Unit B
Introducing the Bible and Old Testament

The Old Testament Literature

The Hebrew Bible is divided into three parts, and these are reflected in its Hebrew title, *Tanakh* which simply means ‘The Law, The Prophets and the Writings’. *The Law* is the first five books, known to the Jews as the five books of Moses. *The Prophets* fall into two parts: “The Former Prophets” includes Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, while “The Latter Prophets” includes Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the 12 “minor prophets”. *The Writings* is all the rest. In the New Testament phrases like “the Law and the Prophets” or “Moses and the Prophets”, are used to refer to the whole Hebrew Bible.

Modern European scholars, however, usually divide the Old Testament up rather differently, according to the type of writing in the various books, as follows:

**A. Historical and traditional material.** These texts tell the story of the outworking of the purposes of God in the experience of the people of Israel. They include:

*Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers*

Probably first compiled by someone in the 8th century BC from earlier writings based on traditional stories handed down for generations by word of mouth. They are intended to put the story of the Exodus of Israel from Egypt in its spiritual perspective in the stories of Israel’s antiquity. Most likely, they were re-edited in the 6th century BC after the Exile, in order to provide the Jews with theological resources for understanding and responding to what had happened to them at that time.

*Deuteronomy, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings*

This collection, sometimes called the “Deuteronomic History” was probably collected together from earlier material and given its present form by an editor in the 6th century BC, after the fall of Jerusalem. It tells the story of Israel in such a way that the destruction of Jerusalem and the Exile can be understood as God’s punishment of his people for their failure to live up to their covenant obligations. The editor is conventionally known as “D”.

*1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah*

This is another “history” collection, probably edited from earlier material in the 4th century BC (the Greek period). It retells the history of Israel in such a way as to challenge the Jews who had returned from exile to be perfect in their observance of the Law. The editor is conventionally known as “The Chronicler”.

**B. The Prophetic Works**

Although almost certainly written down some time after each actual prophet’s activity, these books span the work of a number of people from the 8th century to about 450 BC. They consist mainly of messages from God to Israel (and other nations) often challenging people about their moral and spiritual unfaithfulness to God, threatening judgement, inviting repentance, and sometimes holding out the hope of new experiences of God’s faithfulness in the future. There are occasional references to historical events which help us to relate them to events recorded in the writings.
They fall into three sections according to the period of prophetic activity. The main books in each period are as follows:

**Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah (1-39)**
Before the Exile (pre-exilic)

**Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Second Isaiah (40-55)**
During the Exile (exilic), though Jeremiah was written (and reflects the situation) in Judah during the period between 597 and 586.

**Third Isaiah (56-66), Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi**
After the Exile (post-exilic)

C. Wisdom Literature
These are collections of sayings and longer reflections on the meaning of life, and what is involved in living well. The collection of “wisdom” of this sort seems to have been going on everywhere in the Ancient World, throughout the period of the Old Testament. This means it is difficult to give precise dates to the material in the wisdom books. Probably most of them were actually published in their present form during the Persian period after the Exile, but lots of the material in them is very much older than this.
The main books are:

**Proverbs**
(contains material from the whole period)

**Job, Ecclesiastes**
(late, perhaps 4th century BC, though Job has some very old material)

**Story-tellers**
An important group of books from the 5th-4th century BC, which use stories from the past to convey truths about God and his relationship with his people. It includes *Ruth* and *Jonah,* (which both suggest that God’s love is universal, not restricted to the Jews, a theme which is also prominent in Second Isaiah), and the early part of *Daniel* and *Esther,* (which are about God’s faithfulness at times of oppression).

**Apocalyptic**
A later type of writing, more common in the literature of the period between the two testaments. The later part of *Daniel,* and *2 Esdras* (in the Apocrypha), are fairly typical. “Apocalyptic” comes from a Greek word meaning “unveilling”, and works of this kind are

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1 As you read these notes and other books about the Old Testament you will find references to ‘First Isaiah,’ Second Isaiah,’ perhaps even a ‘Third Isaiah.’ This is because it is noticeable that the words of the prophet relate most closely to different parts of Israel’s history: Isaiah chaps 1-39 are words of warning in the time before the Exile, Isaiah chaps 40-55 are words of comfort during the period in exile, while chapters 56 – 66 address those who have returned. See session 5 for a further discussion.
basically intended to encourage and strengthen a community experiencing suffering and persecution. They do this through explaining “what is really going on” behind the scenes of this world. Their message is that God is really in control, and that those who are his enemies will get what’s coming to them in the end. Apocalyptic uses a kind of pictorial and symbolic code which gives readers who understand it a sense of being “on the inside”—an important feeling at times of persecution and danger.
Palestine in Old Testament Times
Key dates:

• Prehistory

• A lifestyle that existed 1500-1700 years before Christ
  Abraham and Sarah’s Family

• Events around 1300 years before Christ

• Conquest of the Promised Land

• Monarchy: Saul and David are thought to have reigned around 1000 years before Christ

• After Solomon the kingdom divides: Israel in the North and Judah in the South

• Israel destroyed by Assyrians around 720 years before Christ

• Judah defeated and in exile in Babylon, 586/7 years before Christ

• Return and rebuilding 530 years before Christ

Genesis 1-11
Genesis 12-50
Exodus
Judges
1 and 2 Samuel
Kings, Chronicles
Kings, Chronicles
Kings, Chronicles
Ezra, Nehemiah
Reading for Session 2:

ISRAEL’S THEOLOGY OF GOD AND THE WORLD

Primeval History - The Pentateuch

Those who brought Israel’s story together in its present form included, as a sort of prologue or foreword, the texts we now know as the first eleven chapters of Genesis, which together form a separate literary structure of their own, distinct from the stories which begin with the calling of Abraham in Genesis chapter 12. These first eleven chapters of Genesis constitute a kind of “primeval history” asking three questions. “Where did we come from?”, “where are we now?”, and “what has gone wrong?” (in a sense, the whole of the rest of the Bible is an answer to the fourth and fifth questions: “what is the remedy?”, and “who are we now?”). As a result theologians have always had a special interest in these chapters, finding them crucial for attempting to answer so many of the questions our world faces today.

The first chapters of any book are important – they give the reader all kinds of information about what is to follow – about the setting, the subject matter, the characters; the whole framework in which the book is set. Genesis is no exception. Its first eleven chapters begin with God, and they tell a story of how He created a universe which was ordered and good. The story proceeds through a series of stages: to begin with, everything is chaos – but the chaos is slowly transformed to become a cosmos of beauty, order and form, in which human beings have a central place. They end with different kinds of chaos, this time caused by human beings – the chaos of the Flood, which wiped out all but a few, and was followed by a new start – and the chaos of Babel, where human beings' longing to be like God resulted in utter confusion and the loss of communication between people.

A central theme from this material for many interpreters has been that of “image of God”. In these texts, human beings are at the heart of God's creation. They are made “in God's image”, they are given authority and stewardship over the remainder of the created order. They are held responsible for each other, and for the world in which they live. But what does that much-quoted phrase, “in the image of God”, actually mean? One understanding is that it is about relationships. For the God of Genesis 1-11, the creator of all that has ever existed, is a God of relationship – and he wants both a loving and mutual relationship with his creation, and for the created world to be marked by a similar mutuality, harmony, care and justice. God made human beings in his image, having the capacity to experience loving, interdependent relationships. Because they bear his image, they have a duty of respect and care for each other, and before the Fall, the relationships between God and human beings, between man and woman, between people and the natural world, were whole, harmonious and richly fulfilling. This is the basis, then, for an extraordinary paradox: in our fallen world, the closer people grow to God, the more human they become too. Closeness to God doesn’t mean otherworldly piety, a head-in-the-clouds sanctity; it means a richer, deeper joy of our humanity, our inter-relatedness with God, and God’s world, a truer depiction of God’s image in us.
Notice, too, that these first chapters of Genesis contain no mention of Israel. Indeed, most of them seem to imply a middle-eastern setting in Mesopotamia, an area which is now Iraq, NE Syria and neighbouring parts of Turkey and Iran, rather than a near-eastern setting in Palestine or Canaan. Bible scholars used to believe that this primeval history actually came from a fairly late stage in Israel’s development, and was simply put at the beginning of the stories of the ancestors to provide a general background. But more recently, experts have become certain that these are very ancient stories from the period of oral tradition, which use motifs, or themes – creation, paradise, the Flood, the deliverance of humankind from total destruction – which are found in various forms in different cultures of the ancient Near East. What made these stories unique to the Jewish tradition was the nature and role of their God. Once again we pick up on the themes of God wanting an intimate relationship with his people, but conditional on their obedience to him: a set of conditions that they ignored at their peril.

So for the people who wrote them down, these ancient stories were a means of explaining how things had come to be the way they were.

**Science and Faith**

For people in the last 200 years, though, they have raised at least as many questions as they have answered. One area where questions have frequently arisen is that of the relationship of these chapters to modern, “scientific” accounts of the origin of the universe, the history of the world, and human origins.

Ever since modern geology began late in the eighteenth century, earth-scientists have told a very different story about the history of the world. Today, most geologists believe that planet earth is about 4½ billion years old, and they trace its evolution through a series of geological periods, each of which lasted for millions of years. Ninety percent of the earth’s history took place before any of the rocks we can examine today were formed. The simplest life-forms only appeared during the last seven percent of this process, and complex creatures like mammals, very recently indeed in terms of geological time. Nevertheless, according to the palaeontologists, human beings of the species *homo sapiens* have been around for about a quarter of a million years.

Modern geology began in the late eighteenth century, but the real conflict between science and faith was a result of the publication of Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* in 1856. Darwin’s claim that the human race had evolved over millions of years by natural selection from primitive life-forms, and that the chimpanzee was humankind’s closest relative in the animal world, seemed to many devout Christians in the middle of the nineteenth century to be a blasphemy. It seemed to challenge the clear testimony of these chapters in the book of Genesis that the world and its inhabitants were made by God, and that human beings were made in God’s image. Indeed, it seemed to take God out of the story altogether. The controversy that resulted was bitter and sometimes quite personalised. To a considerable extent it reflected not so much conflict between science and faith, as between two irreconcilable versions of the Enlightenment world-view. On the one hand was the scientific methodology, deriving authority from what could be observed and on the other, the attempt of religious people to understand the world from the authoritative word of

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2 The ‘Enlightenment’ was a period in which new interest in science and philosophy encouraged intellectuals to be confident that the world could be known through reason and observation rather than the authority of ancient texts or the intuition of emotion and metaphor.
God. It was this latter version of the Enlightenment that led conservative Christians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to argue that the revelation God had given in the Bible was intended to convey the same kind of information and results as the outcomes of experimental science. This approach, which is a feature of what has come to be known as ‘Fundamentalism,’ asserted that truth is demonstrable by reason, and then looked for arguments to show that this was the kind of truth conveyed by the Bible. Interestingly, pre-Enlightenment biblical scholars did not usually make such claims and there is no necessary reason why belief in the Bible as a definitive and authoritative disclosure of God’s truth should depend on this kind of Enlightenment rationalism.

There are still some Christians today who believe that the creation narratives in Genesis 1 - 2 are to be taken literally as a statement of “scientific” fact: that God did make the world out of nothing in seven “days”, and that, since he was creating a world fully-formed and mature, as a place for human beings to live, it is not surprising that he made it as though it had been around for a much longer time, with all its natural resources, fossil records and “virtual pre-history”. Other Christians, however, no longer feel these are matters of the inner substance of faith, and do not find a major difficulty in accepting the Genesis story of creation as a theological presentation of origins alongside an evolutionary scientific account.

To take a view that allows us to accept the evolutionary scientific account of origins, however, leaves us with questions about what sort of literature we are dealing with in these early chapters of Genesis. If this is not science, then it cannot be history either (since modern history attempts to work by the same method as science). What sort of material is it?

Clearly it is, like the rest of the Old Testament, about God. These are theological texts. Their intention is not merely to leave a record of what took place, nor are these texts simply collections of folk tales, told as a kind of primitive sociology to explain why snakes slither, or weeds grow, or nakedness is embarrassing.

Renewed interest in the power of stories has re-classified these chapters as narrative theology. They tell us about ourselves and about God, not by asserting abstract truths, but by giving us examples of a real life situation. It is a form of theology frequently found in the Bible. It has the power to engage our hearts as well as our heads; inviting us to participate in the story. Though these are tales of long ago, in a world far different to our own, we begin to recognise ourselves in them – and to respond to God’s call through them.

Paradise Lost

Did they fall – or were they pushed?
From the very start of our Bible, we are shown a God who is creative, who is tender, who longs for companionship with the people who are his creation – but also a God who gives people choices, and who creates rules, the wisdom of which aren’t always obvious to his people.

But why? What is the point in God creating a glorious world, and also making the means by which it could all be spoiled? And what does “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil”
mean? Rabbi Jonathan Magonet, by referring to other Old Testament uses of the phrase “knowledge of good and evil”, offers this suggestion:

The two words “good” and “evil” cover two extremes and everything in between; it is “knowledge of all possibilities” that we are talking of here – that is, the potentiality that lies before Adam, if he will eat of the fruit – and it is from this knowledge that God wishes to preserve him.

(J Magonet, A Rabbi’s Bible, p. 112)

For, God says, “On the day you eat of it, you will surely die”. Yet, in fact they didn’t – not in the normal sense of dying, anyway. So we must understand the story to be telling us that God meant something more subtle than immediate physical death as the consequence of disobedience. Perhaps something about eating the fruit would change their awareness of the death that would ultimately be theirs – they would live with the knowledge of its inevitability, of the finiteness of their life. Or perhaps we are to understand that, in some sense, they did die – that death is in the end not only about what happens to physical bodies, but also about what happens to personal relationships, and that the eating of the fruit would introduce a quality of dysfunction and dissolution into their relationship with God and with each other.

And then a new character comes on stage – the serpent, “the most cunning of all the creatures the Lord God had made” – sadly, far more cunning than woman and man. “Is it true that God has forbidden you to eat from any tree of the garden?” (Genesis 3:1). It sounds so innocent on the surface – but we should remember that fruit was what the human pair lived on. Implicit in the question is a suggestion of, “Why ever should God have made a tree and forbidden it? What kind of God would do that to you?” The serpent’s success came not in getting Eve to taste the fruit – but before that, when he made her think about the tree itself, about its desirability, about the unfairness of being forbidden to eat. Her attention was distracted from living and enjoying God’s goodness to questioning God’s wisdom and loving care.

It is as if God, like an over-protective father, had accidentally achieved the very thing he wanted to avoid. By trying to keep the children from the pain of knowledge, God led them to seek it; in trying to keep them in the Garden of Eden, in the paradise of childhood, God had given them the impetus to step outside – and once outside, there was no way back... Lost innocence can only be rediscovered after a long journey through the new-found knowledge; and the journey of humanity, and of each individual person, is a quest to find that state of wholeness again outside the shelter of the garden.

(J Magonet, A Rabbi’s Bible, pages 114–5)

Adam and Eve’s fault lay in that they stopped respecting the holiness of the holy. They were seduced into treating what God had made holy and separate into something to be used for their own purposes. And in forgetting the holy, they forgot God.

The immediate result was a wholly new self-awareness. Christian readers have, over the centuries, seen their realisation of nakedness and ingenious use of fig-leaves as implying sexual awareness. But this reflects the kind of dualism and doubt about physical being and sexuality that we have inherited from the world of Greek thought, rather than the positive commitment to physical being characteristic of the Hebrew mind. Magonet points out that, in the Jewish scriptures, “nakedness” usually means weakness and helplessness. Ironically, the snake had been telling the truth – they suddenly saw themselves as God had seen them, as vulnerable and dependent – an understanding from which God had tried to shield them. In fear and despair they tried to cover their nakedness and vulnerability – to put on a good
front, for clothes give not only a covering and protection, but also express identity and cover up our inner inadequacies.
It is a telling part of the story that these man-made clothes were themselves obviously wholly inadequate. God sent them away from the Garden – but not before he himself had provided them with suitable and effective clothes (3:21). They may have taken an irrevocable step away from God – but God still had their well-being at heart.

**Humanity’s relationship with God**

Adam and Eve’s decision had irrevocably broken the relationship with God whereby he walked with them as the evening breeze sprang up, when each delighted in the other’s company unreservedly. But commentators like Magonet question whether the Fall was an entirely bad thing. After all, if Adam and Eve had just obeyed (it is argued), they would have behaved like children, and could only have had an infantile relationship with God by letting him take all their decisions for them:

Is the “Fall” . . . a first, necessary step towards emancipation of humanity, the first liberation from the slavery of the womb? . . . If it is a liberation, however bitter and painful it may be at the moment of separation, then human beings travel bearing a full responsibility for their life and their actions, for their choices and ultimately for their death. And, in terms of biblical faith, they also have the ultimate freedom – to choose or not to choose God, and that, in the end, is what the adventure begun with Abraham is all about.

*(A Rabbi’s Bible, page 115)*

**The First Problem Family**

The very first family was also the very first “problem family”, as Genesis 4 recounts – a family where sibling rivalries were so great that one brother jealously murdered the other. The story of Cain and Abel is a sequel to the story of the Fall: it shows the consequences of disobeying God – and it is here that the word “sin” is first used, when God (still, apparently, on close speaking terms with his human creatures) warns Cain of the danger he is in (Genesis 4:7). Martin Buber suggests that, in a way, God is testing out what human beings do with the knowledge gained by eating the forbidden fruit. For the journey back to the special relationship with God which had existed before Adam and Eve’s disobedience can now only come from the free choice of human beings to accept God’s will over them. And in fact, the rest of the Bible is the story of how this drama of God’s search for his missing children, and the human quest for that restored relationship with God, is acted out on the stage of history – culminating in God becoming a human being in order to restore us to intimacy with him.

