of time. In 605 BC Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon defeated the Egyptians at Carchemish, and established his unquestionable sovereignty over Syria and Palestine. Judah became a client kingdom of Babylon, but King Jehoiakim's foolish attempt to intrigue with the Egyptians led to a first deportation of Judean aristocracy by Nebuchadnezzar in 598 BC, accompanied by the treasures of the temple. Jehoiakim escaped exile to Babylon only because he died (2 Kings 24:6, 2 Chron 36:6). His son Jehoiachin was taken to Babylon as hostage, and his brother Zedekiah installed as puppet king of the Babylonians. The temptation of escape from the Babylonian yoke proved too great for Zedekiah, however, despite the prophetic warnings of Jeremiah (Jer 28). He rebelled, perhaps encouraged by the Egyptians (see Jer 37:6-10), and

after a siege lasting two and a half years, Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. There were to be no more second chances for Judah. The temple was dismantled, most of the people taken away. The matter-of-fact catalogue of 2 Kings 25:1-21 still has an austere power, two and half millennia later, as it unemotionally describes the Babylonians' systematic destruction of the dream of a land a people which the children of Israel had cherished for fifteen hundred years: so 'Judah went into captivity, away from her land' (2 Ki 25:21).

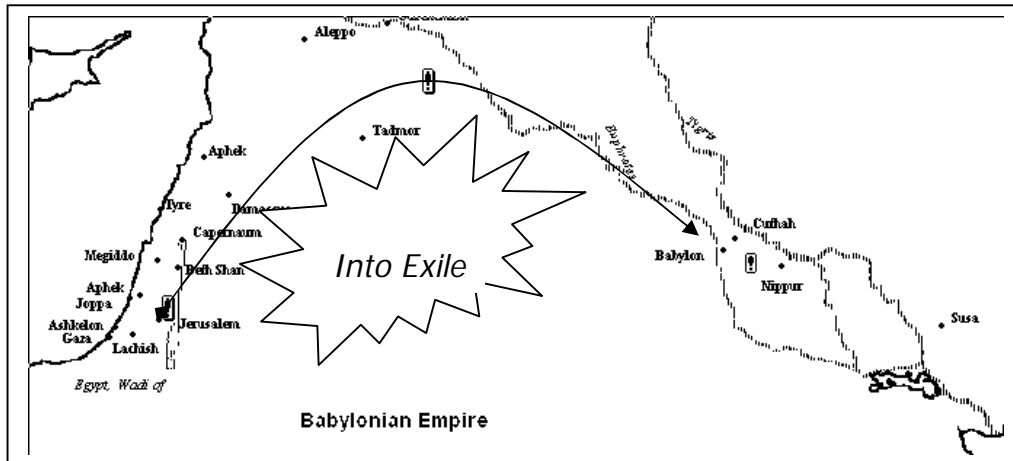
### **(ii) Lamentations**

Although most of the population of Jerusalem seems to have been deported, and it was to them that the focus shifted, some were left in the city, including Jeremiah. Authorship of the book of Lamentations has traditionally been ascribed to Jeremiah, though this is hard to demonstrate. But the book with its haunting evocation of the desolate landscape of the ruined city (Lam 1) is a masterpiece of pathos, coupled with a final fierce appeal to God to redeem his people from a foreign land again (Lam 5:19-22).

 On the end of Judah and Jerusalem, see Drane *OT* pp.147-64.

## 6. Exile

The exile was a time of disaster, which became the crucible of a renewed faith. Out of the destruction of all the Israelites' hopes in themselves came an extraordinarily creative flowering of prophecy, theology and history. The exile in Babylon actually lasted only a short time: a group of Jews returned in 539 BC, and Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem around 445 BC, less than a hundred and fifty years after they had been destroyed. Yet out of the reappraisal of faith that took place in exile came a renewed and stronger faith that began to look forward in hope to God's own rescue of his people from the sin into which they had always fallen.



### (a) 'How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?'

If the Jews in Babylon had had a signature tune, it would have been Psalm 137. This psalm wrestles with the identity of God's people, far away from their home, and retains the bitter but honest response of the exiles to their captors (Ps 137:8-9). The people applied themselves to the challenge of learning to sing the Lord's song in a strange land with vigour. The point of the policy of exiling troublesome peoples, pursued by many ancient conquerors, was to root out resistance and destroy cultures which might assert their independence again. The Assyrian treatment of the northern kingdom of Israel had succeeded in this aim, but the Babylonians failed with the Judeans. First they had to come to terms with their present and accept what had happened. Once they had done this, they looked into the past to understand why the exile had happened and into the future to see what God might still have in store for them. These three tasks led to the flowering of Old Testament prophecy.

### (i) Understanding Exile: the present

After the exile had begun, the prophet Jeremiah sent a letter to those who had been transported to Babylon. In it he urged them to come to terms with what had happened in some specific and practical ways:

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup>Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. <sup>6</sup>Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. <sup>7</sup>But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jer 29:4-7)

The three commands given to the exiles here are significant ones:


- *Build houses and live in them:* up to this point the exiles had been living as refugees in tents. They were used to the houses of Israel, built of wood and stone. In Babylon they would have to make bricks

- from mud and construct different kinds of houses, investing in a more permanent existence in their new home.
- o *Plant gardens and eat what they produce*: the produce of the land would be different from Israel too. This required the exiles to learn how to cook the new kinds of vegetables and fruit they might find in the Babylonian markets as well as in their own gardens. Sowing crops and waiting for a harvest was another way of (literally!) putting down roots.
  - o *Take wives...give your daughters in marriage*: settling into family life, allowing marriages and encouraging the birth of new generations also meant coming to terms with the fact that the children would grow up not knowing their home land at first hand. Above all, this was a sign that 'life goes on' no matter what disaster had fallen on them.

Yet God's words to the exiles were full of hope. In Jeremiah 29:7 he said that this was a place where 'I have sent you into exile', implying control of the situation, and later in the letter assures them that he has plans 'for a future and a hope' (Jer 29:11). Once they had come to terms with living in Babylon they were able to look back and see what had gone wrong.

### **(ii) Understanding Exile: the past**


The 'Deuteronomic history' (consisting of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings) seems to have been completed in its present form during the exile. The question which it asks is, 'what has happened to the covenant promises of God?' The answer, carefully traced through many sources and across many centuries, is that the sinfulness of the people has brought disaster, but Yahweh remains Lord. It was important that the Deuteronomist held on to this conviction: he could have cast his story and its underlying theology in such a way that Yahweh was seen to be merely the supreme power amongst a pantheon of gods (a view which is arguably characteristic of some of the Exodus stories, especially those dealing with the plagues of Egypt). Instead the God of Israel is vindicated, and his ways justified. And the enigmatic end to the story, which at first sight seems an anti-climax, may be a tantalising suggestion that the story is not actually at an end at all: God is not finished yet. Yahweh's continued faithfulness to his promise to David that a descendant of his will always occupy the throne (2 Sam 7) is just hinted at in 2 Kings 25:27-30, the end of the history. David's descendant is restored to royal status, even though many miles from his kingdom. And a group of Israelites returns to Egypt, the land from which they had just departed in Deuteronomy, when the saga began. Hidden in these verses, at the end of a history which has not spared the details of the worst that human beings can do, is the hope of grace. Judgement may not be the final word after all, the writer seems to say: perhaps God has yet more light to break forth...

 On the Deuteronomic history see Drane *OT* pp.84-6, and on the Exile, pp.173-85.

### **(iii) Understanding exile: the future**

The second part of Isaiah (chapters 40-66) and Ezekiel form a major section of the prophets, and both have the context of the Babylonian exile. They will be looked at in more detail in Handbook 2, but it is important to locate them in their rightful historical place, and to relate them to their contemporaries. In particular Ezekiel's emphasis on worshipping without a physical temple laid the foundations for the future of Judaism beyond the bounds of the promised land. Both prophets echoed Jeremiah's faith in Yahweh as the continued redeemer of his people, tied to them with bonds of love which he could not break. Isaiah looked forward to a second exodus, when Yahweh

would lead his people back to Jerusalem.

