

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Kingdom of Judah during the 6th century

The sixth century in Judah began with the capture of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army under Nebuchadnezzar in 597BC (see the previous chapter). Jehoiakim died during the siege, and was succeeded by his eighteen year old son, Jeconiah (Coniah), who took the throne name, Jehoiachin. He decided to surrender, and the siege was lifted. He was taken into exile in Babylon, along with all the leading citizens. Nebuchadnezzar replaced him with another of Josiah's sons, Mattaniah, Jehoiachin's uncle, who took the throne name Zedekiah.

King Nebuchadnezzar ruled over the Babylonian Empire from 605-562. Babylon's main rival was Egypt, firstly under Pharaoh Neco (609-595), then Psammetichus II (595-589), followed by Hophra (589-570). In 594 Nebuchadnezzar had to put down an anti-Babylonian conspiracy in which Zedekiah was involved. A few years later, Zedekiah repeated the mistake made by Jehoiakim and, encouraged by Egypt, withheld tribute. In 588 Ezekiel's threats were realised when the Babylonians besieged Jerusalem. Egypt's intervention was unsuccessful (Ezekiel 30:21). Zedekiah attempted to escape, but was captured (Ezekiel 12:1-16). Ravaged by famine (see Ezekiel 4:9-11; 5:10), Jerusalem capitulated (587). A further group of the leading citizens were taken into exile (Jeremiah 52:29), and the city was razed to the ground.

In the first decade of the sixth century the prophets Jeremiah and Habakkuk were still ministering in Jerusalem. We examined their oracles in the previous chapter.

Exile in Babylon (597-538)

In his commentary on Isaiah 40-55, Blenkinsopp writes (page 100):

Beginning with the first capture of Jerusalem in 597, Judean deportees were resettled in southern Mesopotamia, and some of the names of their settlements are known: Tel-abib (til-abūbi, "Mound of the deluge") on the "river Chebar" (nār kabāri, identified with the Shatt en-nīl near Nippur), Tel-melach ("Salt Mound"), Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addan, Immer, Ahava, Casiphia (Ezekiel 1:1; 3:15; Ezra 2:59 = Nehemiah 7:61; Ezra 8:15-17). The deportees were introduced into a situation of considerable ethnic diversity, including settlements of Lydians, Carians, Elamites, Egyptians, and others.

For economic reasons they were not, it appears, used as slaves. Rather they were settled in areas that needed redevelopment (see the various 'Tels' mentioned above). The internal affairs of the community were in the hands of elders (see Ezekiel 8:1; 14:1; 20:1, 3; Jeremiah 29:1). Separation from the temple and the cult put the emphasis on the regular meeting of the community (the 'synagogues').

The Babylonian Exile demanded an enormous religious adjustment. In spite of all the hopes built upon promises understood to have come from their God, the Promised Land had been taken from them. Despite the assurances that they had been given that Jerusalem would not be defeated by a foreign king – assurances that were reinforced when Sennacherib failed to capture the city in 701 – the Babylonian army had razed YHWH's city to the ground.

Despite assurances that God would guarantee the dynasty of David, they had lost their king. Despite their belief that the temple was the house of their God, YHWH, it had been destroyed. Any national, institutional basis for their religious identity had been swept away. If they were going to retain any sense of themselves as a people, they had to discover a firmer basis. They had to learn a new humility, and find a deeper faith in God, independent of political and economic power.

In Babylon, they found themselves living in what was, in many ways, a superior culture, but not religiously. The concept of monotheism (there is only one God), as distinct from monolatry (among the gods only YHWH is to be worshipped) began to emerge (see Isaiah 44:6-23; 45:18-25), as well as a sense of their missionary vocation (see Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:6). Instead of identifying themselves in relation to the Davidic dynasty, they began to see themselves as a community defined by worship. In the absence of the temple they began to come together to remember and to pray. This was the beginning of the institution of the synagogue, which has remained central to Judaism ever since. They had to ask themselves how the loss of the land, the temple and the monarchy could have happened.

It was impossible for them to contemplate the possibility that their God, YHWH, was weaker than the gods of the Babylonians. So they concluded that it must have been their God who brought about the catastrophe that they were experiencing. Since God is just, the problem had to be their infidelity to their part of the covenant, and they interpreted their loss and suffering as God's punishment for their sin, as God's way of purifying them.

Where had they gone wrong? What must they do to bring about the purification without which they could not enjoy God's blessing? These are some of the questions that were being asked by a number of different 'Schools' during the long years of exile. We are left to imagine the dialogue, debate and discussion that went on between them as they struggled to make sense of what had happened to them.

In Chapter Nine we noted that the Deuteronomistic School was working on a comprehensive 'history' to reflect on what had gone wrong and to provide a guide for future leaders. In Chapter Ten we noted that the Priestly School was working on composing an accurate record of the cult. In different ways both were exploring the essential ethical dimension of what it means to be YHWH's chosen people.

The prophet Ezekiel

One of those taken into exile in 597 with King Jeconiah was a priest, Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1:3; 3:15). His prophetic 'career' belongs to the early years of the Babylonian Exile. A number of Ezekiel's oracles are dated: the earliest is 593BC and the latest is 571BC (see Moshe Greenberg in Volume 1 of his commentary on Ezekiel published in the Anchor Bible Series, 1983 page 12).

Ezekiel is addressing his fellow exiles. He also has in focus those who were left behind in Judah. In Babylon and back in Judah there appear to have been two camps. The first party was made up of those who advocated acceptance of their fate. What was required of them was that they repent. Their fidelity to the Torah would please YHWH who, in his own time, would restore the land to them.