**Two Stories of a Flood**

The folk literature of a number of cultures contains stories of a great flood, and in this respect the literature of Israel is not unique. We know from discoveries made over 100 years ago in what used to be Assyria, that stories of creation and a great flood had circulated in ancient Babylon hundreds of years before the Old Testament was written. Nevertheless, scholars today are doubtful if any sort of direct line of descent can be established from the Babylonian texts to Genesis, though there are enough similarities to

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3 Flood stories occur widely, not just in Ancient Near Eastern literature. Several native North American nations tell flood stories.
make it likely that they are utilising the same basic stock of ideas. The differences between
them seem to be a result of the Old Testament’s distinctive understanding of what God is
like, and this makes it interesting to compare one of the Babylonian stories with the Old
Testament one.

The Babylonian Flood from the Epic of Gilgamesh

Gilgamesh was a legendary king who once ruled in Babylon. The Epic of Gilgamesh tells how
the king tried to find out the secret of immortality from the hero of the Flood, Ut-napishtim.
The Flood story is told in about 200 lines of poetry, some of which are included in the
following extract.

The gods in council decided to send the flood, and Ea, the god responsible for creating man,
took an oath not to tell humankind about it. Ea, however, wanted to warn his worshipper
Ut-napishtim, and so he said to him:

‘Pull down the house, build a ship!
Leave riches, seek life!
Spurn possessions in order to stay alive!
Take the seed of all creatures aboard the ship.
The ship you are to build
Its measurements shall equal each other.
Its width and its length shall be the same.’

There follows a discussion about how Ut-napishtim should explain his work to his fellow
citizens, and how he is to know when the flood will come. The solution was to hide the facts
from them, and lead them to think the gods would bless them. Then the building of the boat
is described. When it was made, Ut-napishtim says:

‘Whatever I had I put aboard it,
Whatever silver I had I put aboard it,
Whatever gold I had I put aboard it,
Whatever living creatures I had I put aboard it.
I made all my family and relative board the ship.
The domesticated animals and the wild,
All the craftsmen, I made go aboard . . .
The fixed time arrived . . .
I looked at the pattern of the weather,
The weather was terrifying to see.
I boarded the ship and closed the door . . .
With the first glow of dawn,
A black cloud rose up from the horizon.
Inside it the storm-god thunders . . .
The god of the underworld tears out the posts of the dam.
The warrior god leads the waters on . . .
Like a battle the divine might overtook the people.
No one could see his neighbour.
The people could not be recognised from heaven.
The gods were frightened by the flood.
They went off up to the heaven of the chief god.
The gods cowered like dogs, crouching outside the door . . .
For six days and seven nights
The wind, the flood, the storm, overwhelmed the land.
When the seventh day arrived, the storm and flood ceased the was
In which they had struggled like a woman in labour.
I looked at the weather: it was still,
And all mankind had turned to clay.
The countryside was flat as a flat roof.
I opened the window, light fell on my cheek,
Crouching down, I sat and wept . . .
On Mount Nisir the ship grounded . . .
When the seventh day came,
I sent out a dove, releasing it.
The dove went, then came back,
No resting-place appeared for it, so it returned.
Then I sent out a swallow, releasing it.
The swallow went, then came back,
no resting-place appeared for it, so it returned.
Then I sent out a raven, releasing it.
The raven went and saw the waters receding,
It ate, it flew about, to and fro, it did not return.
I brought out sacrifices and offered them to the four winds,
I made a libation on the mountain peak,
The gods smelled the sweet savour,
The gods clustered like flies around the sacrifice.’

When at last the great goddess Ishtar arrived, she lifted up the necklace, with large beads made of lapis lazuli, which the chief god had made to amuse her, and she said: ‘All you gods here: just as I shall never forget my lapis lazuli necklace, so shall I remember these days and never forget them.’ There was then a dispute among the gods over the survivor, Ut-napishtim – following which the gods ordained immortality for him and his wife.

(Taken from Alan Millard, Treasures from Bible Times, Lion.)

Many voices – the tower of Babel.

• Read Genesis Chap 11: 1-9
If the previous stories have been intimate portraits of a few people, this is about society on a big scale. And it is important to remember that God is as concerned with the ways that we organise ourselves as a community and a country as with our private and personal lives.

The fault of these people appears to be their desire to build a tower into the heavens, to “make a name for themselves” and so to question God’s sovereignty over their lives. Perhaps this story has echoes of the later Israelites’ desire for a king – to be like the other nations” and to be victorious in war and conquest. The people also wish to avoid being scattered: they want to create a safe haven for themselves. But God’s purpose is to scatter His people, so that they might fill the earth and the whole earth be blessed through them.
Readings for Session 3

Family Histories
Primeval history: The Pentateuch

These scriptures began with the five books which are often referred to collectively as “the Pentateuch” – the story of Israel’s origins. They form a sort of prologue or introduction designed to locate Israel in a wider context. Interestingly this context is solidly theological, rather than sociological or geographical. Although the narratives of this prologue starts at the very beginning of time, with creation, the starting-point of the whole human race, and tells the story of humankind, it is not really interested in social customs or tribal differences, or politics and economics. It looks at who we are and where we are, and at what has gone wrong, and it quickly becomes clear, once the people of Israel arrive on the scene, that they themselves are called to be part of the remedy.

For, in Genesis 12, a family saga begins, which continues up to the end of Genesis (chapter 50) – and beyond - the story of Israel’s ancestors, men and women of almost legendary stature from whom the whole nation descended. These were the people chosen by God himself for a special relationship – not, in many cases, because of their goodness and piety, but despite their flaws, their dishonesty, their deviousness – and because God loved them, allowing them to make mistakes, yet rewarding them for their faith, and teaching them to grow in their understanding of him and of themselves.

At this time, Israel was not yet a nation. It was still a single family – the family of Abraham and Sarah, to whom God gave a son, Isaac, when both parents were well past childbearing age. The name ‘Israel’ (meaning either ‘the one who strives with God’, or ‘God strives’) was given by God to Abraham’s grandson, Jacob, when he finally got his relationship with God on to a proper footing (see Genesis 32:22–32). In other words, the book of Genesis is a sort of pre-history of Israel. It is followed by Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, which tell the story of how God rescued his people Israel from slavery in Egypt, led them through the desert to the land he had promised to their ancestors, and gave them a detailed and extended code of laws to regulate their life when they got there. So these are stories of origins, which were, presumably, passed down by word of mouth among the Israelite tribes from very early in their history, to enable the people of Israel to know something about who they were.

Nations need heroes
Most communities have stories of this kind which give them a sense of their identity. The English have stories– like how Julius Caesar came and saw and conquered, or how King Alfred burned the cakes, or King Harold being shot in the eye at the Battle of Hastings, Francis Drake playing bowls on Plymouth Hoe, Nelson putting the telescope to his blind eye. These are all stories about real people, and most of them have some basis in fact – though we would probably all recognise that the facts have often been embroidered and “improved” to make the stories better at what they do – which is to act as symbols of what it means to be English.
English people have other stories too, equally important for their sense of national identity, but belonging even more in the realm of legend: like the tales of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, or Robin Hood and his Merrie Men. These too probably have some basis in historical fact, but they’ve become folk tales, and we’ve lost contact with any historical facts that may lie behind them.

What matters about all these stories (whether they belong to the first group or the second) is not whether they are historically and factually accurate. Their importance lies in the way they resonate with our sense of identity – they say something that English people believe to be true about themselves and their nation. They have been passed on from generation to generation because English people “claim” them as manifestations of what “Englishness” means. If we are English, they reinforce our belief in our bias towards the underdog, our rejection of tyranny, our willingness to go down fighting, our coolness at moments of crisis, our sense of fairness, and so on. All communities have stories of this sort that help their members to know what it means to belong. There will be local stories too, that distinguish characteristics of a county, or one village from another. They are particularly effective at doing this just because they are stories, for stories work by drawing the listener into the narrative, enabling us to identify with or against the characters we find there.

The stories of the patriarchs (the name given to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph because they were the founding fathers of the nation) are probably stories of this kind. Biblical scholars are divided about how ‘factual’ they are. At one time it was fashionable to dismiss virtually all of them as simple legend – but recent scholarship has indicated that they do reflect a genuine historical context. For example, archaeological research has shown that, from about 2000 BC onwards, there were extensive migrations of semi-nomadic people from the east into the area we know as Palestine – people whose names, lifestyle and customs are similar to those recorded in Genesis. Abraham, with his family and his flocks and herds, migrated from Ur (then at the head of the Gulf, in present-day Iraq) to Palestine some time between 1800 and 1700 BC, according to current thinking. And the stories recorded in Genesis end around 1600 BC, when Jacob’s family moved down to join Joseph in Egypt.

As to the details of what happens in the stories, all we can do is take them as they stand. There is no external or separate account of the events they record, but that does not mean they did not take place. The important thing about the stories, in any case, is what they tell us about Israel’s sense of national and spiritual identity.

**Stories of the Patriarchs and the experience of Exile**

This becomes a matter of crucial importance, of course, in the context of the Exile. By the time Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 BC the stories of the Patriarchs had been around for a very long time. The effect of the Exile was to bring about a fundamental re-examination of what it meant to be an Israelite, and these stories of national identity will have played a central part in that process. The prophets and writers who collected the national literature of Israel together in what we now call the Old Testament, will certainly have wanted to help the nation to use these stories to understand itself and its place in the purposes of God. And the experience of exile will have affected the way in which the people read them.

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1 See the helpful review of these archaeological discoveries and their significance for questions of the historicity of the Patriarchs in Drane 2000, pp 32-35
So these stories of the patriarchs can be interpreted at several levels. They may give us information about the lives and times of the patriarchs themselves. They are also examples of God’s ways with his people, and so models for Israel to follow. They affirm the characteristics that gave the people of Israel their own sense of identity. They also have much to teach us today about the meaning of faith and discipleship. And because they were brought together and retold in their present form either during or soon after the Exile, it will help us to understand their meaning for us if we begin by trying to discover what they would have meant to the people for whom they were first presented in this form.

The Patriarchs and morality
One reason why the stories of the Patriarchs were told was to give the Israelites models for their own response to God. But here we may encounter a bit of a problem. From time to time in these stories, the ‘heroes of the faith’ behave in ways which we find morally repugnant or disgraceful – or simply baffling! For example, not only do some of them have more than one wife each, they also seem to take it for granted that they should have unquestioned sexual rights over their wives’ slave-girls. Abraham twice attempts to pass his wife off as his sister, giving her as a sexual partner to a powerful ruler, apparently to ensure his own physical and economic safety. And Jacob seems to put God’s plans into action through a series of devious plots and scams which we might expect from certain characters from East Enders, but not from someone chosen by God as an example of faithful living!

The fact is that drawing our own conclusions about the meaning of these stories may not be as straightforward a matter as it seems at first. We approach them with a whole range of assumptions about honesty and fairness (not to say marital fidelity and incestuous relationships), which have been shaped by 2000 years of Christian teaching. If we are to ‘hear’ the stories as their editors intended, we may have to try to get inside a different set of moral values which shaped the thinking of those they prepared the stories for. And the stories themselves may assume yet other, much older, ways of thinking which relate to the times from which they originated. Besides, every society (including our own) is blind to some of the things which it condones but which other generations understand that God finds offensive. For example, slavery was accepted in the eighteenth century, and child labour in the nineteenth – and by definition, we can’t see what our own moral blind-spots are.

Strands in the Pentateuch
Ever since the critical study of the Old Testament began in the nineteenth century, scholars have noticed that there seem to be different narrative strands in the Pentateuch that have been woven together to create the text as we now have it. One of the most obvious signs of this plurality of narrative sources is the use of different names for God: some passages use the divine name “Yahweh” (usually printed as LORD in English Bibles), while others use the name “Elohim” (usually rendered in English as “God”), but there are other signs of literary pluralism as well: duplicate stories (eg Genesis 21:31, cp 26:33), anachronisms (eg Genesis 36:31-39, which must, presumably have been written after there were kings in Israel, and therefore long after the time it describes), inconsistencies (how many animals entered the ark? – Genesis 6:19-20 cp Genesis 7:2), and differences in legal provisions (Exodus 20:24, cp Deuteronomy 12:14).

5 Some scholars think the two are really different versions of one story, perhaps preserved in different parts of Israel’s oral tradition, with differing characters but the same basic shape. On the other hand, it is not at all impossible that passing his wife off as his sister was something of a habit with Abraham.
During the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, much energy, and not a little ingenuity, was expended by scholars attempting to get behind the text of the Pentateuch as we know it in order to identify the various strands that had been woven together. Following the work of the Nineteenth-century German scholars, K H Graf and J Wellhausen, it became customary to recognise four main strands, which came to be known as J, E, D and P. J was the strand that used the name Yahweh for God. E was the strand that used the name ‘Elohim’. D stood for Deuteronomy, which was linked, because of some of its theological themes, with the ‘Deuteronomistic History’ (Joshua, Judges, I & II Samuel and I & II Kings). P was the so-called Priestly Writer of the post-exilic period, who was particularly interested in the traditions of the Temple and its worship.6

Very few Biblical scholars today (even among the most conservative), would dispute the presence in the Pentateuch of material from a variety of different sources, many of which are probably very ancient, and circulated for many generations in oral form before they were written down. But contemporary scholarly interest has shifted from the attempt to understand texts by explaining where they came from to a concern to engage with the text as it stands.

… the meaning of a book must surely begin with the text as it stands. No matter how much a work of literature may have been edited or rewritten, its ultimate meaning is to be found in the form it now has. In the study of English literature it is taken for granted that William Shakespeare often took the plots for his plays from other sources. But no-one would dream of looking for the genius of their meaning in the sources, rather than in the mind of Shakespeare himself. And the Pentateuch is just the same. From a purely literary point of view, it is a connected story with its own message.


It is still possible to find references to J, E, D, and P in contemporary scholarly writing, but this is usually simply a matter of trying to contextualise a particular piece of narrative with other material with which it has similarities. Source criticism, however, is no longer seen as a particularly fruitful way of approaching these texts. Attention is now focussed on the texts themselves, in an attempt to understand and interpret the stories they tell.

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6 See the excellent essay on Pentateuchal Source-Criticism and its shortcomings in Drane, 2000, pp 182-187.
Abraham and Sarah

- Genesis 12:1-5
- Genesis 15:1-20
- Genesis 16:1–10
- Genesis 17:1–22
- Genesis 18:1-15
- Genesis 21:1-20
- Genesis 22:1-18

Father of the Faithful, Mother of the Promise

If you only read selected stories about Abraham, you could picture him as an iron man of faith whose obedience to God was rocklike even when it meant leaving his home or sacrificing his beloved son. But if you read the whole story (or select different parts of it), a very different picture emerges. Abraham can be seen as a very human character of great contradictions, wobbling between faith and disbelief, courage and cowardice, and meandering along in search of the fulfilment of God’s promise.

The story of Abram and Sarai⁷ begins (Genesis 12:1-2) with the call of God. How the call was heard we are not told, though it is probably significant that Abraham’s father, Terah, had already set out from the town of Ur in southern Mesopotamia, to go to Canaan. Why the call came to Abraham, rather than to anyone else, we are not told either. As we shall see, this silence of the story about the reason for God’s call to Abraham is theologically eloquent. It emphasises the fact (strongly stressed in Deuteronomy) that God calls his people for his own reasons, not because of qualities he discerns in them.

God’s call

Three major theological themes are being expressed here. One is the way that the initiative in the story lies with God; it is he, not Abraham, who sets things in motion.

The second theme is a consequence of this: it is God who chooses Abraham, not Abraham who chooses God; and God’s choice is a free choice determined only by God; it is not even a consequence of the sort of person Abraham is. This theme (which theologians call election) will recur over and over again in the Old Testament. The scriptures will constantly remind Israel of the way in which God chose to set his love on them not because of any special or desirable quality about them, but simply because he chose to do so.

Thirdly, there is the theme of what Abraham is chosen for.

“I shall make you into a great nation; I shall bless you and make your name so great that it will be used in blessings: those who bless you, I shall bless; those who curse you, I shall curse. All the peoples on earth will wish to be blessed as you are blessed.”

Genesis 12:2-3

⁷ Abram and Sarai’s names are changed by God as a mark of His new relationship with him. For convenience their new names will be used throughout the reading.
Right from the beginning, the call to Abraham and his family is in order to bless the whole world.

**Abraham’s response**

Abraham simply set out from Haran and departed for Cana’an. It is only later in the story that we are told explicitly that “Abraham put his faith in Yahweh, who reckoned it to him for righteousness” (Genesis 15:6). For the moment space is left for us to imagine what the call of God meant for Abraham in practical terms.

These are stories of men and women of flesh and blood, with human foibles and errors. Abraham and Sarah must discover the meaning of faith in the conflicting demands and concrete circumstances of life. But in a very real sense the whole of their story is an extended exploration of what it means to respond to the initiative of God’s electing grace. And through it there run two interconnected theological ideas — faith and obedience.

The story at the end of Genesis 12 is of this kind. Abraham’s attempt to anticipate possible trouble in Egypt by passing off his wife as his sister is simply reported. No value judgements are made on its morality. Pharaoh suffers plagues (an interesting parallel with the story of the Exodus) for an act of wrongdoing for which Abraham is responsible, but no blame is apportioned. It is as though the writers are simply inviting us to draw our own conclusions.

**The Covenant with Abraham and Sarah**

Genesis 17 introduces another theme into the story of Abraham — the theme of Covenant. Abraham’s story started (as we have seen) with God making a demand and a promise (Genesis 12:1–2). He makes more promises to Abraham (Genesis 15:5, 18–20). But in Genesis 17, God’s promise becomes a formal agreement or covenant — and this was to become central to Israel’s faith and life, even up to the present day.

**What was a Covenant?**

Covenants were common in the ancient world of the late Bronze Age (1400-1200 BC). They were, essentially, agreements between two parties, one of whom was in a position of power over the other. Commonly this agreement would be between a conquering power and a conquered people, and the heart of the covenant itself usually consisted of a statement of the actions undertaken or to be undertaken by the party of power, followed by a statement of the obligations thereby incurred by the party of weakness. God’s covenants with Israel follow the same general form.