 On Prophecy during the Exile, see Drane *OT* pp.161-72 (Jeremiah), 179-81 (Ezekiel) and 189-92 (Isaiah).

**(b) 'Seek the Welfare of the City'**

There was more than one way of coping with exile, however. Jeremiah encouraged the exiles to settle in the land to which God had sent them, for, 'if it prospers, you too will prosper' (Jer 29:5-7). When a return to Jerusalem became possible, many of them did not take up the opportunity, preferring to stay and enjoy the wealth they were amassing in Babylon. The groups which had fled to Egypt also developed a thriving community of their own, and while they retained their Jewish identity (the term was coined around this time), they took part fully in trade, learning and culture in general, especially in Alexandria, where by the first century BC they made up forty per cent of the population. The Jews who chose not to return to Judah became known as the 'diaspora' (Greek for 'scattering'), and gradually dispersed across the whole ancient world.

**(i) Worship in exile**

The book of Daniel gives a fascinating description of the development of worship in exile. Previously, prayer had been seen always as a communal activity but in the story of Daniel we see a new individual form, as he prays three times each day, by an open window facing Jerusalem (Daniel 6:10). There must also have been places for communal worship, and it has been suggested that the institution of the synagogue dates from this time, though there is no direct evidence of this.

**(ii) Esther**

The book of Esther is set in the exile, around 483 BC. It is the only biblical book which does not mention God. It also shows a situation of widespread anti-Jewish feeling in the Persian empire (see Esther 3:13). The bravery and resourcefulness of Esther is the theme of the book, and the implicit deliverance by God of the people forms the impulse behind the festival of Purim which the exiles are urged to celebrate at the end of the story (Esther 9:28).

**(iii) A Universal Faith**

In the dark days of exile an important theme came to light. Realising that Yahweh was not just the Lord of Judah, but of the whole world, a newly confident universalism developed, as some of the exiles welcomed non-Jews into their faith. The prophecies recorded at the end of Isaiah show this theme clearly (see Isaiah 56:6-7, for example). Foreign proselytes too were invited in, and this openness became a characteristic of Diaspora Judaism. There was a tension between these views, however, and the hard-line policies of Ezra and the returnees to Judah, which emphasised the need to maintain a racial purity. This debate would have a major impact some centuries later, with the fledgling Christian church and its debates about whether Gentiles should become Jews as well as Christians.

## 7. Restoration

In 539 BC Cyrus, king of Persia, entered Babylon, adding it to his already extensive sphere of supremacy. He had a policy of resettling exiled peoples, and soon encouraged some of the Jews to return to Jerusalem. The next century saw a number of attempts to undo the destruction which the Babylonians had caused, but not until Nehemiah's expedition in c.445 BC, for which he had royal backing, was there a genuinely restored state of Judah. This period was one of high hopes and rude awakenings. The revival overseen by Nehemiah and Ezra soon crumbled away as the perennial sinfulness of the people reasserted itself. Where might help come from now? Judah was never to be independent again, despite the hopes of the people. The era of restoration came to an end as the ancient world itself began to give way to a new age heralded by the world-conquering Alexander, who added Palestine to his empire in 331 BC.

### (a) Return from Exile

Cyrus the Great (lived c.590-529 BC) sought to cement his empire by reversing the Babylonian policy of displacing rebellious nations. He supported local customs, offered sacrifices to local gods, and encouraged toleration and religious diversity in his realms. As predicted in Isaiah 44 and 45, the exiles benefited from Cyrus' rule. In about 538 BC, in obedience to Cyrus' decree (Ezra 1), a party of survivors set off for Jerusalem.

#### (i) The First Restorations

Several groups made the journey from Babylon to Jerusalem:

- The first party, with Sheshbazzar (who may have been King Jehoiachin's son) in command, laid the foundations of a new temple (Ezra 5:16). But they found the work hard, and did not complete it.
- A second group, under Zerubbabel (King Jehoiachin's grandson), set out for Jerusalem in the first year of the reign of Darius (520 BC). They achieved more success in the rebuilding of the temple, which was completed four years later, leading to a revival of hopes for the Davidic dynasty (see Haggai 2:23, Zechariah 12-14). The reality was, however, that Judah remained a sub-province in one part of the Persian empire.

#### (ii) Nehemiah and Ezra

Nehemiah is an engaging character, whose narrative of his journey to restore the city of his people in c.445 BC makes compelling reading. A high court official (Neh 2:1 - only those whose loyalty was unquestioned became royal wine-tasters: their job was to test for poison, and if they dropped dead, the king knew not to drink what had been provided!), Nehemiah had royal support for his expedition. But the physical restoration of the city and its walls was to be accompanied by a spiritual restoration also. Ezra, a scribe who was devoted to the Law, was in Jerusalem at the same time, and between them they accomplished a revival of spiritual life (Neh 8). Coupled with this came a stern ban on foreign marriages, an attempt to avoid the temptations to religious excesses to which Solomon and many of the kings had succumbed (Neh 12:25-6).

### (b) Tidying up the faith

During the Restoration era, the developments which had occurred during the exile in Babylon were consolidated. To this period belong the first definite moves towards settling an approved 'canon' of sacred books (see 2 Macc 2:13, and p.28 above), and the establishment of a group of approved teachers or 'scribes', of whom Ezra himself may have been the first (see Neh 8:9). Ezra may also have established a definitive text of the 'Law of Moses' (*Torah*) for the first time (see R. E. Friedman *Who Wrote the Bible?* Ch. 11-13). In these and other ways, particularly the prohibitions on

intermarriage, the Jewish faith was systematised and 'tidied up' in these years.

### **(i) Chronicles**


To this period also belongs the second retelling of the story of the people of Israel, the books which we know as Chronicles. The intertwining themes of this retelling, which share many characteristics (and passages) of the earlier Deuteronomic history, are David's family and the temple. Cyrus' command to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple forms the climax to the story.

### **(ii) Revival and Disillusion**

The high hopes of the eras of Zerubbabel and Ezra, when it seemed that the triumphant return of Yahweh to Zion was imminent, turned quickly to dust. As before the exile, the people simply could not live up to the standards of the law. After the climax of the reading of the law in Nehemiah 8-12, as soon as Nehemiah's back is turned he finds that the people are disobeying the laws again (Neh 13:4-31).

### **(iii) Still in Exile?**

Both Ezra and Nehemiah emphasise that, though the temple is restored and the people hear the law, they are still 'slaves in the land you gave our forefathers' (Neh 9:36, cf. Ezra 9:9). The restoration of Israel was far from being fully accomplished, and there were many exilic prophecies that the glory of Yahweh would appear in the temple which had yet to be fulfilled (no one ever suggested after the return to Jerusalem that passages like Ezekiel 34:1-2, 4-5, 7 and Zechariah 14, for example, which echo 1 Kings 8:10 or Isaiah 6, were ever fulfilled). 'The people had returned in a geographical sense, but the great prophecies of restoration had not yet come true...but Israel would return, humbled and redeemed: sins would be forgiven, the covenant renewed, the Temple rebuilt, and the dead raised.'<sup>12</sup> Through the centuries that followed, the people continued to wait for deliverance, and for the final decisive act of God who would reign in Zion.

 On the Restoration, see Drane *OT* pp.186-206.

<sup>12</sup> N.T.Wright *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London 1996) pp.126-7.