**The Abrahamic Covenant**

In his covenant with Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 17, God made three promises:

- that Abraham’s descendants would be very numerous (verses 2–5) — and that they would be born from Abraham and Sarah (verses 16–19);
- that God was establishing ‘an everlasting covenant’, which would remain valid for all Abraham’s descendants (verse 7);
- that they would receive the land of Canaan as their permanent home (verse 8).
These promises correspond to the statement of the actions to be undertaken by the party of power. They are followed by a statement of the obligations or actions that God required from Abraham:

- he was to walk in God’s ways, and be ‘blameless’ (verse 1);
- he was to circumcise every male in the household (verses 10–11) – a sign of the covenant that was to be repeated in every succeeding generation.

This is not, in fact, the first covenant described in the Old Testament: in Genesis 9 God made a covenant with Noah. But in that covenant Noah stands for the whole human race and the ‘covenant’ is an undertaking by God that he will secure the continuity of human life without requiring undertakings or obligations on the part of Noah and his descendants. It is a covenant of a different order from the series of covenants that is initiated now with this Abrahamic Covenant, which is much more directly related to the subsequent faith of Israel. Indeed, it is the initial foundation stone on which that faith was built.

While the sign of circumcision is quite explicit, however, what is meant by blamelessness is not. In the Sinai Covenant with Israel through Moses, the meaning of blamelessness would be spelled out in great and precise detail, but for the moment the only law attached to the covenant relationship was the law of circumcision. The covenant relationship at this early stage, then, as the story of Abraham portrays it, is expressed primarily in terms of promise. It was God’s commitment to his people which lay at the heart of it.

The promise God made was specific — that Abraham’s descendants would inherit the land of Cana’an. And this promise was made to a childless man with a wife past child-bearing! Response to the covenant, therefore, required an act of faith on Abraham’s part. When Abraham implemented the covenant sign by circumcising himself and his household he was, in effect, demonstrating the faith with which he received the covenant promise. Circumcision was more than a symbol — it was an act of faith in which Abraham took God at his word. But it seems that God still needed to deal gently with Abraham’s hesitant faith. God appeared to him again (Genesis 18:1–15), this time in human form, to repeat his promise of descendants when Sarah was nearby. Abraham had apparently not told her about her part in the covenant promises – for when she hears of it, eavesdropping on the conversation, she laughs bitterly and cynically (verse 12). God challenges her disbelief – and perhaps it is a token of her transformation that, when baby Isaac is miraculously born, her laughter is no longer bitter but full of joy (Genesis 21:6–7).

The sacrifice of Isaac

The story of the occasion when Abraham’s obedience to God brought him close to killing this precious son is a disturbing one to modern ears. Our society is sensitive to matters of child-abuse, never mind ritual sacrifice of children. Most people would see Abraham as coming out of this tricky situation rather well – indeed, his radical obedience to God has caused his unquestioning faith to resound down the ages. But it can leave the nature of God in some doubt (if we are bold enough to ask awkward questions): at the very best, God seems unfathomable; at worst he seems sadistic.

But Rabbi Jonathan Magonet suggests otherwise, comparing Abraham with Moses on Mount Sinai:
In such moments both Abraham and Moses are unique spiritual figures, going far beyond anything that we are expected to achieve. Never again in the Bible does God make the demand that someone sacrifice his child. . . It is condemned as an abomination, as perverting the worship of God with practices that belong to pagan cults round about. . . What Abraham did once should never be repeated. Because he did it, Israel lives off the merit of his actions and is spared such testing again.

(Bible Lives, p. 32)

We should also remind ourselves of those who heard or read this story in later centuries. By then, more than one king had introduced the sacrifice of human children into Israel’s worship of God (see 2 Kings 21:6), and this story would surely have served to underline God’s rejection of such heathen practices.

So far as the story is concerned, Abraham was tested, and passed. One school of Christian writers has seen here a spirituality of sacrifice, perceiving God as one who always invites his people to place their dearest possessions on the altar of obedience. Another school has seen a warning against the idolatry of activism — that even commitment to God’s work can get in the way of our devotion to God himself. These may or may not be valid ways of constructing the way God relates to us. But so far as the text is concerned, most of these questions are left unanswered. Once again the passage has a sort of inscrutability about it. We are left having to decide for ourselves; and it may be that each time we read it, we shall decide differently
Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Esau

- Genesis 25:21-34
- Genesis 27:1-29
- Genesis 28:10–17
- Genesis 29:1–30
- Genesis 32:3-12, 22-32; 33:1-11

And what of the effect of the experience of nearly being sacrificed had on Isaac? From the very unbiblical standpoint of modern psychology, we may conclude that, after abuse of this magnitude by his own father, it is scarcely surprising that Isaac’s subsequent family relationships were so dysfunctional!

In some ways Isaac’s wife Rebecca is more central to the story than her husband. It is she who is the centre of interest in Genesis 24, when Abraham’s servant goes to find a wife for Isaac from Abraham’s homeland (another passage which later readers might have seen as offering support for their policies of ethnic cleansing). It is possible, too, that later generations of Israelites may have seen a reference to the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah in the oracle about the twins in Rebecca’s womb in Genesis 25:23.

Certainly the narrative presents Rebecca as the moving spirit in the deception that Jacob practised upon the dying Isaac. This too may be a parallel story to the one told in Genesis 25:29ff. In both cases a dish of broth is involved; in both Jacob successfully defrauds Esau of his rights as the first born. But whatever process of combining elements of the tradition may have been going on here, it certainly does not seem to have been intended to sanitise the story of Jacob. There may, of course, be an element of respect for his resourcefulness, but it is hard to see how the way he appears in these stories can have been intended to present him as an object of veneration to Israelite readers familiar with the fifth commandment.

The story of Jacob is, even more than that of Abraham or Joseph, one of a human being with the sort of human foibles we are all familiar with. It is, in fact, a conversion story, and it needs to be read as a sustained narrative, rather than as a series of separate incidents. In it Jacob makes his way by lying, trickery and resourcefulness, always on the run, and always
one jump ahead of his competitors. Isaac, Esau, uncle Laban, Leah, the Mesopotamian cousins, all suffer the consequences of Jacob’s ambition. But the tale leads inevitably up to the mysterious encounter on the banks of the Jabbok Brook recorded in Genesis 32.

This is the moment at which Jacob’s past catches up with him. There is nowhere left to run to except back to where he started from, and there, he knows, an aggrieved brother is waiting for him. But this is the moment, too, where God, who has been, as it were, lurking in the background of the story, steps into centre stage, and Jacob’s life is turned around in one night of desperate conflict. The God who was until now a kind of talisman to ward off bad luck suddenly becomes a deadly adversary who may also, it transpires, be the source of true blessing. The Jacob who meets with Esau next day is a changed man, as his new name, Israel, is surely meant to indicate.

It is also worth looking at the actions of Esau as one who is prepared to welcome his brother back and offer forgiveness. There are shades of the father who waits for and receives the Prodigal Son in the way that Esau is described. When Jesus told his parables he knew that his audience would be familiar with these stories.

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<th>Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Esau</th>
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<td><strong>Recall Genesis 24 1-26, 62-67</strong> : This is a story of ancient prejudices and customs, and of love (verse 67). How do you see God’s hand at work?</td>
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| **Recall Genesis 32 22-32** : This story of Jacob wrestling with an angle for God became so significant for future generations because of the new name given to Jacob, Israel. This is the name by which the nation is to be known. Judaism is known for its robust approach to God, daring to question and challenge while being faithful. |
| o Is this an aspect of spirituality missing from Christian churches? |

| **Recall Genesis 33, 1-11** : Esau’s gracious forgiveness is in marked contrast to the harm done to him (Genesis 27:1-29) and his former anger (Genesis 27:41). |
The Story of Joseph: “God meant it for good”

- Genesis 37:1–36
- Genesis 39:1, 6–23
- Genesis 41:1–44
- Genesis 42:1–4; 43:1–2; 45:1–28

(If you have time, read the whole Joseph story, from Genesis chapter 42 to chapter 47 – or even to chapter 50.)

Like the story of Jacob, that of Joseph, too, is best read as a single continuous narrative. Its place in the unfolding story of Israel is fairly obvious — it explains how the people came to be in Egypt. In order to do so it introduces us to the twelve sons of Jacob, who is now also known by the name given him by the mysterious stranger at the fords of the Jabbok; the name “Israel”. This becomes in turn the generic name of the whole people (the “children of Israel”) and then the designation of the northern kingdom based on Samaria after the reign of Solomon. In the time of the kings and subsequently, the name was to be used in two ways: nationally it referred to the northern kingdom, but in a wider, religious sense it designates all the descendants of Jacob, including the people of the southern kingdom of Judah.

Twelve tribes
The names of Jacob’s twelve sons are those of the Israelite tribes. Clearly the implication is that all Israelites are descended in direct line from Jacob, and thus from Abraham. Scholars are divided as to how far this is an accurate picture of historical reality. Many believe that at least some of the names have been “read back” into the time of Jacob. According to this view some of the tribes of Israel took part in the Exodus and Conquest of Canaan, while others infiltrated Canaan at the same time and became absorbed into the Israelite nation during the long period between the initial invasion of Canaan and its eventual widespread settlement.

Historical questions of this kind are not the first concern of these stories, however. They are much more interested in theological ideas. In asserting that all twelve brothers and their families (not to mention Jacob/Israel himself) went down to Egypt, they make an implicit statement that the whole people of Israel shared the experiences both of slavery and oppression, and of deliverance. In so doing they lay the foundation for a basic theological perception about Israel — that its identity as a nation depends entirely on the saving activity of Yahweh. Theologically speaking, whatever the views of historical scholars may be, no part of the twelve tribes was excluded from the experience of deliverance under Moses. Perhaps even more importantly, there is no room for the possibility that any Israelite might trace their origins to any other source. There are only twelve tribes, and all of them were the subjects of God’s saving acts. Thus to be an Israelite at all includes tracing one’s spiritual identity back to that climactic event.

In other words, it is impossible to be the people of God without first being the people whom God rescues. There is no other way into the covenant relationship. Again and again, this will receive testimony in the religious literature of the nation, especially the Psalms and
the writing of the prophets. Israel will be a nation that owes its very existence to the saving act of God, and this will shape its sense of identity: it will owe God a debt of gratitude which can never be repaid. From this point onwards, the number twelve signifies not only the people of God in all their numerical completeness but also their spiritual identity as the redeemed and rescued covenant community.

**God’s providential care**

But this is not the only theological theme in the story of Joseph. In many ways one of the most significant statements it contains is what Joseph said to his brothers after the death of Jacob (Genesis 50:20):

“You meant to do me harm; but God meant to bring good out of it by preserving the lives of many people, as we see today.”

It is not only that the God of the patriarchs saves his people. He also orders all their circumstances as well as all their doings for their good. Not that they are mere robots, acting in accordance with some divine computer program. The brothers meant to do Joseph harm; it was a deliberate intention — a plot freely contrived and entered into. But behind the scenes, as the story shows, God was weaving a different, unseen purpose. It meant that Joseph had to suffer exile, slavery, false accusation, neglect, and imprisonment, as well as elevation to a position of unimaginable power in Egypt. But the meaning of these things came to light in due time.

The relevance to subsequent generations of Israel is that God’s actions must not be judged hastily. Who knows what good for the future may be concealed behind the sufferings of the present? The faithful believer will await with expectation the revelation of how God “meant it for good”.

**God’s universal rule**

But the story of Joseph also claims that God is the God of Pharaoh and the God of Egypt, as well as of ‘Abraham, Isaac and his descendents.’ It is God who is in control of the food supplies of Egypt, and God who sends Pharaoh dreams which predict the weather systems. And thus it is God who is actually in control of the destinies of Egypt.
Reading for Session Four

The giving of the Law and the beginnings of a nation

Moses, the Man of God

We have now come to the very heart of the faith of Israel. Over and over again the events which we are now studying are the focus of Israel’s faith. The nation always looked back to the Exodus as the definitive act of God’s covenant grace. It was the one event in their early history around which Israel was to build its whole sense of identity and destiny. Its importance for every aspect of the nation’s subsequent experience cannot be over emphasised. The story of the Exodus – the events before, during and after it – is the story of how Israel experienced God’s fulfilment of the second part of his covenant promise to Abraham — that he would give his descendants the land of Canaan.

Midwives and Mothers – Five women and a baby

The story of God’s deliverance begins humbly – not with visions and thunderclaps but with five women – each very determined, and each (in her own way) very brave. Probably none of them realised that they were playing a vital part in God’s deliverance of all of his people.

The political background to the story is a familiar one that has happened to Jewish people and minority groups in many succeeding centuries: a tyrannical ruler feeling threatened by the newcomers, and condemning them to slave labour and oppression as a result.

The midwives

The ‘heroines of the resistance’ (as Trevor Dennis calls them) were the two midwives. Exodus 1:6–17 paints a bleak picture of fear, exploitation and violence. Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives, bring courage, defiance – and even humour – into the darkness. Summoned by Pharaoh to account for their disobedience in killing all the Hebrew boys, they use an excuse which plays on his racial prejudice. They say: ‘These Hebrew women aren’t like your refined Egyptian ladies, who are delicate and have trouble in childbirth. No, they’re more like animals: their labour is so quick, so trouble-free, so like that of the wild beasts, that we just can’t get to them in time!’

Moses, rescuer and leader of Israel, would have been killed at birth were it not for the courage of the midwives. Trevor Dennis writes:

We can compare [these midwives] to Moses. Like him, they act as savours of their own people, and, as he will do eventually, they fearlessly confront the pharaoh and all he stands for. As Israelites, they emerge as heroines who might encourage future generations of their people to stand fast in the face of oppression, and remain loyal to their calling. Their story can be told among those who are themselves the victims of systematic cruelty and carefully calculated violence, and bring them some rare and precious laughter.

(T Dennis, Sarah Laughed, p. 95)

The mothers

So the midwives outwitted Pharaoh – but not for long. Exodus 1:22 tells of a new edict – that all the Hebrew baby boys were to be drowned in the Nile. Moses’ birth, instead of being a cause for joy and celebration, became a cause for fear. Out of love for him, his mother hid her son in a watertight basket, and his sister guarded him.
The story is one which many people know from Sunday-School days. The Egyptian princess discovered the baby – and after what must have been a nerve-wracking time for Moses’ sister (for who would expect the daughter of Pharaoh to do anything other than put her father’s policies and laws into action?), the princess adopted the baby and unwittingly paid his own mother to nurse him.

This isn’t just a sentimental tale – it’s another story of real risk. The princess chose to defy her father. Not only did she save the baby Moses from drowning, but she took him to live as her son in the palace – and kept him there for years under the tyrant’s very nose! God’s plans of deliverance can use the most unlikely people – even those who have no idea of the role they’re playing. That seems to be the lesson of the first two chapters of Exodus – for without these very different women, differently motivated, yet all brave and defiant in the cause of right, Moses, Israel’s great leader and the friend of God, would not have lived to tell the tale.

**God, Moses and Israel**

As Israel looked back to the event of the Exodus, so they looked back to the person of Moses. His story is central to the whole of the rest of the Pentateuch. He was the great leader, the lawgiver, the man who knew God face to face, the one who, over and over again, was intermediary and intercessor between the recalcitrant nation of Israel and God. The story of Moses, like those of the Patriarchs, is archetypical. The relationship between God, Moses and Israel models what was to be the repeated experience of the nation, with its themes of the divine word of law and leadership, the rebellious community, and the prophet as the uneasy interface between them.

In many ways, the story of Moses is quite unlike those of the patriarchs. The patriarchs and matriarchs were the nation (in embryonic form – but the nation nevertheless). Moses was not. His place in the story was not to model Israel’s identity. It was to be the voice of God. And in a sense that was all he was. Despite his centrality, the remainder of the Pentateuch is not the story of Moses. It is the story of how God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt and led them to their inheritance in Canaan. Moses was a tool, not an independent agent.

The point is reinforced by the story of his death in Deuteronomy 34. After all his astonishing labours, his abundant faith, his extraordinary and unique relationship with God, he was allowed only to see the land of Canaan from the distance! A single moment of anger in which “the meekest man in all the earth” presumed to speak for God without authority denied him the ultimate reward. The tool had a single flaw. Yet, 600 years after his death, the memory of him was as strong as ever, and the writer of Deuteronomy could produce this obituary:

“There has never yet risen in Israel a prophet like Moses, whom Yahweh knew face to face: remember all the signs and portents which Yahweh sent him to show in Egypt to Pharaoh and all his servants, and the whole land; remember the strong hand of Moses and the awesome deeds which he did in the sight of all Israel.”

(Deuteronomy. 34:10-12)

**When was the Exodus?**

The records of Egypt say nothing about the Exodus though it was obviously so central to the faith of Israel. If Pharaoh and all his army really did pursue the people into the debacle at the Reed Sea, the records of the Egyptian kings say nothing of it. This makes it difficult to say when it happened.
Many scholars believe that the story of Joseph took place in the time of the Hyksos Empire in Egypt. The Hyksos kings were not native Egyptians, but semitic chieftains who took control of Egypt around 1700 BC. They had similar tribal origins to those of Israel, and this may be the context in which Joseph was able to gain such influence with them. Their Empire lasted until about 1550 BC when a rebellion drove them out. They were replaced by a new dynasty of Egyptian rulers, one of whose descendants, Raamses II, set about rebuilding the ancient capital of the Hyksos kings (Avaris, which he renamed with his own name) and the city of Pithom, near Goshen, around 1270 BC. A stone pillar in Palestine from this period describes how Egyptian slaves “haul stones for the great fortress of the city of Raamses ...”