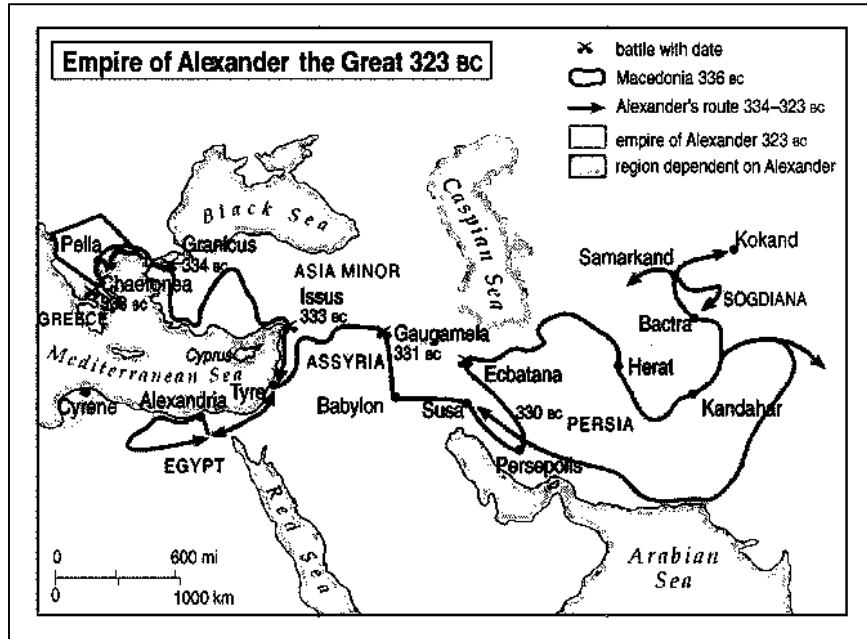
## 8. The Inter-Testamental Period

The period between the Old and New Testaments lasted some four centuries. But the story of Israel during them was a repetition of foreign rulers and rebellions, with conditions hardly changing as successive powers dominated Palestine.

### (a) Alexander and the Changing Face of Power

The Persian empire, first created by Cyrus, had been the greatest the world had ever seen. It had expanded north to the mountains of Macedonia, the Caucasus and the Hindu Kush,

dominated the eastern Mediterranean from Libya in the south to Thrace in the north, and stretched east as far as the river Indus. Its development into Europe was halted, however, by the Greek city states which won crucial victories against the might of King Xerxes'



Persian army at Marathon (490 BC), Salamis (480 BC) and Plataea (479 BC) (Xerxes was the Persian king married to the Jewish Esther). Weakened by internal wars, the Greeks were overwhelmed by the warlike Macedonians, who descended from their northern mountain stronghold under their king Philip and took control of Greece in 338 BC. Two years later Philip's son Alexander succeeded him, and almost immediately set off on an extraordinary military expedition which ushered in a new era of world history. In a decade Alexander conquered and added to the Persian empire. He ended the Mesopotamian dominance of culture and civilisation, and re-oriented the world of his time westwards. He created, by the introduction of Greek as a common language throughout his empire, a united culture across Greece and the old Persian empire which is often called 'Hellenistic'. After Alexander's death his empire broke into a number of pieces, each ruled by one of his generals. In the middle of them sat the little sub-province of Judah, once again prey to armies travelling from north to south between Egypt and Syria.

For more on Alexander, see Drane *OT* pp.208-10. There is a large literature on Alexander, who is a fascinating character. Michael Wood's 1997 TV programme has a well-illustrated book to accompany it, which gives a very good feel of the lands through which Alexander travelled and which form the geographical background to the Old Testament: M.Wood *In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great* (London 1997). Website at <http://www.pbs.org/mpt/alexander/>

**(b) The Maccabees and other revolting people**

Judah came under Egyptian rule from 320 to 198 BC, Syrian (Seleucid) domination from 198 to 63 BC, and finally Roman rule from 63 BC onwards. These years were a constant struggle to retain a sense of national identity and to preserve the worship of Yahweh, coupled with devastating tax burdens on the people of the land. In 167 the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes set up a statue to the god Zeus in the Jerusalem temple and attempted to wipe out the Jewish religion. Armed resistance was led by the family of the Maccabees (the name means 'hammer') who succeeded briefly in re-establishing Judah as an independent state with Syrian agreement. Alliance with the growing power of Rome followed a few years later, but the kingdom descended into chaos and anarchy, which the Romans put a stop to by annexing it in 63 BC, setting up Herod the Great as their client king in 37 BC.

**(i) Responses to Foreign Rule**

There were three major responses to foreign rule:

- The Maccabean option was to resist by force, and to raise a holy war to restore the kingdom to Israel and inaugurate the reign of God. Although Judah's landscape lent itself to guerrilla warfare, independence could not be maintained by these means, and superior invading forces always won in the end. The Zealots of Jesus' time looked to the Maccabees as their model.
- The Herodian option was accommodation with the occupying power, adopting Roman customs and ways, and making the most of submission to the status quo.
- The Qumran option was withdrawal from the world into the desert, there to live a life of purity and simplicity, waiting for the return of Yahweh. The first century AD community which has been excavated at Qumran by the Dead Sea has presented us with a huge variety of scrolls, some of which are the oldest manuscripts of the books of the Old Testament.

These responses overlap from the intertestamental period into the New Testament. They are linked with a growing expectation that God would send a new saviour (messiah) to lead his people out of the slavery of foreign rule, and establish his kingdom.

**(ii) The Apocryphal or Deuterocanonical books**

The books of 1 and 2 Esdras, Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach (also known as Ecclesiasticus), 1 Baruch, Letter of Jeremiah, the Prayer of Manasseh, 1 and 2 Maccabees and additions to the late books of Esther and Daniel form a disputed group from the intertestamental era which have been accepted by some Christians as part of the biblical canon. There is no evidence that they have ever been accepted as part of the Jewish canon, which is why they were excluded from the Christian canon at the Reformation by the Protestant reformers. The books of Maccabees in particular give historical information which is not recorded anywhere else.


 For the Intertestamental period see Drane <i>OT</i> pp.210-227.
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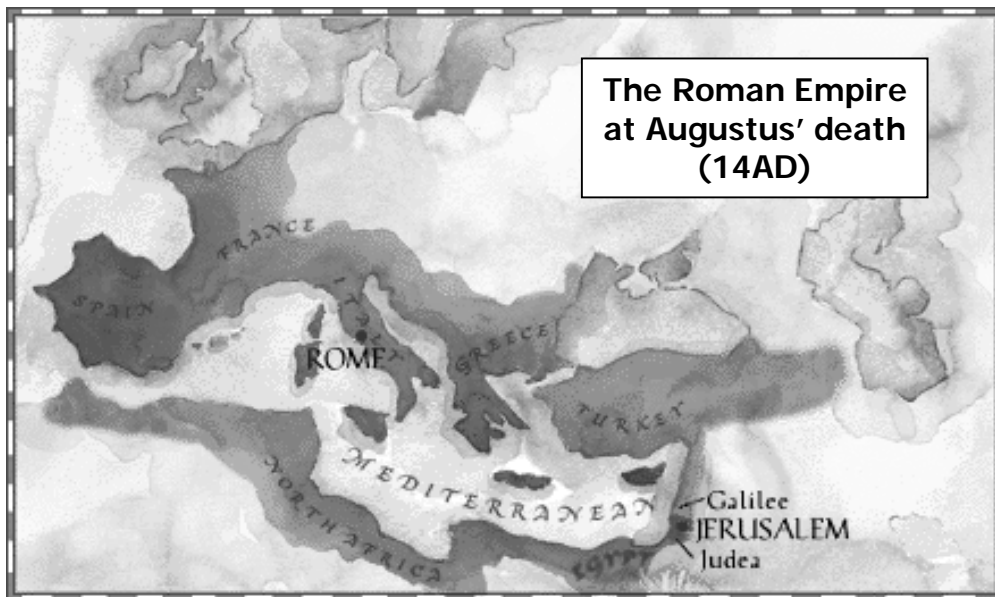
## 9. Roman Domination and the end of the Promised Land

The questions left at the end of the Old Testament era were virtually the same as the ones with which the people of God had wrestled at the exile. Was the exile over? Who would deliver them this time? Had God given them up? Would there be another exodus event to set them free? With the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70AD, and then the final ban on Jews living in Jerusalem after the revolt of 135AD, the Jewish faith ceased to have a connection with the promised land.