The evidence is not conclusive, but it is certainly possible that the Pharaoh of Exodus was Raamses II and that Israel left Egypt during his reign in the mid thirteenth century BC. Other archaeological evidence suggests there were Israelites settled in Canaan by about 1220 BC, and there are a number of discoveries of Canaanite cities destroyed by fire in the same period, which might well reflect the stories of the conquest of the land in the book of Joshua.

The name of God

Moses had to leave the courts of Egypt in a hurry and events took him to the Sinai Peninsula. Exod 3: It was there that the encounter with God described in Exodus 3-4 took place, and it was in this encounter, according to the text of Exodus, that God first identified himself by name as Yahweh.

English Bibles generally render the divine name as “I AM”. The word so translated is the Hebrew YHWH, which most scholars think was probably pronounced “Yahweh”. (Classical Hebrew was written without vowels, and, although the vowel sounds would have been supplied by anyone reading the text, it is so long since any Hebrew person has spoken the name of God aloud that all memory of what the original vowel sounds were has been lost). The name was not pronounced because of its holiness, and there is a tradition in Judaism going back to the post-exilic period of substituting the word ha’adonai (my Lord) for the divine name. The vowels that appear with the name YHWH in pointed Hebrew texts of the OT are those from ha’adonai. It was attempting to combine them with the consonants of the divine name that led to the traditional English form “Jehovah”.

What the name means is not entirely clear. But we do know that it is related to the Hebrew verb “to be”; it seems to mean something like “I am who I am”, or “I will be who I will be”. When the OT was translated into Greek in the second century BC this was taken to be a reference to God’s eternal existence. But this reflects the preoccupations of Greek philosophers with questions of being. Hebrew thought is much more dynamic: its interests are in doing. The name YHWH is much more likely to be meant as a statement about God’s consistent faithfulness in his activity on behalf of his people. As the lord of time, God assures Israel that what he had done in the past he is doing in the present and will continue to do in the future.
The struggle with Pharaoh

After the encounter with Yahweh at the burning bush, Moses (much against his own inclinations) brought the Israelites news of the God of their fathers, now made known by his name. And he announced what Yahweh would do, which was nothing less than delivering his people from the “house of bondage” so that they could return to the land of promise. The story tells of the ensuing period of conflict with Pharaoh, who was understandably reluctant to lose his nation of slaves, during which God visited a series of dreadful plagues on the land of Egypt, culminating in the death of every firstborn child in the land. How long all this took is unclear, but it may be right to think in terms of months or years rather than days or weeks.

In the end, however, the slaves escaped, first from the visit of the angel of death, by marking the lintels of their houses with the blood of sacrificial lambs, and then from Egypt itself, secretly, at dead of night. Pursued by the Egyptians they find themselves caught between Pharaoh’s chariots and the waters of the Reed Sea, but at the last moment a way through the waves opened before them and they escaped, only to see the horses of Egypt perish beneath the returning waters.¹

A story of such epic proportions has certainly been told and retold for centuries, long before it was written down. Its basic outline can be found at the heart of the very oldest parts of the OT, and there is no need to doubt that it reflects a series of events of equally epic proportions. Of course, the story may have been embellished as it was handed down, but, as John Bright suggests,

> the Bible’s own witness is itself so impressive as to leave no doubt that some remarkable deliverance took place. Israel remembered her Exodus for all time to come as the constitutive event that had called her into being as a people. ... A belief so ancient and entrenched will admit of no explanation save that Israel actually escaped from Egypt to the accompaniment of events so stupendous that they were impressed for ever on her memory.

*A History of Israel, SCM, 1960, pp 111-112*

The Sinai Covenant

Moses then led Israel away into the desert, and back to the place where he had his original encounter with God at Mount Sinai (=Horeb). God initiated his covenant once more, this time with the nation as a whole. Moses was the intermediary of this process, going up into the mountain to speak with God and receive his instructions, and coming back to communicate them to the people. As the story tells it, this was a lengthy process, and much of the rest of the Pentateuch is taken up in describing it, especially giving a detailed account of the laws which God imposed as the people’s covenant obligations. These laws covered a very wide range of subjects. At their heart is the basic moral code of the Ten Commandments, but they include all manner of regulations for the conduct of

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¹ The traditional English translation of Exodus 15:4, etc, identifies the sea in which the Egyptians were drowned as the ‘Red Sea’. However, the Hebrew original, here and elsewhere, calls the water “the Reed Sea” – the reference being to the reeds that grow around a body of water. There are no reeds in the Red Sea – so it seems unlikely that the Israelites escaped across the Red Sea as we know it in our modern atlases. No one knows for certain what stretch of water it was – but it was most likely to have been a marshy lake in the region where the Suez Canal is today.
Israel’s common life, and extensive codes of ritual legislation for her worship. There are also detailed instructions for the construction of the “Ark of the Covenant”, which was the visible symbol of God’s invisible presence with Israel, and the “Tabernacle” (a kind of travelling tented sanctuary) to house it.

Undoubtedly some of this material dates from the time of the Exodus, but almost certainly some of it is rather later. Many of the laws assume a settled, agriculture-based economy, and much of the description of ritual assumes a context of regular temple worship. Such material, which may have come from various dates in the history of Israel, was probably included in the legal codes of the Pentateuch when it was organised in its present form.

Nevertheless, some of the material is very old indeed. As the escaped slave-nation pledged themselves to serve and worship Yahweh they used forms of covenant bonding which show marked similarities to binding legal treaties that were widely in use in the middle east throughout the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries BC. Much of the civil law of the Old Testament reflects concepts of justice in Akkad, Sumeria and Babylon, which go back as far as the sixteenth century BC.

It was in the wilderness that God established the basis of His relationship with Israel. He revealed himself as a God of power and awesome majesty, but one who was concerned with the daily lives of each of His people. This was completely unlike any of the gods of neighbouring countries. He made ethical demands of His people as well as desiring sacrifices to Himself. The laws which were given in the wilderness required care for the weak, and personal morality, as well as loyalty to God.

At Sinai Yahweh bound himself again to be Israel’s God. The freed slaves were reminded of God’s intervention on their behalf and promised, in return to keep his commands and be loyal to him alone. In so doing they undertook to live by a series of essentially moral guidelines. Summarised in the Ten Commandments, these guidelines indicated from the beginning that God took more delight in justice, truth, integrity and mercy than he did in the observance of ritual and the performance of sacrifice.

The laws known as the Ten Commandments are laid out in Exodus 20, vss 1-17, but they are set within many other instructions, in Chapters 20 –23.
Readings for Session Five

The history recounted in the Old Testament is important:
- We are told that God has acted in real historical events; He has become involved in our lives,
- So finding out about the history is one way of finding out what God is like.
- The Scriptures continually told the Jews to remember what God had done for them – history was a prompt for praise, and
- What happened to the Jewish nation shaped the kind of people they became and how they worshipped God – as it has since Biblical times.

Judges, Prophets and Kings

Judges:

During the time of wandering in the Wilderness the tribes of Israel had to learn to live together, and co-operate in the conquest of their new land. Some of those who already lived there were expelled, often harshly, while some stayed. Archaeology shows that there was a sophisticated, aristocratic culture in this country of Canaan. They worshipped gods and goddesses of fertility – called baals and asherahs - who controlled the weather, the heavenly bodies such as the sun and the moon, and plant and animal reproduction. Just the sort of gods a farmer needs! Could Yahweh, victorious in battle and faithful to the tribes as they led a nomadic life, be the right god to worship in this new land?

For several hundred years the new nation in Canaan was ruled by Judges – charismatic individuals like Samson, Deborah and Gideon, who led the people in battle and settled disputes. They were tribal leaders, nominated by their kinsmen and women. But rather than simply choosing the fiercest, bravest or most powerful leaders, the Israelites looked for people who were filled with God’s Spirit.

You probably know the stories of the Judges – they are popular Sunday school material. The Judges led the people in two kinds of battle – one against the Canaanite tribes and one against the Canaanite religion.

Judges 2:6 – 3:6 This summary of the time of the Judges gives a theological interpretation of what happened in these years.

Judges 4: 4-10 This passage describes Deborah and the variety of roles she undertook. Make a list of these and note their modern day equivalents.

Judges 6: 10-34 What personal qualities are displayed by Gideon?

Although the Judges were successful in battle and offered some government to the tribes of Israel, the people were not satisfied and wanted to be like other nations, who had grand
monarchs. It was also clear that the people had failed in their attempt to choose their own leaders and anarchy ruled (Judges 21: 25). God was persuaded to allow a monarch to be appointed over His people. Samuel, the last of the effective judges, resisted this development, but became instrumental in the choice and establishment of the first king, Saul. 1 Samuel Chap. 8.

**Prophets and Kings:**

It is clear that the presence of prophets was a regular feature among the people of Israel from quite early in the nation's history. Indeed, the Deuteronomist describes Moses as a prophet, the like of whom will never be seen again (Deuteronomy 34:10-12), and specifically links the presence of prophets in Israel to the idea of carrying on the ministry of Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15-22).

We saw in the introduction to week 1 that a major portion of the Old Testament consists of writings associated with the names of various prophets. There are 16 books of the Old Testament that fall into this category, and they are traditionally divided by size into 4 Major Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel) and 12 Minor Prophets (Hosea – Malachi). In English Bibles the books of these ‘Writing Prophets’, as they are sometimes called, come at the end of the Old Testament.

**What was a Prophet?**

The activities and role of a prophet varied greatly from one person to another. Prophets could be visionaries, miracle-workers, advisors, consultants, predictors – or people who went into ecstatic trances. One or two of the prophets mentioned in the Old Testament were women (Deborah, Judges 4:4; Huldah, 2 Kings 22:14) – we don’t know how common or unusual this was. Prophets were sometimes loners, but sometimes they seem to have wandered round in bands or groups, and the Deuternomistic Historians several times refer to ‘the Sons of the Prophets’ (2 Kings 2:3,5,7) which may have been a group of ‘prophets in training’. The story of Ahab and Jehoshaphat, and their abortive campaign against the Syrians in 1 Kings 22 suggests that at least some prophets (the text refers to about 400!), were seen as having a quasi official role in relation to national policy.

The main Hebrew word for prophet is *nabi*, the meaning of which has to do with calling or announcing. It’s uncertain whether it means ‘someone who calls or announces’ or ‘someone who is called’ – indeed, it may even imply both, for both are an important aspect of the life of a prophet of Yahweh, as we shall see. Given this double meaning of the Hebrew word for prophet it is easy to see why Deuteronomy presents Moses as the first in the sequence.

Prophets were not only found among the Israelites. They seem to have flourished throughout the Middle East. Nor were they only spokespersons for Yahweh (Ba’al had prophets, as recorded in 1 Kings 18:22) – though the prophetic ministry of Yahweh’s prophets was distinctive in a number of ways from that of other prophets. In general, pagan prophets were paid to keep the king happy. They were courtiers with a specific role – to make sure the Gods backed up whatever the king wanted to do. Yahweh’s prophets, by contrast, knew that everyone – and especially the king – must obey God’s laws and keep the covenant. It was often their uncomfortable job to tell the king where he was going wrong.
Prophetic ministry was thus particularly needed once Israel had a king rather than being ruled by spirit-filled Judges.

2) Kings and Prophets: The kings were often tempted to forget that they only ruled on God's behalf and were subject to His rules. God sent prophets to challenge them and confront them with the challenges of keeping God's covenant. They were not, for example to raise taxes to fight wars for their own glory.

King Saul: 1 Samuel 14: 47-49 A military commander

King David: 2 Samuel 5:1-5 Soldier, Poet and Lover

King Solomon: 1 Kings 4: 20, 21 5; 13 Wise ruler or despot?

The Covenant with David 2 Samuel 7 records Nathan's words to King David, bringing God's promise of an everlasting covenant. As he came to the throne, David was in a unique situation for a ruler of Israel. The three powers, the Hittites, the Assyrians and the Egyptians, who had threatened the country's security for centuries were each weakened by internal disputes and fighting each other. David was chosen to be king first by the tribes in the south of the country and then in the north and he conquered the city of the Jebusites, which lay between these two groups. The city was Jerusalem. David decided to install the Ark of the Covenant, containing the tablets of stone on which the Ten Commandments were carved, in his new capital. (2 Samuel 6: 12-20). God's presence was so closely associated with the Ark that it now seemed to many people that Jerusalem was the place of God's dwelling. David had plans to build a temple for God, but he was told that this was not permitted: instead God will build a 'house' for him (2 Samuel 7 5-11).

Nathan's words, recorded in 2 Samuel 7, pronounced David as God's representative on earth: 'I will be a father to him and he shall be a son to me.' God will ensure the continuation of his line and His blessing will rest with all David's descendants. God had not ceased to rule Israel by allowing a king to be crowned, because His rule and that of David's descendants were so closely linked that they could be spoken of as the same.

Thus 1 Chron. 28:5 speaks of Solomon sitting on "the throne of the kingdom of the Lord", and in 2 Chron. 13:8 refers to "the kingdom of the Lord," and in 2 Chron 9:8 the king is placed by God "on his [God's] throne to be king for the Lord your God." The king is the Lord's anointed one, (1 Sam. 24:6 and 2 Sam. 19:21). God's rule (known as theocracy) and the Davidic kingdom are inseparably linked and in the future the hope of a perfect ruler linked them. The Messiah must come from the house of David.
When did the prophets live?
Confusingly the prophets did not live and write in the order in which their books appear in the Old Testament. The following chart gives an idea of when each of the prophets lived and worked:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dates BC</th>
<th>Kings/Events</th>
<th>Prophets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1050-1000</td>
<td>King Saul</td>
<td>Samuel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000-950</td>
<td>King David</td>
<td>Nathan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>King Solomon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>870-840</td>
<td>King Ahab and his descendants</td>
<td>Elijah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>750-700</td>
<td>Fall of Israel (northern kingdom); Judah (southern kingdom) survives – just</td>
<td>Amos &amp; Hosea (north)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>630-605</td>
<td>Rise of Babylon</td>
<td>Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk (or maybe post-exilic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>605-570</td>
<td>Fall of Jerusalem (586)</td>
<td>Jeremiah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exile and defeat</td>
<td>Isaiah 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>540-500</td>
<td>Fall of Babylon (539)</td>
<td>Isaiah 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Return, and restoration of Jerusalem</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500-400</td>
<td>Judah as province of Persian Empire</td>
<td>Malachi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 400-333  | Persian decline; rise of Greece under Alexander the Great | Zechariah 2 | Book of Jonah

The courageous words of Nathan to King David are a good example of the Prophet challenging the King (2 Samuel 12, 1-14). Nathan reminded David that he too was subject to God’s Law and that he must not act in ways that he would not allow one of his subjects to do. Nathan framed his message in the form of a story, perhaps he did not know how it would be received. David’s spirit was willing and receptive to the message and Nathan was able to appeal to his desire to behave as well as he could.

Other monarchs were not so willing to listen. Elijah and Elisha often placed their own lives in danger as they criticised King Ahab and his family for dragging the nation back to the worship of foreign gods. For example, King Ahab (at Jezebel’s suggestion) took over a vineyard he wanted by killing its rightful owner. ‘Have you found me, O my enemy?’ Ahab

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9 The story of Jonah was probably written down in its present form in this period – but from a much older, spoken, version.
asked (1 Kings 21:20) when Elijah arrives to rebuke him. Elsewhere he calls the prophet ‘you troubler of Israel – though, as Elijah rightly points out ‘I have not troubled Israel but you have … because you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord and followed the Ba’als (1 Kings 18:17-18).

There are, indeed, more prophetic messages about the way in which a whole nation is living than about personal morality. God repeatedly demonstrated his concern for good government, equal justice and care of the weak and poor members of society.

**Division of the Kingdom:**
Solomon’s idolatry, and rivalry between the twelve tribes eventually spilt the Kingdom into two: Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Israel was destroyed by Assyrians in 722BC and the people scattered: the Samaritans were Israelites who stayed in the area and intermarried with other ethnic groups.

Judah continued to be ruled by descendants of David. Although God had been reluctant to establish a monarchy, He had made a covenant with King David, and promised blessing for the Holy City of Jerusalem. (2 Samuel 7: 12-16)

**Amos** was from the southern kingdom of Judah – probably a fairly wealthy farmer with an export business in mutton, wool and fig-mulberries to the northern kingdom of Israel. The last part of the eighth century and the first part of the seventh was a time of vigorous prophetic activity, with Amos and Hosea at work in the northern kingdom and *Isaiah of Jerusalem* and *Micah* in the southern.

**Hosea** was probably at work some ten to fifteen years later than Amos, perhaps nearer 730. A married man with children, he came from the northern kingdom in the first place. We know nothing more than this about his origins except that his father was called Beeri.

During the early 8th century both Israel and Judah experienced a dramatic revival in their fortunes, following a hundred years of decline. Between them, the two Israelite kingdoms once again for a short time exercised a degree of power and influence approaching that of the time of David and Solomon. This was partly due to two able rulers, but also to a turn in world events from which they benefited.

In the 9th century the dominant power in the area had been Syria, but early in the 8th, the much larger kingdom of Assyria to the north, in what is now northern Iraq, defeated Syria and took control of a number of small states to the north of Israel. Assyria’s success was short-lived. Internal dissension, and threats from the equally powerful kingdom of Urartu (modern Armenia) caused the gradual disintegration of Assyrian power.

In Syria, the rivalry of the cities of Hamath and Damascus meant it, too, was unable to maintain a hold on Israel. Freed from domination, Israel’s resurgence began under Jehoash (801-786) who extended the borders of the northern kingdom and briefly conquered Judah in the south. His successor Jeroboam II (786-746) continued this powerful expansion, while, in Judah, Uzziah (783-742) matched the success of the north, rebuilding Jerusalem and extending national boundaries on all sides.

By the mid-eighth century, Israel and Judah were enjoying a prosperity unknown since the time of Solomon. Peace was established between north and south, full use of Israelite-held trade-routes followed, and there was a revival of Red Sea trade. Archaeology reveals that splendid buildings were erected at this time, various industries flourished, and superficially,
at least, it was a time of great optimism and confidence in the promises of God for the future. On the other hand, however, the book of Amos indicates that this period was also one of complacency, community breakdown, social injustice and oppression.