### (a) Roman expansion

The first century AD was a time of expansion for the Roman Empire. Following the demise of the Roman Republic and Augustus' gradual acquisition of a stranglehold on power from 27BC, Rome was drawn into territorial expansion in order to preserve peace. Rather like the USA in the later twentieth century, Rome was in some senses a reluctant imperial power, ostensibly seeking foreign influence only to ensure peace and the free flow of trade. Most conquered cities retained their own gods and customs, many officially keeping their own political organisation, too. No one was in much doubt where the real power lay, however.

 <http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/> is a PBS series on the Roman Empire in the First Century.

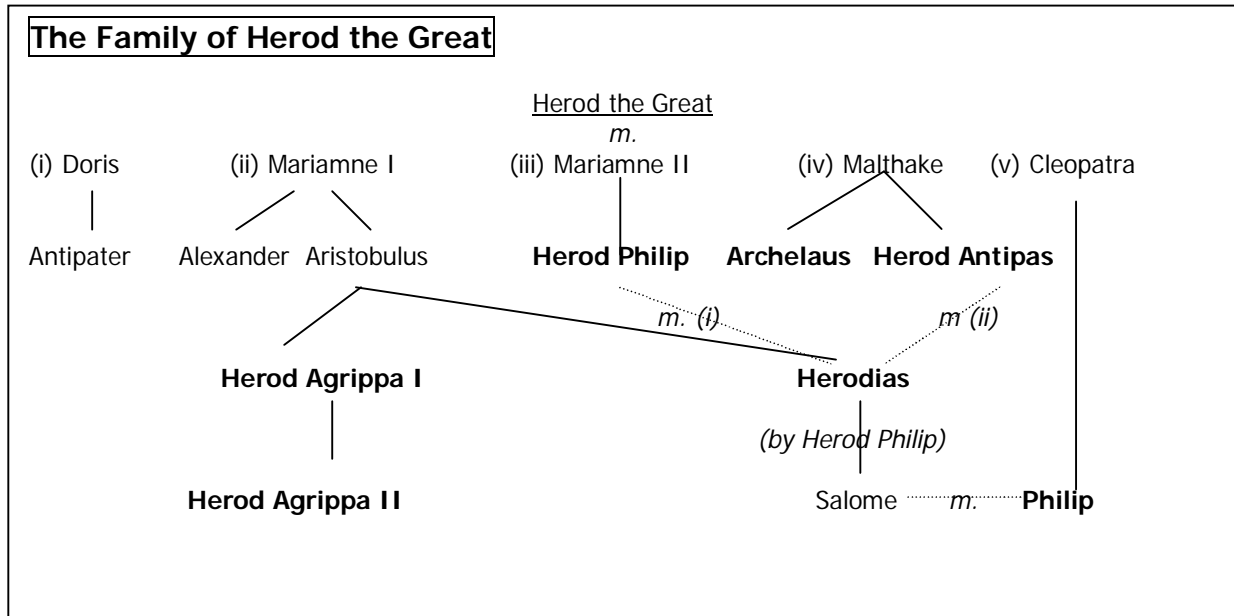


The eastern provinces were especially important, however, as a buffer against the Parthians (heirs of the Seleucids), east of the Euphrates. Judea came under Roman domination in 63BC, and was directly ruled by Rome from 66AD onwards. Rome could not afford to have political chaos on the eastern borders of the empire, and so took a very dim view of any agitation there. Political unrest was dealt with quickly and brutally.

### (i) How many Herods?

The Herodian dynasty can be confusing, because several of the rulers in the New Testament go by this name. **Herod the Great** (ruler at the time of Jesus' birth) was the first of the line, and was King of Judea/Samaria from 37 to 4BC, as a client-king of Rome. Herod had no royal blood himself (his enemies claimed that because he came from Idumea in Southern Judea, an area added to Israel less than a century before, he was not even a genuine Jew); however his wife Mariamne I was a member of the Maccabean (also known as

Hasmonean) royal family. Herod made Caesarea Maritima on the coast his capital and power-base and rebuilt it in a sumptuous Roman style. He strongly encouraged the full-scale Hellenisation of Judea. Herod's somewhat chaotic private life included five wives, who produced at least seven sons; at his death the kingdom was split by the Emperor Augustus between three of the sons, but none of them was granted kingly status. This is a simplified family tree, with notes on individuals in **bold** below:



- **Herod Philip** was designated as Herod the Great's successor as a young man, but he never ruled and subsequently lived as a private citizen. He was the first husband of his half-niece Herodias, and the father of her child Salome.
- **Archelaus** (ruled 4BC-6AD, mentioned in Matthew 2:22), also known as 'Herod the Ethnarch', governed the bulk of Judea and Samaria from Caesarea, but was removed by the Romans because of his unpopularity and incompetence. He was replaced by a Roman procurator, a post occupied by Pontius Pilate from 26-36AD. Caesarea became the Roman headquarters.
- **Herod Antipas** (ruled 4BC-39AD), also known as 'Herod the Tetrarch', governed western Galilee and Perea. He is the Herod who had dealings with both John the Baptist and Jesus, (see Mark 6:14-28 and Luke 23:7-12). Antipas inherited much of his father's diplomatic cunning (and was described by Jesus as a 'fox', Luke 13:32), but his nephew Herod Agrippa II persuaded the Emperor Caligula that Antipas was plotting against imperial authority, and he was deposed in 39AD, dying in exile. He was the second husband of his half-niece Herodias.
- **Philip the Tetrarch** (ruled 4BC-34AD), also known as 'Herod Philip', governed Galilee east of the Jordan (Iturea: Luke 3:1). He married Salome, who was the granddaughter of one of his half-brothers, the daughter of another and the step-daughter of a third. Perhaps fortunately for genealogists, they had no children!
- **Herod Agrippa I** (ruled 37-44AD), was brought up in Rome but lived with Herod Antipas for a time, later betraying him to the Emperor Caligula and gaining his lands in return. Between 37 and 41AD Agrippa managed to acquire virtually all the territory which his grandfather Herod the Great had ruled, and also reclaimed the title of king. He died suddenly and dramatically in 44AD (Acts 12:21-3, an account echoed by Josephus). His daughter Drusilla was married to Marcus Antonius Felix, Procurator of Palestine from 52-60AD.

- **Herodias** was first married to her half-uncle Herod Philip, but left him for his half-brother Herod Antipas, lured perhaps by the prospect of power which her father and husband had failed to acquire. Their relationship was a scandalous flouting of the Mosaic marriage code, especially since Antipas was already married to an Arabian princess. Denounced by John the Baptist, Herodias schemed to procure his death (Mark 6:17-29); her daughter Salome married Philip the Tetrarch. Herodias herself remained loyal to Antipas and went into exile with him when he was deposed by her brother Agrippa I.
- **Herod Agrippa II** (ruled 53-c.100AD), did not immediately succeed his father Herod Agrippa I in 44AD, as he was only seventeen and the political situation in Palestine was too delicate to be entrusted to him. However, he gained favour with successive emperors and in 54AD Claudius made him King. Like his father, he gradually augmented his territories. Like his great-grandfather he shrewdly backed Rome against all comers, especially during the revolt of 66-70AD. Agrippa's power was wholly circumscribed by the Roman authorities after 70AD, however, and his death without children spelt the end of the Herodian dynasty. Paul's encounter, while held prisoner, with Agrippa is recorded in Acts 25:23-26:32.

### (ii) Josephus

Much of the background to this period of history comes from the work of Flavius Josephus (AD 37–c. 100) in his books *Antiquities of the Jews*, which tells the story of Israel up to the revolt of 66AD; *The Jewish War*, which tells the story of the revolt, in which Josephus himself commanded the rebels in Galilee; and his *Autobiography*. After his capture by the Roman forces, Josephus was taken to Rome where his writings vindicating the Roman conquest gained him favour with the Emperor Vespasian.

 There is a Josephus homepage at [www.members.aol.com/fljosephus/home.htm](http://www.members.aol.com/fljosephus/home.htm)

### (b) Redeemers

As the new era of Roman imperialism took hold, the people of Judea were waiting for a redeemer to come. All their own efforts seemed to have failed, though that didn't stop some of them trying to break free again. There was a history of brigandage in the area, which might be regarded as a kind of armed resistance movement of outlaws. After the death of Herod the Great in 4BC, armed revolts broke out in Galilee, Perea and Judea, each led by someone who claimed to be a messiah. These people disappeared or were executed, but this did not deter others from following them in later years. During the revolt of 66-70 two more messianic claimants appeared. Redeemer-figures were not unusual at this time, but without exception their pretensions did not command widespread support.

 There are eighteen messianic claimants listed for the years 4BC-135AD at the 'Livius' web site: <http://www.livius.org/men-mh/messiah/messiah00.html>

**(c) Revolts**

There were major revolts in 66-70AD and 132-135AD. The first led to the destruction of the Temple and the second to the end of any Jewish occupation of Jerusalem, as any circumcised person found within the walls of the city was condemned to execution. These revolts spelled the end of the remnant of Israel, as it had existed since the conquest under Joshua. The province was renamed Syria Palestina, and Jerusalem became Aelia Capitolina. The dream of the promised land and the holy city was over.

**(i) Masada – symbol of resistance**

The mountain fortress of Masada was, according to Josephus, the scene of the last stand of the Jewish rebels in 73AD. Josephus' stirring account said that the leader of the garrison, Eleazer, instructed all 960 of his troops and their families to commit suicide rather than fall into the hands of the besieging Romans. The excavation of bodies at the site in 1963-5 seemed to bear out Josephus' story, and members of the Israeli army swear their oath of allegiance at Masada, after spending a night at the place of martyrdom. Unfortunately it seems that Josephus may not have been telling the truth. He wanted to show in his book about the Jewish War that Rome was in the right and that God was on the Roman side. The point of his story is that Eleazer sees that he and his men have been so sinful that God will not rescue them, and he decides to get them to kill themselves as a way of atoning for their sin. There is no real evidence for this, and the discovery in 1997 of pig bones near the skeletons makes it likely that the bodies reburied with full Israeli military honours in 1966 were in fact Roman soldiers.

 There is a Masada web site with good photographs at [www.uwm.edu/StudentOrg/TAGAR/masada.html](http://www.uwm.edu/StudentOrg/TAGAR/masada.html). Shaye Cohen has written about the 'Myth of Masada' at [www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/portrait/masada.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/portrait/masada.html)

**(ii) The star of Jacob – Simon bar Kokba**

The revolt of Simon bar Kokba in 132AD was the final act of Jewish defiance against Rome. It did not succeed. Provoked by the Emperor Hadrian's attempt to found a Roman colony in Jerusalem and to raise a shrine to Jupiter on the site of the destroyed temple, Simon bar Kosba gathered an army in the Judean desert and for three years conducted a guerrilla war, while proclaiming himself head of a new free government. A costly and brutal campaign, in which some 580,000 Jews died, ended the revolt and with it the hopes of the Jews for a homeland for nearly two millennia. What is perhaps most significant, however, is what the story of Simon reveals about expectations of a messiah a century after Jesus' time. Simon was a descendant of David, and was renamed bar Kokba ('son of the star') by Rabbi Akiba because he was thought to be fulfilling the prophecy of Numbers 24:17 ('a star shall rise out of Jacob...'). Simon issued coins which dated 132 as year 1 – the first year of freedom and the new kingdom. In many ways Simon's brief and bloody three year career is a distorted reflection of Jesus' a hundred years before. Simon's opponents renamed him Simon bar Kozba – son of the liar.

## 10. A New Beginning

The emergence of the Christian sect in the later first century AD coincided with the destruction of the Jewish kingdoms in Judea. This enabled the Christians to claim that they were now the true people of God, and that through the sacrifice of Jesus a new beginning had been opened up for the divine purpose. Using the resources of apocalyptic thinking, Christian prophets looked ahead and saw a future glorious triumph in the victorious return of Jesus to rule the earth.

### (a) John the Baptist


John the Baptist was the leader of a renewal movement in the Judean wilderness, emerging at some point in the third decade of the first century AD. Modelled on the Old Testament prophets Elijah, he dressed in clothes of camel hair and ate locusts and wild honey (see 2 Kings 1:8). Christian tradition downplayed John's significance, possibly due to later conflict with his followers (see, e.g. Acts 19:1-4; the Mandaean sect, which survives in Iran and Iraq and reveres John at the expense of Jesus may be a remnant of these disciples of John), but he deserves to be seen as the last in the line of Old Testament prophets, and a major figure in first century Judea, as Josephus' descriptions of him make clear.

### (i) John's message

John's message was one of repentance in the face of impending disaster: the frenzied political atmosphere of first century Judea may not have required great prophetic gifts to discern the potential for bloody destruction in the near future, but what distinguished John was his response to the coming fire. Unlike the military messiahs who focussed on the external threat of foreign domination, John directed people inward to piety and justice (in this he may have been pointing to the traditional 'two tablets' of the Law: see D.3.(d) (ii) 'Justice and righteousness' above). Like the pre-exilic prophets, he identified the time of disaster as the time of God's judgement upon his people. His practice of baptism, a purification ritual signifying a new seriousness in the recipient's relationship with God set him apart from others who used ritual washing, such as the Qumran community. John's baptism signified a new beginning, an initiation into a new movement of repentance and redemption. Gentiles who converted to Judaism received a purificatory baptism after they had become Jews through the rite of circumcision, and thus immersion was seen as part of their continuing experience, not its beginning. John's considerable personal popularity made him a dangerous character, despite his apparent reluctance to advocate armed struggle. Herod Antipas had him imprisoned and executed because of his criticism of the king's liaison with Herodias, his half-brother's wife. It is quite characteristic of John that he would have attacked the immorality of Antipas: such flagrant breaches of the Law underlined John's message that only heartfelt repentance could save the people in the face of coming doom.

### (ii) The Prophet in the Wilderness

John's base was in the Judean desert, an evocative symbol of the exodus, and a focus of spiritual longing and aspiration in the first century. The Qumran community lived there, and Josephus describes Bannus, a 'holy man' whose disciple he became in the 50s, who 'dwelt in the wilderness, wearing only such clothing as the trees provided, feeding on such things as grew of themselves, and using frequent ablutions of cold water, by day and night, for purity's sake.' (Josephus *Life* 2.10-12). The desert was also the place where the gospels record Jesus' prolonged fast as he wrestled with what his identity and mission might be.

 On John the Baptist see Drane *NT* pp.52-4, 61-2.

### (b) Jesus of Nazareth

Jesus' impact on his own times was limited in scope. He proclaimed that the new kingdom of God had come in a brief ministry of healing and teaching based in Galilee, lasting perhaps three years. Galilee was distant, however, from the heartland of Judah which had been the focus of Jewish faith. The second phase of Jesus' ministry was therefore a direct challenge to Jerusalem, bringing a message of judgement on the city. This culminated in Jesus' execution at Passover, sometime between 26 and 36AD, probably 33.

At first sight Jesus was one amongst many messianic pretenders of those times, but two features stand out to distinguish him sharply from his contemporaries: first, he was not violent in his proclamation of a new kingdom; second, his disciples did not cease following him after his death, but proclaimed that he had returned to life and was still with them in a personal way, by the Spirit of God.

The message of Jesus announced a radical new direction in the story of the people of God, and as the political storm-clouds gathered over the Jews' promised land, Jesus' disciples began to proclaim that they were the new people of God.

### (i) The Mission in Galilee

Known universally as 'Jesus of Nazareth', a town in the hill country of northern Galilee, Jesus' early ministry was concentrated in the towns and villages close to the familiar northern shores of the Sea of Galilee. Capernaum, where Jesus seems to have stayed with the family of a fisherman, Simon Peter, became the centre of a revival movement which initially attracted many followers. Peter, with a band of eleven others, became the core of Jesus' following, a group of twelve consciously reflecting the twelve tribes of Israel. Jesus explained the atmosphere of revival as the coming of the kingdom he proclaimed. Healings and other miracles were signs that the kingdom of God was here and now, present in his presence. His message was one of profound hope to the people of Galilee, often marginalised and despised by their southern cousins. Jesus also identified himself with the only prophet to have come from the Galilee area: Jonah, whose task had been to challenge the city of Nineveh to come to repentance. Perhaps it was this latter theme which prompted him to head to Jerusalem to proclaim his message of the kingdom of God there.