In the third quarter of the eighth century, Israel was confronted by circumstances that altered her status decisively and permanently. Tiglath-Pileser III came to the throne of Assyria in 743, with a policy of permanent expansion. The northern kingdom of Israel snapped before the blast and within 25 years had been erased from the map. Judah, though it survived for a further century and a half, never knew real political independence again. The Exile of 586 BC marked the end of this period of history – and many it seemed to mark the end of God’s people.

The message of the pre-exilic prophets

The originality of Amos lay in his declaration of what Yahweh was about to do with Israel as a result of its failure to keep the covenant obligations. In effect he started a tradition of warning Israel that the disaster that would be entailed by failing to live by the known ethical and religious standards of Yahweh would be of cosmic proportions. His confidence lay in his understanding of the unique relationship between Yahweh and Israel, which colours the work of the canonical prophets who followed him. Clements explores this relationship under four headings: Election, Law, Worship and Eschatology.

Election

The origin of the special relationship between Yahweh and Israel is constantly referred to by the Prophets. Amos recalls:

Yet it was I who destroyed the Amorites before them, though they were tall as cedars, though they were sturdy as oaks, I who destroyed their fruit above and their roots below. It was I who brought you up from the land of Egypt, I who led you in the wilderness forty years, to take possession of the land of the Amorites.

(Amos 2.9-10, cp.9.7).

The prophet is clearly referring back to the Exodus story of the deliverance from Egypt, the wandering in the wilderness and the conquest. In all these events, Yahweh acted for Israel, his people, and in response, the people were expected to live in a particular way. Their failure to do so, is the reason for their present condemnation.

This election tradition is a constant point of reference in the pre-exilic prophets. Thus, Hosea, some decades later, says:

When Israel was a boy, I loved him; I called my son out of Egypt.

(Hosea 11.1 and cp 12.9; 13.4f etc).

Jeremiah and Ezekiel, too, appeal to the same tradition as the basis of their view of God and the election of Israel. Although it is not entirely absent from Isaiah and Micah, these two prophets make the basis of the relationship between God and Israel spring more from the promise of Yahweh to the royal dynasty of David, and his care for Jerusalem. (Isaiah 11.1-9, 31.4-5). These two traditions are echoed in Jeremiah, (Jeremiah 7.22, cp 23.5f and 22.30) and in Ezekiel (20.1-44, cp 34.23-30, 37.15-28 etc).

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Law

The pre-understanding of all that the prophets say is the fact of Yahweh’s gracious calling of the people out of slavery into the freedom of his service. The basis of their accusations is that God has thereby imposed certain demands upon his people. The God who brought their special relationship into being had also imposed certain obligations, which Israel identified in the Law or Torah. These obligations have not been fulfilled. Israel’s law codes presuppose the special relationship of the covenant. Their aim and purpose is to maintain a standard of conduct which is consonant with membership of the covenant community. Morality was always closely woven into the fabric of Israel’s religion, and was both affirmed and formed in its public worship, and this is evidenced in the laws of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20.2-17), whose negative form indicates their purpose of preventing conduct that will undermine the maintenance of covenant order.

The eighth century prophets, then, did not introduce a strong ethical note into Israelite religion; it was there from the first, and the accusations which Amos raised against the people for the injustice of their practices and their neglect of the elementary standards of social righteousness, were authenticated by the demands of the covenant law, which Israel knew. The pre-exilic prophets condemned those who administered the law, for their failure to do so justly. (Amos 5.12; Hosea 5.1; Isaiah 1.17, 23; Micah 3.1-9). They also revealed very clearly the many ways in which the people failed to reflect the life of a covenant community.

“For crime after crime of Israel
I will grant them no reprieve
because they sell the innocent for silver
and the destitute for a pair of shoes.
They grind the heads of the poor into the earth
and thrust the humble out of their way
Father and son resort to the same girl
to the profanation of my holy name”

(Amos 2.6-7, cp 8.4-6)

The law which should have been the source of the nation’s welfare had become a curse and a threat to its continued existence.

Worship

The prophets’ denunciation of those who have failed to administer the law and make it known (Amos 5.12, Hosea 5.1 etc), includes the officials of the Israelite religious cultus. The law failed to be an effective force in governing Israelite behaviour because Israel’s cultic practices had failed to make known the true demands of the covenant. Yet the evidence suggests that worship was everywhere well attended. It is therefore important to see what the prophets said about Israel’s worship.

The origins of many of Israel’s cultic practices are obscure, and may sometimes be bound up with Cana’anite practice in the land before and during the early years of the settlement. Even during the early days of the monarchy, unity was elusive, and it was not until Josiah’s reform (621 BC) that a real effort was made to suppress local sanctuaries and centre worship on Jerusalem. Thus in the pre-exilic period, Israel’s cult was important as an instrument of maintaining faith and conduct in Israel, yet there was no clear pattern of uniformity to guide

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11 The term “cultus” is used here not in the sense in which we speak of religious cults today, but as a technical term for the whole practice of religion in ancient Israel. In Jerusalem, this would have included the Temple and all its sacrificial rites. In Israel there seem to have been equivalent focal points and practices, but the term cultus would also include religious practices which Israel picked up from neighbouring nations and incorporated into its worship.
and control that cult. When the eighth century prophets intervene to re-awaken a knowledge of what the covenant really meant, they strenuously attack the worship of the sanctuaries.

These are the words of the Lord to the people of Israel:
‘Resort to me, if you would live, not to Bethel; go not to Gilgal, nor pass on to Beersheba; for Gilgal shall be swept away and Bethel brought to nothing.’

(Amos 5.4-5)

Amos and Hosea both reject a cult which has become divorced from righteousness and obedience - a mere formality. (Amos 5.21-4, Hosea 6.6; cp Jeremiah 7.21-3 etc). They not only attack their sacrifices, they also insist that the knowledge of God has ceased in the land, and that this is the fault of the cult.

"My people are ruined for lack of knowledge; your own countrymen are brought to ruin. You have rejected knowledge, and I will reject you from serving me as priest. You have forgotten the teaching of God, and I, your God, will forget your sons."

(Hosea 4.6 cp 5.1, Isaiah 5.13)

In Amos and Micah’s time, the Israelites were tempted to think that if they carried out the correct sacrifices and kept the festivals that God had asked them to do, they could live the rest of their lives as they liked.

Read Micah 6:6-8 and Amos 5 11-13, 21-24.
- What are the Israelites being called to do?
- Can you think of New Testament passages that identify God’s interests with those of the poor, weak and vulnerable?

Prophecy and Eschatology

In its narrowest sense, eschatology means the doctrine of the things which concern the end of the world. In this sense, there is no eschatology in the prophets, since the events of which they speak take place within history and not beyond it. In a broader sense, however, we may speak of eschatology as the study of ideas and beliefs concerning the end of the present world order, and the introduction of a new order. In this sense, the prophets have an eschatology, since they emphasise that Israel’s election is consonant with a belief in a new and creative work of God which will take place in the future.

The pre-exilic prophets were primarily concerned to foretell the coming judgement of Yahweh; those who came after the exile (586 BC) speak of a new beginning and with a sense of hope. However, this hope of a new day is anticipated by the earlier prophets. The background to this seems to lie in the cultic celebration, in which the day of Yahweh was anticipated.

The great New Year’s Day festival in Israel each autumn was a promise of the day when Yahweh’s promise would be fulfilled, when his kingdom would be established, and he would secure justice and prosperity for his people. This popular expectation provided the people and their festivities with an attitude of easy-going optimism, which greatly incensed Amos, who proclaimed that the Day would be a disaster! (Amos 5.18-20). His eschatology, then, is first one of doom.
Nevertheless, there is also hope, Hosea pictures Israel as a bride once more. (Hosea 2.14-15, 3.5). The covenant is founded on love, and judgement will be followed by restoration.

EXILE - ISRAEL’S CRISIS OF FAITH

The Disaster

One night in the month of February, five hundred and eighty six years before the birth of Christ, Zedekiah, King of Judah, with his palace guard and courtiers, slipped silently through the private gate in the walls of Jerusalem that gave access to the king’s garden. For eighteen months the city had been under siege by the army of Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon. The food had run out, the people were starving; there was no-one to come to their aid: only the ancient secret water supply through the tunnel King Hezekiah had constructed over a century earlier had made this much resistance possible. In the end the people themselves had sent a message to the Babylonian commander indicating their weariness with the siege and their willingness to surrender.

But for the king there could be no surrender. Had he not chanced everything on a desperate political gamble by conspiring with the King of Egypt to throw off the authority of Babylon? And had not Egypt proved a broken reed? Under the cover of darkness he and his household set out for the Jordan valley. But they were seen and the hunt was up.

The Babylonians finally overtook them near the town of Jericho. Zedekiah’s soldiers deserted him and fled; the king himself and his immediate family were taken prisoner, and, a few days later, after a summary trial for rebellion, Zedekiah was forced to watch the savage execution of his children. Then the king’s eyes were gouged out, leaving the sight of his children’s sufferings etched on his memory, and he was taken away in chains to Babylon.

A few weeks later, in the March of that year, the Babylonian army returned to Jerusalem. They tore down the great walls, looted, whatever was left of any value, pillaged and sacked the city of God. By the time they had finished the temple of Solomon, the king’s palace, and every building of substance in Jerusalem had been destroyed by fire. All the citizens except the very poorest were rounded up and herded away to the land of Babylon across the Syrian desert beyond the river Euphrates. Jerusalem was left as an awful testimony to the vengeance of Nebuchadnezzar.

Politics

It was not the first time that disaster had struck the city; nor was it the first time that people from Jerusalem had been driven off into exile. Ten years before, as the year 597 had drawn to a close, Nebuchadnezzar had descended on the tiny kingdom of Judah. Caught as they were between two great powers struggling for mastery, declining Egypt and ascendant Babylon, the Kings of Judah had been playing dangerous games of political brinkmanship. The temptation to turn to the power they knew to the south (Egypt) for support against the new threat from the east (Babylon) was understandable, but ill judged. In the conflict of nations little Judah was of small account, but its territory lay across the route through the fertile crescent from Mesopotamia to the Nile, and to Nebuchadnezzar, intent on the defeat of Egypt, it looked like an Egyptian outpost. Rather than have his flank exposed to possible attack from Jerusalem, Nebuchadnezzar did the obvious thing. In 597 he captured the city and installed a puppet regime. King Zedekiah was his placeman: he was meant to have been obedient.
The fall of Jerusalem in 597 was simple conquest, not punishment. It was standard Babylonian policy to deport the leading citizens from a conquered territory. Their places of influence and wealth would be taken by others who owed their privilege to Babylon, and who might, therefore, be expected to show some loyalty. It was Zedekiah's unwise attempt to throw off the Babylonian yoke and revert to the policy of alliance with Egypt that led to the savage reprisals of 586, and the exiles who were herded away with Zedekiah went to join friends and families who had been settled in Babylon for a decade.

Religion
Our TV screens have shown us the horrors endured by people who become refugees, their land closed to them, their homes destroyed, independence denied and national life and institutions at an end. The suffering of the people of Judah must a terrible experience. The Scriptures also record the religious trauma they suffered with the destruction of Jerusalem.

The City of Yahweh
For Jerusalem was the city of God, the focus of everything sacred, the symbol of Israel's faith in Yahweh. It was, if anything, more important to Israel than Mecca is to Islam. Reflect on the tenacity with which the modern secular state of Israel still holds on to the ancient part of Jerusalem today, 2500 years after the events we are considering, and you will see its power as an symbol.

Jerusalem was the city that God had chosen. It was the city he had given to David, who represented a golden age in which Judah had been not only prosperous and victorious (a great power, even), but also pure and faithful. It was the place where the Ark of the Covenant had finally come to rest, symbolising the nation's right of possession in the land it had wrested by conquest from the hands of the Canaanites. It was the place where the Temple had been built, with its Holy of Holies, where God himself dwelt. It was the outward sign of the Covenant that Yahweh had made with his people that he would be their God. For four hundred years sacrifices had been offered to him there daily.

When the ten tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel had separated themselves from the southern kingdom, had they not, at first, continued to see Jerusalem as the symbol of their faith? Was it not their abandonment of Jerusalem and its temple that had led to their ultimate destruction and disappearance at the hands of the Assyrians? Had not the supremacy of Jerusalem been proved over and over again, by the failure of foreign generals to capture it, most notably Sennacherib, whose army had been mysteriously wiped out by the angel of God in the very act of laying siege to the city in the days of good king Hezekiah? Even when Nebuchadnezzar had taken the city in 597, and the first exile had begun, was not the continuance of the city and its temple a sign that the Covenant of Yahweh still held good, and that there was still hope for Yahweh's people? Even the Israelites in exile had comforted themselves with the thought that the temple and its worship continued back home in Jerusalem.

The crisis of faith
Whether or not they were always faithful in observance of it, the people of Jerusalem, in particular, seem to have convinced themselves that the covenant with Yahweh would secure
their safety against aggression and military conquest. They relied on God's promise to King David and this kind of thinking was no doubt buttressed by the fact that for nearly 400 years Jerusalem had proved impregnable. The fall of the city and the destruction of the Temple were unthinkable.

So the Israelite people had to wrestle with religious doubt as well as with the physical hardship of exile. Was the covenant with God, which defined them as a chosen people, still effective?

The Covenant itself was a sacred, binding promise in which Yahweh had committed himself to his people, and to securing their future. It was Yahweh who had initiated the Covenant, and Yahweh who had demonstrated its meaning by first rescuing a nation of oppressed slaves from suffering and hopelessness in the land of Egypt, giving them a sense of identity and nationhood in the process. It was the Covenant which had promised them a new home in the land of Canaan, and it was the Covenant to which all their distinctive religious institutions and practices bore testimony. The Temple, built to house the Ark of the Covenant, its ritual of sacrifices, its three great yearly festivals, and its Holy of Holies, where the shekinah, the glory of God himself, dwelt behind the curtain that could only be passed once a year, were all visible signs of Israel's special covenant relationship with Yahweh.

But the Covenant was two-sided. In it The Covenant was not only about deliverance; it was also about Law. And over and over again the prophets, the theologians of Israel who were the spokesmen of Yahweh, had challenged the nation about its failure to live by Yahweh's laws, particularly his laws about justice, integrity, mercy and protection for the poor, the weak and the marginalised. Implicit in the idea of Covenant was Israel's calling — to be different from the nations round about.

But What sort of God was Yahweh? Behind the idea of the Covenant lies the second, and even more profound idea that distinguished the religion of Israel from those of other nations round about — the idea of Yahweh.

For, unlike the gods of the nations, who were mostly local deities associated with particular places, or people, or seasons, or communities, Yahweh was known, from the earliest times as a universal God. The gods of the nations were understood to exist alongside each other; conflict between peoples was seen as a contest between gods. Yahweh, by contrast, had always been known in Israel as “God Almighty”. Indeed, that was his name before he was known as “Yahweh”. Israel always claimed that their God was the God of gods. And as God Almighty he claimed authority over and responsibility for not just Israel but all other nations as well.

It is probably this perception of God's universal authority and power that lies behind the repeated prohibition in the Old Testament of attempting to portray him in a visible way. From earliest times God was understood to be invisible, and to represent him by means of an image was idolatry. The point seems to be that making an image effectively “locates” the god in time and space, implicitly limiting its being. God's invisibility is a symbol of his universality and sovereignty.

The Exile, therefore, represented a religious crisis of unimaginable proportions for the people of Judah. It was not just another local cultic deity who had failed in the contest of the
gods. It was Yahweh, the Covenant God of Israel, who claimed authority over all the world. The Exile raised questions about the sovereignty of God, his relationship to his people, his power, not only over Israel, but over all nations, his purposes, perhaps even his existence. It raised questions about the people themselves, their faithfulness to God, their role in the world as God’s representatives, their expectations of God’s Covenant, the way they had exercised their responsibilities as the Covenant People. These were the issues that the prophets addressed.

**Prophets of the Exile**
The books of Isaiah, Ezekiel and Jeremiah contain the same mixture of warning and hope as Amos Hosea and the earlier prophets. Living in the southern kingdom of Judah they foretold the end of the nation if the people would not repent of their rebellion against God, but that God would change his mind if people changed their behaviour and attitudes. Then, ultimately, God would bring in a new covenant and a new age, when his relationship with people and with the earth would be very different.

This hope of restoration is found in *Isaiah* (Isaiah 2.2-4, 9, 11f, etc). *Jeremiah* too, speaks of a new covenant (Jeremiah 31.31ff) which will restore Israel’s shattered fortunes, and Ezekiel pictures the rebirth of the nation in the dramatic vision of chapter 37.

**A Note about Isaiah:**
As you read these notes and other books about the Old Testament you will find references to ‘First Isaiah,’ ‘Second Isaiah,’ perhaps even a ‘Third Isaiah.’ This is because it is noticeable that the words of the prophet relate most closely to different parts of Israel’s history: Isaiah chapters 1-39 are words of warning in the time before the Exile, Isaiah chapters 40-55 are words of comfort during the period in exile, while chapters 56 – 66 address those who have returned.

Of one thing we can be sure: the Ancient Israelites were much less concerned about the details of authorship and dating than we were. What they wanted to know was whether these were authentic words from God or not.

**Ezekiel**
Ezekiel was active in Babylon from 593 BC onwards (i.e. after the first Exile, and before the final sack of Jerusalem). He describes the utter omnipotence of God, in his great vision of chapter 1, and the utter failure of Judah (chapters 16, 20 and 23). The corruption in Jerusalem is vividly portrayed, and its fall predicted.

In answer to the argument that the people are suffering for the sins of their fathers, Ezekiel is quite explicit — “the soul that sins shall die” (chapters 18 and 33).