### (ii) Journey to Jerusalem

Jesus' brief public ministry in Jerusalem was unsuccessful if he was seeking to bring about the kind of presence of the kingdom which had characterised his work in Galilee. His entry as a pilgrim on an ass was a political statement of a kind, but his challenge was like the John the Baptist's, in being pointed


at the Jewish authorities and religious system rather than the Romans. In the heated, crowded atmosphere of Jerusalem at Passover, his demonstration in the temple precincts against the money-changers and dove-sellers who underpinned the sacrificial system was seen as inflammatory. He was soon arrested, tried and executed by standard penal procedure on a cross, on the orders of the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate, with the connivance of the High Priest.

### **(iii) What Happened Next?**

The story of first century Palestine is littered with messianic pretenders. The claims of none of these were taken seriously after their deaths. Only Jesus' movement became more powerful after the death of its protagonist. His disciples explained what had happened by saying that they had seen him after his death, and that he spent a further period of time with them, teaching them and sharing meals with them as he had done before. This was an extraordinary claim, especially since the doctrine of resurrection was largely understood in general terms as a hope for the end of time, not something that might happen as an isolated occurrence. Yet this was their view, held with remarkable unanimity by a large number of Jesus' followers, and never gainsaid by the authorities who might have produced the body. That the death of an obscure Galilean prophet in the middle of a busy Passover weekend should have been the catalyst for a faith that within a century would challenge Judaism itself is almost incredible - but that is what happened.

### **(c) After Jesus**

Within a few weeks of Jesus' death his disciples were actively proclaiming his resurrection in Jerusalem and experiencing something similar to the kind of revival which had characterised his earlier ministry in Galilee. Empowered, they said, by the Spirit of God, whom they associated as the gift of Jesus, ripples spread far and wide through the next decades, across the empire to Rome itself and eastwards into Syria and beyond. At first largely Jewish, the Christian congregations gradually assimilated themselves to Gentile membership after a certain amount of argument about self-definition. By the end of the century all the major cities of the empire had churches, and despite persecution and martyrdom, the faith continued to grow rapidly. Some disciples wrote down the recollections of the first followers of Jesus, and by the early second century there were a number of lives of Jesus available (some more reliable than others) and also growing collections of letters which had been written during the early expansion of the faith by Paul and other apostles.

 There is an excellent website on 'Peter and Paul and the Christian Revolution' at <http://www.pbs.org/empires/peterandpaul/>

### **(i) Peter, James and the early mission**

Peter, who had been very close to Jesus during the Galilee ministry, assumed leadership of the fledgling church in Jerusalem after Pentecost. However, his desire to take the faith beyond the boundaries of Judea meant that he was eventually replaced by James, the brother of Jesus, as the figurehead of the mother church. Jerusalem was a tough place to live in during the decades of the 40s and 50s. Political tensions ran high in the prelude to the revolt of 66AD, and James eventually became a casualty of them in 62AD, a death recorded with some sympathy by Josephus. Peter, meanwhile, undertook a roving brief within the (still largely Jewish) churches in Syria and Asia Minor, no doubt much in demand for his eye-witness retelling of Jesus' ministry. His eventual home seems to have been Rome, where he almost certainly met his death during the persecution instigated by Nero after the great fire of 64AD.

**(ii) Paul and wider expansion**

Paul, a strict Pharisee who initially persecuted the young church, was dramatically converted into a follower of Jesus around 35AD. Although not part of the original group of eye-witness apostles, Paul eventually became, as a result of his theological training, the great creative mind who helped the Christian faith to grow beyond its roots in Jerusalem and to embrace all races. Paul planted and strengthened churches right across the breadth of the northern shores of the Mediterranean. Like Peter, he seems to have met his death during Nero's persecution of the Christians in 64AD.

**(iii) Writing the New Testament**

The death of the apostles either through martyrdom or natural causes was a spur to the collection of their reminiscences of Jesus. Mark, the first gospel, bears the marks of having been based on the recollections of Peter, and it seems likely that it dates from around the early 60s AD, when Peter may have become conscious of the danger of death that he faced. It seems that there were substantial oral and possibly written collections of sayings of Jesus and the story of his passion in existence from quite early on in the history of the church. Much is preserved in the writings of the New Testament that must have been embarrassing to the later church, but which had already acquired an authoritative status (the role of John the Baptist, for example). The recollections of different apostles in different churches formed the basis of creative syntheses of the story of Jesus, and eventually the church would focus on four of these as the most definitive (though some of the others undoubtedly contained further genuine stories and sayings). Letters written by leaders during the creative years of the 50s and 60s were also collected together, reflections on the growing faith which spelt out the apostles' understanding of Christian theology. In this way they ensured that the story would not be forgotten, and that generations to come would be able to retell it for posterity.

**(d) The Final Act**

Jesus' message had included a promise of return. Many in the early church wondered when and how that would be. As the early generations of Christians died off, so the question became more pressing. What would happen to those who had died, and were not therefore going to be on hand when Jesus returned? Paul first addressed this question, recognising that the return of Jesus might be delayed for a long time. Later, using the language and imagery of apocalyptic, John provided a strange and terrifying but ultimately comforting vision of the end of the story, when God would dwell with his people, and 'there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.' (Rev 21:4.) But in the meantime it was important to remain faithful and to hold on to hope.

**(i) The New Israel**

Amongst the many questions with which the early Christians wrestled, one of the most difficult was of the identity of God's people. The Old Testament was clear that Israel was the focus of God's purposes, from Abraham onwards, even though the ultimate beneficiaries would be all the peoples of the earth. Jesus came proclaiming a new beginning for Israel, and seems to have deliberately enacted a new start. He called twelve disciples, a clear counterpart to the twelve tribes of Israel, and commanded them to remember him in bread and wine in a new Passover act. Stephen's speech, recorded in Acts 7, effectively claims that the followers of Jesus have become the new people of God. Paul, as in much else, saw clearly that though the roots of the people of God lay with the Jews, now the predominantly Gentile church had been grafted on, like a new branch to a wild olive tree, and that from this

source would the new growth come (Rom 11:17). Paul, observant Jew all his life as he was, was at pains to tell his Gentile converts not to despise God's original chosen people. Unfortunately too much of subsequent Christian history, especially after the triumph of the church under Constantine, has been disfigured by anti-Semitism. For centuries orthodox Christian teaching blamed the Jewish race as a whole for the death of Jesus, a process which reached its appalling climax in the Nazi holocaust of 1933-45. Paul, in the dense arguments of Romans 9-11, never gave up hope that somehow, in the providence of God, Israel old and new would be reunited.

**(ii) The Old Covenant – cancelled or superseded?**

What happened to God's promises to Israel after Jesus? Were they cancelled or simply superseded? The heretic Marcion in the second century argued that the old covenant had been cancelled and that therefore Christians did not need to read the Old Testament. However, the church in general did not agree and insisted that the Jewish scriptures, which had been read as part of Christian worship since its beginnings, were essential to Christian faith. In the fourth century the great theologian Augustine of Hippo developed the doctrine of 'supersessionism', which held that the Old Covenant, while superseded by the new, was incorporated into it.

**(iii) Final or penultimate?**

Revelation provides us with a cosmic vision of the end of the story. But what of those who, like its first readers then and us now, who live between the close of the story of the early church and the end of the story as a whole? Tom Wright has suggested that the situation is rather like a group of classical actors improvising a lost scene situated somewhere in the fifth act of a Shakespeare play, on the basis of what they already know of the previous four acts. This means entering the story and playing it out to its conclusion, using all the knowledge and skill they have already acquired. If we see the biblical story as falling into five movements of creation, exodus, exile, incarnation and resurrection, then the task is to provide part of the 'resurrection' act, on the basis of the hints of how the story ends given in Romans 8, 1 Cor 15 and Revelation. 'The church is designed, according to this model, as a stage in the completion of the creator's work of art: as Paul says in Ephesians 2:10...we are his artwork.'<sup>13</sup> Our task, therefore, is to enter the penultimate scenes of the great story of the people of God and to carry the story forward ourselves.