However, when Jerusalem has fallen, Ezekiel’s message turns to hope: the kings have been bad shepherds, but now Yahweh himself will shepherd Israel (chapter 34). Israel is a dead nation, but will live again, (chapter 37), and in their new life the people will learn to avoid the sins of the past. So God will make them a new community — and all this “for his name’s sake” and through no merit of their own, (chapters 40-48). So Ezekiel explains the exile, and leads the people back to faith and hope.
“Second Isaiah”

‘Second Isaiah’ probably worked in Babylon, slightly later than Ezekiel, around 540 BC. Cyrus, King of Persia had, by now, begun to challenge the power of the Babylonian Empire, which was beginning to disintegrate. Persian policy, unlike that of the Babylonians, was to restore subject peoples to their own lands. Like Ezekiel, Second Isaiah, too, was explicit about the absolute power of God, and the utter worthlessness of idols (44.6-20). He pictured Cyrus as Yahweh’s anointed, (the same name as had been used in the past for the Kings of David’s line: the Hebrew word is Messiah) his servant (45-1), and spoke of Israel having paid double for all her sins (40.2) This meant the nation could now be restored.

Isaiah brings hope at a time of despair. It is a triumphant hope of God restoring the whole people of Israel, with power and with tenderness:

See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep. (Isaiah 40:10–11)

Restoration is portrayed as a second Exodus (43.16-20). God will lead the people triumphantly home, for his name’s sake, so that they, too, may once more be his Servant. A just punishment has been meted out, but now all is joy and hope. In some passages, restoration to Jerusalem is specifically promised, in the context of the people having learned their lesson, of God truly being their king:

Shake yourself from the dust, rise up, O captive Jerusalem; loose the bonds from your neck, O captive daughter of Zion! . . . How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!' (Isaiah 52:2, 7)

Messages about the Messiah

Four particular passages (42.1-4; 49.1-6; 50.4-9; 52.13-53.12) are known as the Servant Songs. In them, a Servant of God is spoken of, often in highly personalised terms. In the description of his vicarious suffering and restoration, Christians have naturally seen a foreshadowing of Christ.

However, it is unlikely that ‘Second Isaiah’ was foretelling a Messiah figure in the distant future. His interest is in what must take place if God is to lead his people home. Some scholars have speculated that he spoke of an individual leader, past, present or future; some
that he spoke in this figure of a perfect remnant of the future, and so, in a sense, of Christ as the true Israelite. It may be that the songs are included because they aptly sum up the events through which Israel had passed, and point to its future role. It had suffered for its failure, was even now being restored, and could be the servant of God again, which, if it accepted the role, would indeed call for sacrifice.

So the passages in the prophetic writings which Christians today connect with Jesus may not have been consciously written as messianic predictions in the first place. But whatever the original writers intended, the fact that these oracles speak to Christians today, in cultures and situations so different from those of ancient Israel, reminds us of the mystery that our experience of the Bible is of texts in which God reveals himself to us, and that their meaning finds its fullest expression for Christians in and through Jesus Christ.

You could look at Isaiah 42, (cp Isaiah 61:1-2, a passage which Jesus actually claimed as referring to himself [see Luke 4:16-21]), or, of course, at Isaiah 53, the most famous of the ‘Servant Songs’. There are many other passages of this sort (eg Ezekiel 37:21-28, Jeremiah 31:31-34, Joel 2:28-32), which you could look up and read if you have the time.

Restoration and Hope

In the 6th Century BC Babylon fell to Persia. Babylon had always deported conquered people, but Persia liked them to remain in their homelands, so the Jews were allowed to return.

There were many disputes and backward steps before the Temple was re-built, regular worship restored and the country, still under Persian rule, re-established.

The Persians were conquered by the Greeks, who in turn fell to the Romans. The Jews remained under foreign rule, still hoping for a Messiah to restore their nation.

How did the prophets communicate?

Sometimes the prophets imply proclaimed their message – in private at court, or in the public square. But they also used a variety of methods to get their message across.

1. Miracles

Miracles play an important part in the stories of the early prophets Elijah and Elisha. These stories, like those of the patriarchs, aren’t told with the precise, factual interest of a modern-day historian; rather, they were remembered and handed down by word of mouth, and though there is no reason to doubt that many of them recount actual circumstances, they are more important for the way they reflect the experience of Israel at a time of great crisis in its history. God demonstrated his power and sovereignty before all the people through Elijah’s miracles, many of which were concerned with God’s power over creation, as shown in the fertility of the land, or the holding back or sending of rain.
The most public and dramatic of Elijah’s miracles occurred as a great contest of strength between Yahweh and the prophets of Ba’al (told in 1 Kings 18:17-40), on Mount Carmel. God’s decisive victory there also heralded the end of a terrible drought (verses 41-45). Elijah’s power as a man of God was also reflected in more private (though no less dramatic) miracles – such as his restoring to life the only son of the widow who had looked after him (1 Kings 17:17-24.)

The miracle stories about Elisha, Elijah’s successor, are of a different, gentler and more domestic kind – finding a lost axe-head in the river, making bitter water sweet, and various healings, notably the curing of Naaman, the Syrian general, from leprosy when he visited the prophet at the suggestion of an Israelite slave-girl. Elisha’s miracles were those of a prophet concerned for people’s needs, of whom the king could say ‘The word of the Lord is with him’ (2 Kings 3:12).

After Elisha’s time, miracles largely drop out of the prophetic tradition, though there was always the possibility that they would re-surface at times of particular national crisis in the work of some prophets (eg Daniel, and, later, Jesus).

2. Visions

God spoke to some of the prophets through powerful visions. In Isaiah Chapter 6 you can read about Isaiah’s vision of the heavenly temple which was the setting for his call to be a prophet. Ezekiel was another prophet who had visions. His call, too, came through one — a most extraordinary vision involving bizarre creatures ‘full of eyes’, and some kind of a machine that sounds a bit like a helicopter, but which is in fact an attempt at a description of the chariot-throne of Yahweh (Ezekiel 1:15-21)! It was a vision in which the otherness and holiness of God was a major theme, and its climax was an encounter, not with Yahweh himself, for God is unimaginable and all-consuming, nor even with God’s glory, but with ‘the appearance of the likeness of the glory of Yahweh’.

The best-known vision in Ezekiel, however, was that of the valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37:1-14), which God made first into human bodies and then into living beings, as a sign of what he could do with the apparently dead and scattered people of Israel.

3. Actions

There were several prophets who lived out God’s message to the people through their own lives, sometimes at great personal cost. This ‘action-prophecy’ sometimes involved only a one-off parable, but it could also involve long-term and painful commitment. Hosea, for example, tells how God instructed him to love and marry a prostitute, which gave him first-hand insights into unfaithfulness within the covenant context of marriage. This enabled him to speak with passion about Israel’s unfaithfulness to God, and the pain of broken covenants.
Ezekiel describes how God told him to lie on his left side for 390 days to “bear the punishment of Israel” and on his right side for 40 days to “bear the punishment of Judah (Ezekiel 4:4-8).

Sometimes a prophet used a dramatic action as a kind of visual aid or reinforcement of an oracle, as in the case of Jeremiah who, at God’s command, illustrated the perils of covenant-breaking by smashing an earthenware pot at the end of an impassioned sermon about Israel’s faithlessness, saying, ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts: So I will break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter’s vessel, so that it can never be mended’ (Jeremiah 19:11).

Some of the prophets were asked by God to live out God’s message in their own lives. Hosea was told to marry a woman of poor character, who would be unfaithful to him. (Hosea Ch.1 2-5). His children are given names that are puns on the fate of Israel. He felt in his own life something of God’s pain for His faithless, unbelieving people.

- Read Hosea Ch 11 1-5.
- These words are God speaking, through Hosea, of His love and pain for Israel. They are one of several passages in the Old Testament where God sounds as much like a mother as a father. These words of tenderness and anguish show that “the God of the Old Testament” is far from being a vengeful, judgemental god.
- Discuss whether you find it helpful to think of God suffering these pangs of love, or whether it would be easier to worship a God who never felt the weaknesses of love.

Being a prophet in Old Testament times was, as we have already seen, a special and privileged calling. Prophets believed they were chosen and called by God, and given messages from God to deliver to kings and courtiers, priests and people. But it was also a costly vocation. The Old Testament does not hide the pain, doubts and difficulties of being true to Yahweh. We shall look now at some of the demands God made on the lives of his prophets.

1. Being ignored

Prophets knew that Yahweh had spoken to them. They could see very clearly the dreadful consequences if God’s people continued to break the covenant and go their own way, lining their own pockets, worshipping other gods alongside Yahweh and showing no consideration for the marginalized and vulnerable members of society. Again and again, the prophets warned people of what their actions would lead to – but their warnings fell on deaf ears.

The story of the prophet Micaiah (in 1 Kings 22:1–40) is a good illustration of the dilemmas facing a prophet. Ahab and Jehoshaphat, the kings of Israel and Judah, were debating whether to go to battle against neighbouring Syria. All the court prophets told them what they wanted to hear – that they would be victorious. And even Micaiah, a true prophet says the same (verse 15) – until Ahab demands that he talk straight:

‘How many times must I make you swear to tell me nothing but the truth in the name of the Lord? (verse 16).

But when Micaiah does give them the true message from God, they don’t want to know. King Ahab exclaims petulantly to King Jehoshaphat:

‘Did I not tell you that he would not prophesy anything favourable about me, but only disaster? (verse 18)
Micaiah then speaks even more plainly – but his truth-telling lands him in jail, on iron rations (verse 27), ignored by those who ride off to meet their death in battle, as he has prophesied.

The Old Testament prophets were uncomfortable people who went against the prevailing culture and consciousness of their times. They saw and spoke things which people preferred not to think about or engage with – and this rejection of truth could be agonising.

Jeremiah illustrates this more clearly than any of the prophets. He is often misunderstood as a gloomy prophet of doomsday – but actually Jeremiah suffered great pain because he saw and spoke so vividly what no one else was willing to face, for his community wanted to continue in self-deception. Jeremiah’s grief was on two levels: he grieved for the end of his people (defeat, the destruction of Jerusalem, exile), which God had shown him to be inevitable. His grief was genuine – he really cared for them, and he knew that God cared for them too. And this grief was even more intense because no one would listen to him, no one would see what was to him so transparently obvious. The book of Jeremiah plainly shows his pain – here is just one example from Jeremiah 4:19–20:

My anguish! my anguish! I writhe in pain!
Oh, the walls of my heart!
My heart is beating wildly;
I cannot keep silent;
for I hear the sound of the trumpet,
the alarm of war.
Disaster overtakes disaster,
the whole land is laid waste.

In his grief and isolation Jeremiah came to see that he was living out the pain and sorrow of Yahweh himself. Being chosen by God was, for Jeremiah, an experience of great pain and loneliness. And Israel had to come to know something of that grief (through the experience of exile) before they could experience God’s newness (described in Jeremiah 31:31–4).

2. The pain of self-doubt
Jeremiah suffered terrible pain and isolation – but not, apparently, the torments of self-doubt. Surprisingly, it is the powerful and dramatic prophet Elijah who suffered in this way – and perhaps, from what we know of his bold, outward-going life and works, we might expect such experiences to have been particularly painful for him. The story is told in 1 Kings 19:1–18. Interestingly, it followed immediately after the triumph on Mount Carmel, when Elijah, as Yahweh’s representative, had been victorious over the prophets of Baal in the contest to see which god was more powerful. This high-point for Elijah is quickly succeeded by fear, doubt and depression. Queen Jezebel vows to kill him within 24 hours – so he runs away, convinced that he alone, in all the land, is faithful to God. He feels so desperate that all he wants is to die (verse 4). Yet God gently and lovingly cares for him, first by providing him with food and drink to sustain him on his journey, then by listening to his complaints (which sound suspiciously like self-pity – verse 10). Finally God reveals to Elijah something important about the divine nature and being: what God is – and what he is not. In a context in which Elijah, remembering how the fire from heaven had fallen and consumed the sacrifice, could have been forgiven for believing in a loud, dramatic God, Yahweh turns out not to be in the dramatic wind, the earthquake or the fire but in ‘the sound of sheer silence’ (as the New Revised Standard version translates it).
3. Physical hardship and persecution

We have already seen that Micaiah was thrown into prison, and fed on bread and water, because he truly spoke God’s word. Other prophets too suffered hardship: Jeremiah wasn’t allowed to marry (Jeremiah 16:1); he was put in the stocks (Jeremiah 20:2); and, most serious of all, he was thrown into a deep water-cistern and left to die (Jeremiah 38:7–13). After being rescued from this, he was wise enough, and realistic enough, to get King Zedekiah to promise not to harm him if the king wasn’t happy with his prophecies:

King Zedekiah sent for the prophet Jeremiah . . . and said to [him]: ‘I have something to ask you; do not hide anything from me.’ Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, ‘If I tell you, you will put me to death, will you not? And if I give you advice, you will not listen to me.’ So King Zedekiah swore an oath in secret to Jeremiah, ‘As the Lord lives, who gave us our lives, I will not put you to death or hand you over to these men who seek your life.

(Jeremiah 38:14–16).

Pain and hardship were part of the prophet’s calling.

4. The pain of prophecy in action

We saw earlier that some of the prophets were required to live out their prophecies, as a way of showing people by actions what was going on in their land and their relationships, and feeling something of God’s pain for themselves (as with Jeremiah’s pain and loneliness described above), so that their pleas for repentance and change were even more impassioned than if the knowledge had just been in their heads.

For example, Ezekiel not only had to suffer his wife’s death, but was not allowed to mourn openly for her, as an enacted prophecy of the pain of the exiled Israelites at the destruction of Jerusalem (Ezekiel 24:15–24). Hosea was directed by God to marry a prostitute and remain faithful to her, despite her faithlessness to him. This makes his words even more poignant and passionate, when we read:

On that day, says the Lord . . . I will make you [i.e. Israel] lie down in safety. And I will take you for my wife for ever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord

(Hosea 2:16, 19–20).

Hosea’s own broken family made him profoundly committed to the God who is loving partner and faithful, gentle parent:

When Israel was a child, I [i.e. God] loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to Baals, and offering incense to idols. Yet it was I who taught [them] to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift their infant to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.

(Hosea 11:1–4)
ISRAEL’S WORSHIP

The Praises of Yahweh

Like many other books of the Old Testament, the book of Psalms is an anthology – a collection of works dating from many different periods of Israel’s history. There are actually five books within the book of Psalms, with sections beginning at Psalm 1, Psalm 42, Psalm 73, Psalm 90 and Psalm 107. Each section or book ends with a verse or two of praise to God to draw it to a satisfactory conclusion.

Many of the psalms are hard to date – though the present collection was probably first put together after the return from exile (which started to happen in 538 BC). About half of them are entitled ‘Psalms of David’ – though scholars disagree about the significance of this title. It is just possible that David composed some of the psalms that bear his name – and some psalms may indeed date back to David’s time (around 1000 BC). But it is also thought that many of the psalms date from the period after the return from exile. All in all, it is likely that the psalms were composed by many different people, and over a long period of time.

So far as Anglicans are concerned, the book of Psalms was, until quite recently, the most familiar and best loved part of the Old Testament. Anglicans used to sing the psalms Sunday by Sunday at Morning and Evening prayer, and they entered deeply into Anglican spirituality for that reason. The rise of Parish Communion has rather changed that, and though the Communion services in Common Worship provide for the use of psalms, they are an option which many churches seldom make use of.

This may be partly because of difficulties with the way Anglicans used to sing them – the traditional Anglican chant does not seem very natural to many people and was, in fact, never the way the psalms were sung in popular use, even in the early days of the Book of Common Prayer. Metrical versions, in which the psalms are re-written according to the European style of poetry, have always been more accessible to English people. Indeed, when the psalms were sung in parish churches, Dissenting meeting houses and homes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, before the use of hymns began, it was metrical versions that were used, and some of these have passed into continued use as well-loved hymns: “O God our help in ages past”, for instance (Ps 90), or “The Lord’s my shepherd” (Ps 23), “Let us with a gladsome mind” (Ps 136), and “All people that on earth do dwell” (Ps 100). Methodists are more likely to be familiar with these metrical versions of the psalms, many of which were written around the time of the Evangelical Revival by writers like Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley, though the Methodist Worship Book contains psalms pointed for chanting in the Anglican style. The traditional Anglican way of singing psalms to chants was originally restricted to churches with trained choirs, like cathedrals and college chapels. It was not until choirs and organs were widely introduced into parish churches in the second half of the nineteenth century, that chanting the psalms became widespread in Anglican worship. However, this way of singing the psalms has one advantage over others: it preserves something of the feeling and rhythm of the original Hebrew poetry that is being sung.

What is a psalm?
We shall look at Hebrew poetry in more detail in a moment. Meanwhile, we should notice how appropriate the use of psalms in our liturgy is when we consider the context for which they were originally written and in which they were presumably used for several centuries in
Israel before the Exile. Psalms were designed to be sung as a part of worship – the book of Psalms has been described by some scholars as ‘the hymnbook of the Second Temple’ (i.e. the one that was rebuilt after the return from exile). If you look at the beginning of quite a number of psalms, you can see instructions about the tunes to which they were to be sung (e.g. Psalm 69, ‘According to the Lilies’, Psalm 22, ‘according to the Deer of the Dawn’). But it also seems from their content that some of the psalms were composed for individual use, and some for corporate use in worship at the Temple.

As well as being hymns, the psalms are also prayers. They therefore represent a vital source of information about what, today, we would call the spirituality of Israel. Through the book of Psalms we can learn about how the Israelites saw God, thought about him and approached him, and how they construed what it would mean to live for God in their own world.

The Psalms – Prayer and Poetry

With a very few exceptions, the psalms are not the voice of God addressing Israel. Rather, they are the voice of human beings, written, composed and compiled long ago in Israel, speaking about life as it really is – the issues and possibilities, the joys and pains, the hopes and fears – for the people of God. And, perhaps like no other part of the Old Testament, these texts speak with an amazing authenticity and relevance today. The Psalms voice our own struggles, the questions and the pain, the praise and the amazement. They express elation, grief and rage – sometimes in ways we find disconcerting or awkward to accept.

The Psalms have been called ‘the prayer book (or the hymn book) of the Bible’, but we shouldn’t judge them by most of our modern-day prayer and hymn books. For the Psalms are not a comfortable, neat, orthodox expression of what Israelites would have liked the life of faith to be about. They express the whole range of human emotions before God and they reveal a spirituality that was diverse, realistic, sometimes raw, and always deeply felt. Trevor Dennis puts it like this: ‘Nowadays we come creeping up to God on our knees, fervently addressing his big toe. The Psalms show us that the Israelites marched right up to God, looked him in the eye, and gave it to him straight!’

What are the Psalms about?
Certain themes keep recurring in the psalms, so we can identify a number of distinct psalm-types. Different scholars divide these up differently, and give the categories different names. We shall use a well-accepted tradition of three broad categories – psalms of praise, of lament and of thanksgiving – with two further, much smaller categories of psalms of meditation on God’s law, and Royal Psalms. However, not every psalm necessarily fits neatly into one category, and some psalms may belong to more than one.

1. Psalms of praise
These are songs of praise and worship, written to express the glory of Yahweh, to confess his lordship over creation and his faithfulness to Israel. A well-known example is Psalm 150, which exhorts the worshipper to praise God with various musical instruments for his greatness and power. Psalms 145-149 are further examples of the same type, as are Psalms 95, 100, 103, and there are many others. Sometimes they are written as if for an individual
These hymns have a regular pattern, which can clearly be seen by looking at Psalm 117, the shortest psalm in the book:

- they begin with an introductory call to worship:

  *Praise the Lord, all you nations!*
  *Extol him, all you peoples!*

- then comes the main section, which describes the motive for praise:

  *For great is his steadfast love towards us,*
  *and the faithfulness of the Lord endures for ever.*

- then finally there is a recap:

  *Praise the Lord!*

Many psalms of praise follow this general pattern (e.g. 33, 95, 100, 145, 148, 150). The ‘Zion Songs’ are usually included among the praise psalms. These express belief that Jerusalem has a central place in God’s plans for the world (e.g. Psalm 48). Also included are the ‘Pilgrimage Songs’ (e.g. Psalm 15) which express the joy of worshippers visiting the Temple for one of the great festivals.

Psalm 122 is a good example of how psalms can belong to more than one type. It is clearly a pilgrimage song, but also a Zion song. It belongs in a group of psalms (Psalms 120-134) known as the Songs of Ascents, which are thought traditionally to have been sung by pilgrims as they made their way up into the hills on their way to the city of Jerusalem.

### 2. Psalms of lament and cursing

There is a surprisingly large number of psalms of lament — about 60 out of the 150 psalms. Laments are songs of distress, sorrow — and often bitter complaint — in the face of trouble, disaster and discouragement, sickness and death. In all types of lament psalm, the reality of chaos, disorder and disorientation is expressed. Some of them are a response to the psalmist’s own sins, and focus on confession and the search for a sense of forgiveness; some simply express the pain and anger of loss and desolation (e.g. Psalms 6, 13, 51, 77, 102).

Psalms of personal lament usually have four strands:

- a cry to God for help;
- a description of the reasons why help is needed;
- reasons put forward as to why God should hear (which may be to do with God’s character or the psalmist’s);
- a conclusion which often leads the psalmist back to confidence in God.

In some individual laments, the conclusion may have been added later when the psalm was taken into liturgical use. In some cases the conclusions don’t seem to have a lot to do with the content of the rest of the psalm: they often introduce a communal element into a psalm that was obviously written for individual use in the first place!

Some of the laments, however, are communal (e.g. Psalms 44, 60, 90). These have a similar structure to individual laments, but the themes tend to be more about the life of the nation. They refer to defeat in battle, threats to the well-being of Israel and the cries of exiles, but also to the complaint of the poor oppressed by injustice.
A ‘sub-group’ of the lament psalms are the psalms of anger and cursing – which often call down the wrath of God in curses on the heads of persecutors or enemies (e.g. Psalms 35, 58, 109). These can cause problems for Christian readers today. What are we to make of such prayers? Should we follow the *Alternative Service Book, 1980*, which marked these passages to be omitted from Christian worship? The fact that we find them difficult may say as much about us, and our reluctance as a society truly to address the darker issues of human life and experience, as about the psalmist. For in these passages the psalmist is truly opening the depth and reality of his feelings to God. Such honesty with ourselves – never mind with God – in prayer is painful, and, for that reason, rare. But it may be the only way in which we can work through our own negative feelings and come to share the mind of God, instead of harbouring unspoken and suppressed feelings of hostility, hatred and pain.

### 3. Psalms of thanksgiving

Psalms of thanksgiving contain elements of both the hymn of praise and the lament. The main characteristic of psalms of thanksgiving is that they look back to a time when the psalmist cried to God for help – and God responded to that cry, as a result of which the psalmist now sings ‘a new song’. Walter Brueggemann describes psalms of lament as being about ‘disorientation’ and psalms of thanksgiving as being about ‘reorientation’ – which expresses their difference, and their relationship to each other, rather well. Again, these are of both communal and individual types, and have a recognisable pattern. We shall illustrate this with Psalm 116, an example of an individual’s thanksgiving hymn:

- **Introduction** (verses 1–2), in which the individual offers praise to Yahweh;
- **Main section** (verses 3–9), which tells of past experience:
  - (a) a description of the psalmist’s previous distress (verse 3);
  - (b) recollection of the cry for help (verse 4);
  - (c) Yahweh’s response to his prayer (verses 8–9);
- **Conclusion** (verses 12–14) – praise to Yahweh for deliverance.

Other individual thanksgiving psalms include Psalms 40, 92, 118, 138. Psalm 40 may well have been one of those used regularly in the Temple by worshippers giving thanks for deliverance from sickness.

There are fewer community psalms of thanksgiving (e.g. Psalms 107, 124). Psalms 65 and 66 seem to have a clear setting in Israel’s worship: Psalm 65 may well have been intended for use at the harvest festival (The Feast of Weeks), while Psalm 66 may have been a Passover psalm.

### 4. Psalms of meditation on the law

This very small group of psalms was almost certainly not connected to Temple worship, but has a central theme of meditation on God’s law (Psalms 1; 19:7–14; 119). Psalm 119 is the longest psalm of all; its verse-pattern is based on the Hebrew alphabet, being written in a series of eight-line stanzas, each line of the same stanza beginning with the same letter of the alphabet. This elaborate patterning is wholly lost in translation. Almost every verse of Psalm 119 refers to the law under one description or another - instruction, word, statutes, promise, decree, commandments, precepts, etc.
These psalms are, in their content, much simpler and more straightforward than other types of psalm. In them, those who study the law are wise and blessed; those who don’t are foolish and wicked. It all seems rather too neat and simple, too straightforward, after the sometimes shocking honesty of the other types of psalms.

It seems likely that such psalms are relatively late, probably from the period after the Exile when the synagogue was beginning to develop as an alternative focus of religious life to the Temple. These psalms also point to another pattern of religious experience – one in which worship at the Temple would be replaced by the personal religious development of the disciple.

5. Royal Psalms

A number of psalms make direct references to the king, who expresses in his own rule as God’s anointed one, the rule of Yahweh himself (see eg Pss 2, 45, which may have been a psalm for use at royal weddings). In some of these royal psalms, too, the theme of the king has become connected with that of God’s covenant with David. These Royal Psalms are probably best understood as celebrations of the kingship of Yahweh, expressed through the rule of the human king. We know from the books of 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings that the kings of Judah were closely involved in the life of the temple, and Royal Psalms are probably reflections of the ‘official’ participation of the king in the worship of Israel.

Temple worship?

What we don’t know: No-one knows for sure how the Psalms were used in worship, though they clearly were. It is hard to be certain when the Psalms were written, exactly when they were used, or who wrote them. There are headings – which could be music settings, or suggestions for times to be used, as in our hymnbooks. “Psalm of David” may mean: ‘written by King David’, it may mean ‘dedicated to David.’ No-one knows what ‘Selah,’ which appears in the middle of psalms, means; though I like the suggestion that it is what the harpists said when their string broke!

What we do know: Just as in our hymn books, the use of the first person singular ‘I,’ does not necessarily mean the psalm was only used privately, though the thoughts and emotions expressed show how deep and personal the relationship between God and the author was. The Israelites do not seemed to have censored their words or thoughts before praying if they thought it, they said it to God. Worship was often noisy, boisterous and exuberant. There was shouting, dancing and weeping. It is important to read the Psalms to balance the criticisms of the prophets. At times the worship of the Israelites needed to be corrected: at other times it was so joyful and deeply spiritual that it puts our efforts to shame!

There are identifiable kinds of Psalms and they follow established patterns. There are rules of rhythm and repetition (tho’ not rhyming), and sequences of thought. A Psalm of praise follows one pattern, a Psalm of complaint, another.

Three great pilgrimage feasts in the Israelite year are described in Exodus 23:14-17 as Unleavened Bread, at which deliverance from Egypt was celebrated, Harvest, when the
firstfruits of the wheat harvest were gathered in early summer, and **Ingathering** (what we would call Harvest Festival), at the end of the year in the autumn, when all the fruits of the land were gathered in. In time these festivals came to be known by alternative names which associated them with Israel’s story - **Passover** (the celebration of deliverance from Egypt), **Weeks** (which commemorated Yahweh’s gift of the land to Israel) and **Tabernacles** (when the Covenant was remembered and renewed).

Our knowledge of what actually happened at these festivals is pretty sketchy. Joshua 24 gives an account of what may have been an early covenant renewal festival long before there was ever a temple at Jerusalem, and the outline of a similar event is reflected in Psalm 81. There is a summons to worship, an account of the actions of Yahweh, and an appeal to hear God’s voice and receive his blessings, which may relate to the renewal of the covenant. This psalm may well have been used in the Tabernacles liturgy in the temple. But it is also possible that it was originally written for use in the northern kingdom at the autumn festival "like the one in Jerusalem" that Jeroboam I set up to stop people going to Jerusalem to worship (1 Kings 12:32-33). Of course the form the celebration took at Bethel may well have been similar to that at the temple, though it seems likely that the reason Jeroboam started a new festival was because the Jerusalem one included references to the covenant with David and his successors. This tradition may be reflected in Ps 74, which tells how Yahweh has preferred Judah and the house of David to the Israelites of the northern kingdom.

Some scholars have detected a good deal of evidence for different bits of a supposed New Year liturgy in various psalms, especially the Zion Songs, and Ps. 132, which may have been written to accompany a procession of the Ark of the Covenant around the temple. Much of this is guesswork, however. Nowhere do the historical books describe such a ceremony once the Ark had been installed in the temple (2 Sam 6). All we can say for sure is that the covenant with David and his successors as the anointed kings is a recurrent theme of temple worship.

**Enthronement Festivals**

Some scholars see the royal psalms, too, as part of the liturgy for this putative annual New Year celebration. It is suggested that they belonged to an "enthronement festival" which may have been held at New Year, to celebrate God’s covenant with Israel as personified in the king.

Much of the supposed ritual for this festival has been based on fragmentary evidence of similar enthronement celebrations from other ancient near-eastern nations, notably Babylon. In these acts of worship the divine king, representing the god who "sponsored" him, enacted a death and resurrection that mirrored the ending of the old year and the beginning of the new. Thus the enthronement festival was a way of claiming the goodwill of the god for another year of prosperity.

In fact, however, there is very little evidence at all in the Old Testament for a festival of this sort, and none that Israel thought of its kings as representatives of God in this way. This may be because post-exilic editors have removed such references, seeing them as symbols of the ‘idolatry’ that brought about the destruction of the first temple. But if the kings had claimed divine status, it is inconceivable that the prophets would not have criticised them for it, and unlikely that echoes of that criticism would not have remained in their writings.
It is probably best to see the Royal Psalms as celebrations of the kingship of God, expressed through the rule of the human king, without attempting to tie them to a particular annual festival. We do know from the books of 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings that the kings of Judah were closely involved in the life of the temple, and, as suggested above, Royal Psalms may simply be reflections of the ‘official’ participation of the king in the worship of Israel.

**Hebrew Poetry – What Is It?**

We have already seen that quite a lot of the prophets’ oracles were delivered in the form of poetry. But not all Old Testament poetry is found in the books of the prophets. There is also love poetry, hymns and prayers, and philosophical poems on the nature of human life, and what it means to be wise. In this session, we are concentrating mainly on the poetry in the book of Psalms. But there are also two other poetry books in the Old Testament: the Song of Solomon and the book of Lamentations – both of which are works of great passion. We shall consider these very briefly, before looking more generally at the main characteristics of Hebrew poetry,

**The Song of Solomon**

The Song of Solomon (almost certainly *not* by Solomon, and properly called the Song of Songs) is a passionate and erotic love poem, which has caused embarrassment to Christian scholars and readers alike as they have tried to ‘spiritualise’ it, in order to justify its place in the Bible. Christian theologians have suggested, for example, that it represents symbolically the love between Christ and his bride, the Church. But there are no real grounds for treating the book in this way. It seems better to accept it at face value: as a celebration of God-given human sexuality, and the faithful and joyful physical love of man and woman as part of God’s creation.

**Lamentations**

Lamentations is equally passionate – but with entirely different subject-matter. In this short book the writer (traditionally claimed to be Jeremiah) pours out his heart in anguish and pain at the fall of Jerusalem and the Exile of 586 BC. The writing, though passionate in content, is highly stylised in its poetic and linguistic patterns (which we can’t easily grasp in translation) – and the poems in the book are in the form of dirges or mourning songs.

**What makes a Hebrew poem?**

Poetry is a deeply satisfying way of expressing complex feelings and experiences which most people can’t easily put into words. It often involves intense feelings – of great joy, or deep sadness, intense passion or profound hurt. In this, Hebrew poetry is no different from English poetry.

Throughout the 1400-year history of English poetry, the *sound* of words, and the rhythm of the verses, has always been important. For example, we are used to poetry in which the last words of some of the lines rhyme with each other (as in most of the hymns we sing). In this poetry with which we are familiar there are, in fact four main conventions that enable us to recognise poetry for what it is.
The first of these is metre. Consider the metrical version of Ps 90, which we know as the hymn ‘O God our help in ages past’. The metrical pattern of this hymn is based on the number of ‘beats’ in each line. There are eight in line one, six in line two, eight in line three, and six in line four, as follows:

```
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
O  God  our  help  in  ag-  es  past
Our  hope  for  years  to  come
Our  shel-  ter  from  the  storm-  y  blast
And  our  e-  ter-  nal  home
```

Each beat is represented by a syllable, and this pattern is maintained throughout the whole poem. This particular metre (8.6.8.6), is known as ‘Common Metre’ because so many of the metrical versions of the psalms were written in it. Any tune that will fit this hymn, will fit any other hymn with the same metre (try singing this hymn to Crimond, the tune for “The Lord’s my shepherd”!).

The second main convention in European poetry is rhythm. Together with metre this makes up the musical pattern of a piece of poetry. Rhythm has to do with whether the ‘beats’ in each line of the poem are strong or weak ones. The strong beats are called stresses, and the rhythm depends on where the stresses fall in each line as we say it. In our example the stress falls on every second syllable:

```
O  God  our  help  in  ag-  es  past,
our  hope  for  years  to  come  ...
```

and so on throughout the hymn, a rhythmical pattern of weak-strong-weak-strong, etc. Compare this with another example:

```
Dis-  pos-  er  su-  preme  and  judge  of  the  earth  ...
```

where the rhythm is weak-strong-weak-weak-strong, etc. Rhythm also affects the choice of tunes for hymns. Not every Common Metre tune, for example, will be right for the rhythm of every Common Metre hymn, even though it has the right number of beats in a line.

While most traditional European poetry has metre and rhythm, not all has the third convention, verse. In the example we are using, every four lines of the poem are grouped together into a verse or stanza. These bear some resemblance to paragraphs in a piece of prose, in that they usually focus on one particular line of thought with its associated ideas. Part of the skill of the poet is in completing the exploration of this line of thought within the confines of the verse. Where they occur in western poetry, stanzas are also often defined by the fourth convention, rhyme. In our example, the final syllable of the first and third lines has a similar sound: past - blast; as does that of the second and fourth lines: come - home. This rhyme-scheme (known as A-B-A-B) ends with the verse. The second verse uses different sounds in the same pattern (throne - alone: secure - sure), in the scheme C-D-C-D. Thus the pattern of rhymes helps to mark out the verses. Poetry does not need to rhyme, of course: most of Shakespeare's plays are written in non-rhyming poetry (blank verse); but rhyme is a popular way of giving poetry a structure. Metre, rhythm, verse and rhyme are all to do with patterns of sound, and when we encounter them in European literature, we know we are dealing with poetry. But Hebrew poetry has none of these except rhythm, and it is often difficult for us to appreciate even that, because it gets lost when the poems are translated into English. (The ‘verse’ divisions in our Bibles are, of course, nothing to do with poetry. In the Psalms they each generally mark out one set of ideas, but they are a reference system like numbered paragraphs in a report, and were added a long time after the biblical text was written.) Many psalms do seem to fall naturally into groups of verses, each of which may have been
sung by a different person or choir, but the nearest Hebrew poetry comes to verse is where a refrain is repeated at regular intervals throughout a psalm (see eg Psalms 107, 136). There appears to be no concept of rhyme in Hebrew poetry at all, and though scholars disagree about the question of metre, there is hardly ever a regular pattern of the number of syllables in a line.

The rhythm of Hebrew poetry is based entirely on the number of stressed (ie strong) syllables in the Hebrew: each line is usually divided into two parts, and the balance of stresses in each part is repeated in each line. However, there may be any number of weak syllables between the strong ones, and this has the effect of making the lines different in length.