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<sup>13</sup> N.T.Wright *The New Testament and the People of God* (SPCK London 1992) p.142.

<b>Glossary</b>
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**Apocalyptic**

Writings, usually dating from the intertestamental era, which speak of the future coming of God in terms of visions and dreams, images and mythical creatures.

**Apocrypha/Apocryphal**

Books which were viewed by Rabbis as important but not part of the Hebrew Bible. Includes historical accounts of the intertestamental period, especially the Maccabees. Accepted by the Council of Trent as part of the Christian Bible. Approved by the Thirty-Nine Articles as useful for reading but not doctrine.

**Canon/Canonical**

The authoritative list of books in the Bible. '*Canon*' means 'measuring stick' - so 'canonical books' are the ones by which right belief is measured.

**Canonical criticism**

A form of criticism developed by B.S.Childs which stresses the need to interpret biblical books as we receive them in a final form in the Bible, rather than by dissecting them into the units which were combined to form them.

**Council of Trent**

Council of the Church held by the Pope in response to the Reformation, 1545-52 and 1562-3. Formulated for the first time (1546) a definitive view that the unwritten tradition of the church was equal in authority to the Bible.

**Diaspora**

Literally the 'scattering' of the Jewish people from their homeland as a result of the exile. By the time of Jesus 'Diaspora Jews' (of whom Paul was one) outnumbered those who lived in Palestine.

**Enlightenment**

European philosophical movement beginning at the end of the seventeenth century and dominating the eighteenth, which emphasised the supremacy of human reason and attacked the 'superstition' of religion.

**Eschatological**

relating to the fulfilment of all things at the end of time (pronounced *ess-kat-ological*).

**Genre**

The type of writing used in a particular text; deciding whether the writer intended to be understood as a poet, historian, prophet or letter-writer affects how the text is read.

**Intertestamental**

The period between the Old and New Testaments, roughly 400 BC-30 AD. The so-called apocryphal writings mostly date from this period.

**LXX (Septuagint)**

The Greek version of the Hebrew Bible Old Testament), allegedly translated by 70 scholars.

**Mesopotamia**

Literally, in Greek, the land 'in the middle of the rivers' (the Tigris and Euphrates). Sometimes known as the 'cradle of civilisation'.

**Oracles**

Prophetic announcements, often of judgement.

**Original Texts**

Archaeologists are continually uncovering ancient copies of Biblical texts (the Dead Sea Scrolls found in 1947 are the most famous examples), some of which may be older (and therefore probably closer to the writer's words) than those on which translations have been based. The text we now have of the New Testament is certainly closer to the original versions than that which the translators of the AV had in the early 1600s.

**Patriarchal Narratives**

Early traditions of Israel, probably passed down by word of mouth, which have been incorporated in Genesis.

**Pentateuch**

The first five books of the Bible (also known as the Torah).

**Polytheism**

Belief in many gods, characteristic of the societies of the ancient Near East and the classical world. Israel, with its fiercely monotheistic faith was a remarkable exception.

**Presuppositions**

The assumptions which scholars bring to their work, but which may not be tested or examined and lead them to conclusions which are not warranted

**Proselytes**

Gentiles prepared to accept baptism and circumcision in order to become Jews.

**Qumran**

Site near the Dead Sea of a semi-monastic community of the first centuries BC and AD. The caves at Qumran have yielded the Dead Sea Scrolls.

**Redactor**

The editor who gives a book its final shape.

**Second Temple**

The second temple was built after the return of the exiles from Babylon (c.516 BC), and intertestamental Judaism is often called 'second temple Judaism'. This was the system of faith which existed in Jesus' time. The third temple (Herod's) was built incorporating much of the second in 19BC-63AD, shortly before its destruction by the Romans in 70AD

**Strata**

Archaeological sites are composed of layers of remains, as buildings are built on top of older buildings. Each site therefore has a series of layers, known as strata, to be uncovered

**Thirty-nine Articles**

Statement of doctrine of the Church of England incorporated in the *Book of Common Prayer*.

**Variant Readings**

Conflicting texts of the same verse.



Need some more help? <http://www.wfu.edu/~horton/r102/ho1.html> has a 'basic vocabulary of biblical studies for beginning students'.

## Further reading

Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

(Ecclesiastes 12:12)

### A. Bible Translations

*There are many contemporary translations of the Bible. It is important that you have one which you use and stick to so that you know your way around it. It is also important that you are aware that there are other translations, and that particular phrases may be translated differently.*

**Authorised (King James) Version** (1611) - Unparalleled in terms of literary style, but based on a Hebrew and Greek text which was not very good. Its **Revised Version** (1885) was based on much better original texts. Both have the advantage that they tend to use one English word consistently for each Greek or Hebrew word. This makes these translations still invaluable for concordance work.

**Revised Standard Version** (1952) - the first of the modern translations to have wide backing. Derived from the Authorised (King James) Version, some of whose language rhythms it tried to keep. A solid translation, but now feels a bit dated.

**The Jerusalem Bible** (1968) and **New Jerusalem Bible** (1985) - Roman Catholic translation. Individual books were translated by different scholars chosen as much for their literary as their academic ability, leading to gems such as JRR Tolkien's rendering of Job, but also occasional idiosyncrasies.

**New English Bible** (1970) - Intended as a supplement to the AV (which it was assumed would remain the version used for reading aloud) the NEB is a translation which has some oddities. In the attempt to make the reading fresh and escape the shadow of the AV the translators tended to choose the most incomprehensible option in the case of disputed readings, and deliberately prosaic phrases where the AV had familiar poetic ones (e.g. the 'still small voice' which Elijah hears in 2Kings 19:13 becomes 'a low murmuring sound', which sounds as if a herd of cows passed by, rather than God!) Worth having to check different readings, but not to use as a main translation.

**Good News Bible (Today's English Version)** (1976) - still a good standby for narrative sections like the gospels, but because of its deliberately simple vocabulary comes unstuck when trying to translate Paul's letters, for example. Most editions include very helpful cross-references.

**New International Version** (1979) - a good, solid translation by evangelical American scholars, which (not surprisingly) interprets disputed verses in a fairly conservative way, concerned to reinforce accepted doctrinal views rather than grapple with the meaning of the original text.

**New Revised Standard Version** (1989) - probably the best all-round current translation, accurate and well-written; also the first to take account of the issue of 'inclusive language'.

**Revised English Bible** (1989) - a revision of the NEB, but rather in the shadow of the NRSV which was published in the same year.

There are other more recent translations (e.g. the Bible Society's **Contemporary English Version** (1997)) and also some paraphrases that can be useful, e.g. the (now rather old but still lively) **New Testament in Modern English** (1958) by J.B. Phillips or **The Message** (1993/2001) by Eugene Peterson which has many striking turns of phrase with an American flavour.

## B. Reference and General Introductions

### 1. Bible Reference Books

*These books are ones to refer to and look up facts about the Bible and the people and places which appear in it.*

D. & P. Alexander (eds) *The New Lion Handbook to the Bible* (Oxford, 1999) is the third edition of a comprehensive handbook which is well illustrated and presented, with a wide international range of (largely conservative) contributors. It's a good idea to have this or *The Complete Bible Handbook*.

*The New Bible Dictionary* (IVP 3rd ed. 1996) generally conservative, but usually argues its case.

J. Bowker (ed.) *The Complete Bible Handbook* (London 1998) beautifully produced and illustrated, it has a distinguished list of (mostly British) contributors. It has a book-by-book introduction to the Bible, plus features on major topics, and an excellent bibliography. Highly recommended (now available in paperback).

R. J. Coggins & J. L. Houlden *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* (SCM 1990). Very comprehensive guide to how the Bible has been interpreted.