Hebrew poetry was all about setting ideas side by side – sometimes called ‘parallelism’ – so that the statement made in one line is echoed, reflected or extended in some way in the next line (and remember that the ‘lines’ in our translations are not necessarily the same as the original Hebrew ‘lines’ – so look out for the reflection of meaning, rather than the exact place where a line ends in your particular Bible version). For example:

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
(Psalm 19:1)

Lord, you have been our dwelling-place
in all generations.
Before the mountains were brought forth
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.
(Psalm 90:1,2)

There are three main ways in which Hebrew poetry uses this technique of setting ideas side by side: for repetition, for contrast and for the development of ideas.

1. Repetition
As in the two examples quoted above, the same idea may be expressed in two ways. Here are a couple more examples, one from Lamentations and the other from the Song of Solomon:

How lonely sits the city
that was once full of people!
How like a widow she has become,
she that was great among the nations!
(Lamentations 1:1)

My beloved has gone down to his garden,
to the beds of spices,
to pasture his flock in the gardens,
and to gather lilies.
(Song of Solomon 6:2)

2. Contrast
Sometimes two ideas are set together which are in tension or even conflict with other. This device is often found in all the poetry books (and most commonly of all in the book of Proverbs), for example:

The wicked borrow, and do not pay back,
but the righteous are generous and keep giving.
(Psalm 37:21)

Upon my bed at night
I sought him whom my soul loves;  
I sought him, but found him not;  
I called him, but he gave no answer.  

(Song of Solomon 3:1)

All ones ways may be pure in ones own eyes,  
but the Lord weighs the spirit.  

(Proverbs 16:2)

3. Development

The poetry books of the Old Testament are full of examples of ideas that are expressed in one line and then developed in some way in the next:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;  
he restores my soul.  

(Psalm 23:1,2)

I waited patiently for the Lord;  
he inclined to me and heard my cry.  
He drew me up from the desolate pit,  
out of the miry bog,  
and set my feet upon a rock,  
making my footsteps sure.  

(Psalm 40:1,2)

Sometimes these developments are piled on top of each other like building-blocks, to form a sort of staircase of ideas:

The idols of the nations are silver and gold,  
the work of human hands.  
They have mouths, but they do not speak;  
they have eyes, but they do not see;  
they have ears, but they do not hear,  
and there is no breath in their mouths.  
Those who make them, and all who trust in them,  
shall become like them.  

(Psalm 135:15-18)

This quotation from Psalm 135 introduces another aspect of Hebrew poetry – it is often full of laughter, particularly of a dry, reflective, ironic kind of humour that sees what is funny about the way people live and behave. In this it is not too different from the sort of humour that Jewish people still enjoy today. It is hard to get the full flavour of Hebrew poetry without a sense of irony and there is a danger that, in our concern to understand the message of the Bible and take it seriously, we shall miss some of the fun it pokes at us. Hebrew poetry often invites us to laugh at ourselves. Perhaps we fail to do so because we take ourselves (rather than the Bible) too seriously!
Israel’s theology of God and the world

It is not only in the early chapters of Genesis that we encounter Israel’s theology of God and the world. There are two other strands of material in the Old Testament which give us insight into how Israel understood its relationship to God, and God’s relationship to the world. The **Wisdom Literature** in books like Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes tells us a lot about what faith in Yahweh meant in everyday terms for Israelite men and women, while the **Stories** of Ruth, Esther and Jonah give us a sense of how at least one strand of post-exilic theology was addressing the issue of Yahweh’s relationship with foreign nations.

The Old Testament books of Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are grouped together by scholars as ‘wisdom literature’ – a style of writing which was found in other ancient Middle Eastern cultures of the time (especially Egypt and Assyria). Yet these books seem very different from each other, containing poetry, stories, proverbial sayings, philosophy, lists, and containing some passages about people, real or imaginary, and some solely about ideas. So in what way are they similar?

There are four distinct features shared by wisdom literature, which set these books apart from other Old Testament writings.

### 1. Purpose

The aim of these books (and of a few psalms, such as Psalms 1 and 119) is to teach and instruct in wise living. In their different ways, their underlying theme can be expressed in the verse: ‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom’ (Proverbs 1:7), where ‘fear’ means reverence and worship, not terror. These wisdom books are not necessarily about wisdom – some express a wise point of view, rather than explicitly writing about wisdom itself.

The statement, ‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom’, is particularly profound when we consider what wisdom meant in Old Testament times. It had to do with the skills of everyday living, whether at court or in the market-place or at home. To be wise meant knowing how to handle relationships with other people, how to manage business shrewdly, how to do your daily work well. Wisdom involved knowing the ropes, having discernment and good judgement. Wisdom **might** include intellectual achievement – but it principally meant knowing how to succeed in your own area of life, whatever that might be – as a parent, a child, a courtier, a ruler.

Wisdom in the Bible includes making the right moral decisions. The fool isn’t someone brainless, but someone who lacks discernment, who makes wrong moral choices and has poor judgement. To say that the foundation of wisdom was ‘the fear of the Lord’ was to claim that, whatever other powers of mind, and skills of life, a person may have, if these are not founded upon a living relationship of trust and confidence in Yahweh, then they will, in the end, turn out to be worthless.
2. Views of God

God the creator
In wisdom literature, God is seen mainly as the creator and sustainer – unlike the Pentateuch or most of the books of the prophets, where God is seen and depicted as rescuer and deliverer, in covenant relationship with Israel, and in the context of their national history. Indeed, Wisdom is described as the agent by which God created the world (Proverbs 3:19–20) – and God confronts Job about ultimate wisdom (that is, wisdom which is greater even than moral issues) by revealing himself as the supreme creator, who continues to create and lovingly to sustain the world that he has made (Job chapters 38–41). In this sense, the wisdom literature of the Old Testament is an important testimony to Israel’s understanding of the relationship between God and the world as outlined in the early part of Genesis.

God through human experience
Much of the Old Testament presents a picture of a changing society, responding – or, more usually, failing to respond – to God’s laws. There is a quality of action about it, and God is a correspondingly dynamic God. But wisdom literature is quite different. It is static and reflective instead of dynamic and visionary – and thus its way of understanding and approaching God is different too. It attempts to understand the ways of God through the painstaking observation and cataloguing of the everyday experiences of humankind, rather than through the rise and fall of nations and the intervention of God.

In this it reflects an aspect of Israel’s life that it is all too easy to miss when we read the history books of the Old Testament. The Pentateuch and the books of the historians record the saving acts of God – his interventions on Israel’s behalf at moments of great crisis. But in the whole period of more than 600 years that this literature covers, such interventions were relatively rare experiences. On most days life was going and Yahweh was not intervening. Wisdom Literature reflects this experience of continuity. It is a spirituality for everyday, rather than one of crisis and deliverance.

3. Views of society
It is not surprising, then, that whereas the prophets addressed very specific events and situations, set in a particular historical context, wisdom literature isn’t obviously related to a particular moment in history or society. The various sections of Proverbs, for instance, are notoriously difficult to date, partly because the book contains no references to any historical events, and its wise and pithy sayings could apply equally well in almost any social setting. The prophets were often critical of society – as we saw in Session 3. Wisdom literature (especially the book of Proverbs) tends to support the status quo – and back up the prevailing social standards, making an unquestioned assumption that they are right:

Like vinegar to the teeth, and smoke to the eyes, so are the lazy to their employers. (Proverbs 10:26)

The dread anger of a king is like the growling of a lion; anyone who provokes him to anger forfeits life itself.

It is honourable to refrain from strife,

12 Though see Second Isaiah, which often depicts God as the creator.
but every fool is quick to quarrel.

(Proverbs 20:1–3)

How different are these last two verses from the approach to life and royalty shown by the prophets!

In wisdom literature there is a sense of rightness about the way things are – though it might take a wise person to discern it. The famous passage in Ecclesiastes 3:1–8 reflects this:

For everything there is a season,
and a time for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born and a time to die . . .
a time to seek and a time to lose;
a time to keep and a time to throw away;
a time to tear and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence and a time to speak.

(Ecclesiastes 3:1–2, 6–7)

Job’s ultimate reality
This is where the book of Job offers a much deeper and more complex understanding of the world. For Job is righteous, admired in his society, apparently wise, discerning – and therefore (according to the teaching of Proverbs) wealthy and successful. But Job loses everything. His friends, who represent the society of his day, offer him the kind of wisdom that comes out of Christmas crackers – neat answers, pat phrases: ‘You must have sinned, even if you can’t remember it’, they say. ‘Only people who have done wrong suffer like you’re suffering!’

The wisdom that God reveals to Job is greater and deeper even than the wisdom of doing right, of being a pillar of society. God reveals that the ‘wisdom language’ of uprightness, integrity, virtue and moral responsibility is limited – and that there is a greater language of power, awe, mystery, amazement, daring, miracle. Job has said, ‘I will hold on to my integrity till I die!’ But God shows him that integrity and virtue can be a screen against the awesome reality of God. Being right is no substitute for being amazed. In the light of this understanding, Job is once again restored to prosperity and a position of social prestige, but seeing it now in the context that ‘[There are] things too wonderful for me which I did not know’ (Job 42:3).

4. Views of the individual
Much of the Old Testament focuses on God, and on the people of Israel and God’s relationship with them as a community. The wisdom books show no interest in the revelation of God in Israel’s history – the unique relationship between God and his chosen people, played out in the historical drama of Israelite national life. They are interested instead in how human beings live, the choices they make, and the basis for those choices. Wisdom literature concentrates not on God or on the community, but on the individual – perhaps that is why books like Ecclesiastes speak so powerfully to our individualistic society today.

Ecclesiastes describes the painful struggle of an individual looking for meaning in life. What is it all for? Where is it all leading? What’s the point of anything? These are the questions with
which the writer is wrestling. For much of the book, he seems to conclude that life is meaningless – yet at the very end, he seems to reach some kind of resolution:

The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgement, including every secret thing, whether good or evil.

(Ecclesiastes 12:13–14)

The individual's experience counts
Wisdom literature describes people whose minds work very like our own. They believe first and foremost in the evidence of their senses. Wise people observe, catalogue, analyse, reflect on what they see, and draw general conclusions from it. They do not start with the word of the Lord, but with the data of everyday life – the way thorns crackle when they are set alight in the fire, the way drips fall from the roof on a rainy day, the way money slips through your fingers.

Some wise people even seem to have been interested in things simply for their own sake, and not just for the way they can serve as metaphors for human experience. See, for instance, the ‘numerical proverbs’ in Proverbs 30:15–31, or the detailed descriptions of the world of nature in God’s answer to Job (Job chapters 38–41). This is not sociology or natural history – but it is sufficiently close to things we are familiar with (like statistics, opinion polls, and issues of the environment), for us to feel that it is not totally alien to our way of thinking.

In the wisdom writings, then, we make contact with an important strand of the life and faith of Israel that would otherwise be hidden from us – the everyday experience of ordinary people. And there is sufficient evidence in the rest of the Old Testament for us to be pretty sure that this was a strand of Israelite life that was always there, and always regarded as another way of encountering the lordship of God (see, for instance, Jeremiah 18:18, which speaks of ‘the counsel of the wise’ alongside, and as of equivalent authority to ‘the law of the priest’ and ‘the word of the prophet’).
Bible Stories, Bible Lives

The last section of the Jewish Bible was “The Writings”. The imprecise nature of this last category indicates that it was where everything else went which wasn’t the Law or the Prophets – including the storybooks of Ruth and Esther.

As we have seen already, the Old Testament is full of stories of people’s lives – Abraham and Sarah, Joseph, Daniel, Sampson, to name but a few. These people lived in particular historical circumstances and their stories are told as part of the great epic of God’s dealings with Israel. They have a cosmic significance – the testimony of Israel is that the account of God’s dealings with them, and their response to God, have significance throughout the ages. As we have seen, it’s not particularly helpful to think of them as history in the modern sense, since they lack the level of research and the concern for sequential accuracy that characterises what we think of as history today. But they are told as stories of what happened in the experience of Israel, and the reason for telling them is that they enable the people of Israel to understand who they are. Their main focus is not the intrinsic interest of the characters or the unfolding of the plot (as in the popular fiction with we are familiar) but their theological significance. There are, however, two or three stories in the Old Testament that may have a little more in common with the fiction we read today (particularly if we think of historical novels, which deal with real people in real situations, but offer a fictional attempt to understand and explain their story.

Ruth – an everyday story of country folk

The importance of Ruth to the story of Israel is that she was the grandmother of King David. But the themes of the book also have their own significance.
The book has two heroines – the young and beautiful Ruth, and the middle-aged and desolate Naomi. It has one hero – and no villain at all. It is elegantly structured:

- Chapter 1: The Journey
- Chapter 2: Introductions
- Chapter 3: Seduction
- Chapter 4: Marriage.

Why was the book of Ruth written?

Many scholars think that, although the story is set in early times, before there were kings in Israel, it was actually written quite late in Israel’s history, after the return from exile (which began in 538 BC). Several different ideas have been put forward as to why the book was written:

- After the return from exile, there were strict laws preventing Jews from intermarrying with non-Jews. The book of Ruth, which shows the utter love and loyalty of the Moabite Ruth, could have been a protest against this, using King David’s own lineage to show that racial purity was not necessarily always best.
- It might have been a way of ‘rewriting history’, when later generations concerned with racial purity remembered that the lineage of King David was not 100 per cent Jewish. Writers wanted to explain that his Moabite grandmother was a truly
remarkable, God-fearing woman, whose loyalty to her Jewish mother-in-law was touching and impressive.

- To promote the virtue of ‘loving-kindness’ – a Hebrew word used in the Psalms to describe God’s relationship with people, and used here to describe Ruth’s relationship with Naomi. Or, as the rabbis put it, ‘To teach how great is the reward of those who do deeds of kindness’.

- To make an important theological point – that God’s sovereignty works through ‘unimportant’ people and events. As we saw in the story of Joseph, God uses all kinds of apparent disasters for his own ends – even when human beings are unaware of his presence, he is still working through them.

Although it is unlikely to have been the reason for which Ruth was written, it also serves the important purpose for us of providing a window into the reality of women’s lives in Israel. Ruth takes on roles more often attributed to male heroes of stories – she leaves home to seek adventure, encountering hardships which she overcomes. Ruth’s very self-confidence is portrayed both as a strength and a flaw: her sexual manipulativeness may only be tolerated by the writer because she is a Moabite not an Israelite.

Whatever the reason, or combination of reasons, why it was first written, the book of Ruth is a positive and hopeful story, which begins in desolation and loneliness, and has a happy-ever-after ending. In its short length, it is full of opposites – famine and plenty, barrenness and fruitfulness, old age and youth, isolation and community, reward and punishment, male and female, death and life, tradition and innovation. Yet through them all is the triumph of hope, the power of God to bring good out of evil.

Esther – in the Persian king’s harem

The book of Esther is also about courage and loyalty – but of very different kinds from those in the book of Ruth. Whereas Ruth is a foreigner in Israel, Esther is an Israelite in a foreign country – the tables are turned. Ruth had the courage to leave her own country and religion to be loyal to her mother-in-law. Esther took her life in her hands for the sake of loyalty to her uncle, and to the Jewish people.

The book of Esther is another wonderful story – more like something out of The Arabian Nights than the Bible! What other book has such a satisfyingly evil villain as the wicked Haman, and such a beautiful and resourceful heroine as Esther herself, and such a comic figure as King Ahasuerus, with his endless parties, beauty parades and sleepless nights. But some Christians have been disturbed that God is never mentioned in it – so what is it doing in the Old Testament?

The book of Esther is read at the Jewish festival of Purim – for it claims that the festival was inaugurated by Mordecai to celebrate the Jews’ deliverance (Esther 9:20–32). The book seems deliberately to avoid mentioning God – which may in part be a reluctance to mention the holy divine name, which might in turn suggest that it was written at a fairly late date after the exile. Nevertheless, underlying the whole story is the conviction that God has called his people to be separate from the world (see Esther 3:8), and to demonstrate an exclusive covenant loyalty. With the Jewish people under threat of genocide, Esther was prepared to do anything in her power to save them. Jonathan Magonet suggests:

[The book of Esther] paints not merely a fantasy world but the very real world of political intrigue, compromises and power struggles that are the background in which the drama of 2000
years of Jewish existence in the Diaspora has been played out ... In a world of capricious monarchs and tyrants – and there is clearly a bitter undercurrent to the book despite all its surface charm – in such a world, survival depends on divine providence, but also on precautions and subtlety and favour.

(J Magonet, Bible Lives, p. 86)

And even without mentioning God’s name, the book of Esther depicts the two contrasting lifestyles of Haman, the man who trusts in chance and luck, and Mordecai, who believes that God can control chance to bring about his purposes for his people.

**Jonah – a comedy of errors**

We have already had a brief look at the contents of Jonah in our work on the prophets. Many scholars take the view that Jonah is a work of fiction – a comedy told to challenge the post-exilic tendency to exclusivity that would eventually lead to the kind of attitude towards “Gentiles” that marked the Judaism of Jesus’ day. Uniquely among the prophets, Jonah is sent to a foreign nation to preach about Yahweh, and the people there repent and are forgiven.

Implicit in the story are claims about God’s universal rule and its consequences. These begin with Jonah’s flight – he sets out to go to Tarshish which, he assumes, is “out of reach of Yahweh”, and soon discovers his mistake! Had he reflected on the fact that he was sent to Nineveh in the first place, he might have deduced that running away would be no good. But of course, what is being challenged here is the assumption that Yahweh is somehow specific to Israel. The theme continues with the repentance of the Ninevites, who seem to have no difficulty with responding to a message from the God of Israel. It concludes with God extending covenant mercies to these Gentiles, a denouement that would almost certainly have raised questions for post exilic Jews in the tradition of Ezra and Malachai. But God specifically challenges such a response:

> When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it. But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, “O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” And the Lord said, “Is it right for you to be angry?”

(Jonah 3:10–4:4)