**One-volume commentaries** on the whole Bible should be used with caution: their coverage is usually too brief and rather patchy. Old commentaries like Matthew Henry's may give ideas for preaching, but should not be used as a sole guide to the text.

It is worth investing in a **Concordance** which will list the occurrence of different words and makes it possible to find that verse you remember but can't quite pin down... However, the best are still based on the AV (because of its word-for-word equivalence principle, see under Translations above). It's worth considering the NIV and NRSV Bible on CD-ROM, available for under £50 or downloaded from the internet. They will do a much better job than any manual concordance.

An **Atlas** is useful to have; even a small cheap one will be helpful. J. B. Pritchard (ed.) *The Times Atlas of the Bible* (London 1987) is the best (and most expensive!). SPCK's *The Essential Atlas of the Bible* (London 1999) is up to date and comprehensive, well illustrated, but strangely weak on maps.

### 2. Introductions to the Bible as a Whole

*These introductions will give you an overview of the Bible.*

J. Barton *What is the Bible?* (London 1991) Excellent short introduction to the Bible by a major British Old Testament scholar.

M. D. Coogan *The Oxford History of the Biblical World* (Oxford 1998) is the only up to date book which covers the history of both Old and New Testaments. Although it carries the 'Oxford' label it is in fact an American production, though none the worse for that. It tends to deal with the historical background to the Bible, and be cool about the extent to which the biblical text itself may be trusted historically. Well illustrated, with good maps, it is expensive but useful to refer to, and may be a good corrective to the tendency of this handbook to emphasise the historical nature of the Bible. Quite advanced.

J. Goldingay, J. *How to Read the Bible* (London 1997) Simple, short, but very useful guide to the different types of writing in the Bible, but stronger on Old Testament.

S. Motyer *The Bible with Pleasure* (Leicester, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1997) Similar to Goldingay in scope, but written in a more 'chatty' style.

S. Moyise *Introduction to Biblical Studies* (London 1997) A good introduction for those who want to enter the scholarly debates a little more thoroughly.

J. Riches *The Bible: a very short introduction* (Oxford 2000) is, as its title suggests, succinct. It is really a guide to interpretation and as such is well worth reading.

J. Rogerson (ed.) *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Bible* (Oxford 2001) The contributors to this wonderfully illustrated book discuss the societies in which the Bible was written, the texts and translations and the ways in which it has been studied and used, as well contemporary interpretations. There are three very helpful chapters on liberation theology's biblical interpretation.

H. Shanks (ed.) *Ancient Israel: a short history from Abraham to the Roman Destruction of the Temple* (SPCK London 1989/2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Biblical Archaeology Society, Washington, 1999, available through Amazon.co.uk) is the best relatively cheap single volume on

biblical history. It's really about the Old Testament, but includes background to the New also. Its judgements on the historical value of the biblical text tend to be more positive than those of the *Oxford History*, but it suffers from being written by a variety of scholars who don't necessarily agree with each other.

W.Wangerin *The Book of God : the Bible as a Novel* (Oxford 1996) is just what it says it is. A well written 'blockbuster': the power of the narrative carries you along. It is, however, also an interpretation, and an example, in a way, of 'narrative criticism'.

P.Yancey *Disappointment with God* (London 1989) Not a critical work as such, but an excellent example of how the Bible story may be used pastorally. Yancey asks 'Why does God disappoint us - or is it just the way we (mis)understand him?', and gives a brilliant overview of the whole Bible. Previously published in the UK as *Seeing in the Dark: Faith in Times of Doubt*.

### 3. Basic Introductions to the Old Testament


*These will introduce you to the main themes of the Old Testament.*

J. Drane *Introducing the Old Testament* (Revised ed. Oxford 2000) This is the main recommended course textbook.

J.Laffin *The Duffer's Guide to the Old Testament* (London 1996) A cleverly written approach to Old Testament studies, written with humour and giving a range of views about particular issues.

A.Motyer *A Scenic Route through the Old Testament* (Leicester 1994) Six key themes with accompanying suggested readings by an evangelical 'elder statesman'.

J.Rogerson.& P.Davies *The Old Testament World* (Cambridge 1989) Introduction to the historical background by two respected British scholars.

 The 'Exploring Ancient Cultures' web-site is a good starting place for historical resources ([www.eawc.evansville.edu/nepage.htm](http://www.eawc.evansville.edu/nepage.htm)), as also is the 'Ancient History Sourcebook' ([www.fordham.edu/halsall](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall)).

### 4. Basic Introductions to the New Testament

*These will briefly introduce you to the New Testament.*

P.Barnett, *Bethlehem to Patmos: the New Testament Story* (London 1989) A survey of the NT against its historical background.

J.Drane *Introducing the NT* (Revised ed. Oxford 1999) Easily the best major introduction to the NT. The book list at the end is good and comprehensive.

S.Jones *A Rough Guide to the NT* (Leicester 1994) Outstanding simple guide to the NT writings with useful pictures and charts. It has been revised as *Discovering the New Testament* (Leicester 2001) but without the pictures!

### 3. History of Israel

J.Bright, *A History of Israel* (3rd ed. London 1980) A standard history, first published in 1960 and revised many times. Often found in second-hand bookshops, and now rather dated.

M.D.Coogan *The Oxford History of the Biblical World* (Oxford 1998) The relevant sections are up to date but rather technical and very sceptical about the value of the historical books of the Old Testament.

J.M.Miller & J.H.Hayes *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (London 1986) Probably the most comprehensive and balanced summary currently available.

H.Shanks (ed.) *Ancient Israel: a short history from Abraham to the Roman Destruction of the Temple* (London 1989) Clear and concise.

J.A.Soggin, *A History of Israel: from the beginnings to the Bar Kochba revolt, AD 135* (London 1984) Standard scholarly summary.

### 4. History Books and Narrative

R.Alter *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Allen & Unwin 1981) Excellent introduction to the way the text is written.

R. Bauckham, *Is the Bible Male? The Book of Ruth and Biblical Narrative* (Cambridge 1996) Excellent Grove booklet on the issues of feminist criticism, applied to Ruth.

T.Dennis, *Lo and Behold!* (London 1991) Excellent look at the power of OT story telling.

B.Fyall, *Preaching Old Testament Narrative* (Cambridge 1997) Grove booklet which looks

creatively at stories, with a case study on Kings.

- J. Goldingay, *After Eating the Apricot* (Carlisle 1996) Retelling of 13 OT stories. The method used is outlined in 'Preaching on the stories in scripture' *Anvil* 7(1990) pp.105-114
- M.E.Mills *Historical Israel: Biblical Israel – Studying Joshua to 2 Kings* (London 1999) Up-to-date summary of differing chronological and literary approaches.
- V. Phillips Long *The Art of Biblical History* (Leicester 1994) A superb book on history and narrative. More advanced.
- I.W.Provan *1 and 2 Kings* (Carlisle 1995) is a commentary in the *New International Biblical Commentary* series which focuses on issues of narrative.

### 5. Chronology and Archaeology

- J. Bimson (*When did it happen? New Contexts for Old Testament History* (Grove Books 2003) Short introduction to the issues.
- P.James, *Centuries of Darkness* (London 1991) introduces this complex but important field looking at the whole Ancient World, with one chapter on Israel. Web-site at <http://www.centuries.co.uk/>
- K.M.Kenyon & P.R.S.Moorey, *The Bible and Recent Archaeology* (London 1987) Revised edition of standard British Museum survey.
- J.Rohl, *A Test of Time* (Century 1995) more detailed than James and deals specifically with Egypt and Israel, suggesting a remarkable degree of agreement between the archaeological record and the chronology recorded in the Old Testament. A fascinating read, which became a Channel 4 TV series, but Rohl has set himself up as a crusader against received opinion, and often exceeds his proper sphere of judgement as an Egyptologist, so do not trust everything he says! Web-site at [www.knowledge.co.uk/xxx/cat/rohl/](http://www.knowledge.co.uk/xxx/cat/rohl/)