Back in Judah, the prophet Jeremiah belonged to this party, and the priest Ezekiel, in exile in Babylon, was of the same conviction. We see this in his tirades against Egypt and against those who looked to Egypt to liberate them from servitude to Babylon. In his commentary on Ezekiel, (in the Hermeneia Series, Fortress Press 1969) Walther Zimmerli includes the following as areas in which there is agreement between Jeremiah and Ezekiel: ‘submission to the Babylonians, the decidedly anti-Egyptian attitude, the expectation of a new future for Israel among the exiles and not among those left in the land, the condemnation of the action of Zedekiah, and statements about the inner transformation of the people in the promised age of salvation’ (page 45).

The second party was led by Zedekiah the ruler in Judah. They looked to Egypt to help them throw off the Babylonian yoke. There was no place in their thinking for submission or repentance.

The Ezekiel scroll hinges on the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army in 587, by which time Ezekiel and his fellow exiles had been in Babylon for eleven years. We find the record of the beginning of the siege (588) in Ezekiel chapter 24, and the announcement of the city’s fall (587) in chapter 33. The oracles in the first 24 chapters belong to the period between 593BC and 587BC. These oracles are highly critical of the people’s behaviour. They seek to explain why it is that YHWH appears to have abandoned them. Ezekiel insists that the people are undergoing a punishment that they have brought on themselves by their infidelity to the covenant. Ezekiel warns that if the people do not learn their lesson Jerusalem will suffer an even worse fate (see Ezekiel 4:7-17; 12:1-29). He points out the folly of the Jerusalem establishment looking to Egypt (see Ezekiel 17:11-21). In Ezekiel 33:21-22 we hear of his response to the news that Jerusalem has fallen. The catastrophe of 587BC vindicates Ezekiel’s warnings and opens up a new phase in his ministry.

Chapter 24 is followed by a series of oracles directed against nations other than Judah. These chapters provide a dramatic pause while the fate of the city hangs in the balance. Theologically they highlight the justice of YHWH. From the first 24 chapters one could get the impression that Judah was the only nation being ‘punished’. These oracles declare that this is not the case and prepare for the words of restoration of Judah that we find after chapter 33.

The oracles after chapter 33 belong to the period after 587BC. The time for threats is over. In these later oracles Ezekiel highlights YHWH’s fidelity and promises a new beginning and a restoration of land and temple. Now that the worst has happened, he focuses on YHWH’s desire to forgive. He builds on earlier oracles of hope, if only people would learn the lesson and turn to God (see Ezekiel 11:16-20; 18:30-32). In chapter 36 he speaks of a new covenant, and in chapter 37 he has a vision of the nation rising again. He declares that nothing can separate Israel from God’s care (see Ezekiel 38-39).

Finally, in chapters 40-48, Ezekiel the priest, sets out a program for the rebuilding of the destroyed temple and its cult.

Again and again Ezekiel makes the point that YHWH is reluctant to punish.

Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord YHWH, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live? ... Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel?

– Ezekiel 18:23, 31

He also insists that God's judgment is just. We are punished because of the way we behave (see Ezekiel 7:3-9; 39:23). It is because the people had 'a wanton heart that turned away from me' (Ezekiel 6:9). They were rebellious (Ezekiel 5:5-10), unfaithful to the covenant (Ezekiel 11:12; 8:1-18; 16:59). We are assured that the innocent would not be punished (Ezekiel 9:4; 18:4, 20, 30; 33).

Ezekiel has a lot to offer those of us who are in positions of leadership. He is devastating in his criticism of bad leaders who look after themselves and neglect those they are supposed to care for (see especially his declaration against the 'shepherds, chapter 34). God will not abandon his 'sheep':

I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out.

– Ezekiel 34:11

I will break the bars of their yoke, and save them from the hands of those who enslaved them.

– Ezekiel 34:27

Ezekiel criticises the priests (see Ezekiel 22:26-27; 8:1-18), and especially those who claim to speak for God but who 'follow their own spirit and have seen nothing' (Ezekiel 13:3); who see a cracked wall and cover the crack with whitewash (Ezekiel 13:10, 15); who 'prophesy out of their own imagination' (Ezekiel 13:17). Ezekiel himself is instructed to 'eat' God's word (Ezekiel 3:1-3), to 'receive it in your heart' (Ezekiel 3:10), to speak whether people listen or not (Ezekiel 3:11).

Throughout the scroll, especially in the chapters that post-date the fall of Jerusalem (chapters 33-39), we find a promise of restoration (Ezekiel 36:8-12, 24-28; 39:25-29), and of a covenant that will last forever (Ezekiel 37:26). Though YHWH must punish, his will is that 'they will be my people and I will be their God' (Ezekiel 14:11):

I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall know that I am YHWH, in order that you may remember and be confounded, and never open your mouth again because of your shame, when I forgive you all that you have done, says the Lord YHWH.

– Ezekiel 16:62-63

YHWH wants to re-establish the loving communion he offered when Israel first became his people (see Ezekiel 16:8). For this to happen the people will need a new spirit.

I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God.

– Ezekiel 11:19-20

This text seems to make the gift of the new heart and new spirit dependent on repentance (see the context, Ezekiel 11:18-21). Elsewhere the gift is presented as wholly a divine initiative flowing from God's largesse (see Ezekiel 36:22-32; 37:14).

Ezekiel uses extraordinary imagery to express his experience of his initial encounter with God (chapter 1; see also Ezekiel 3:23 and 8:4), including the imagery of 'spirit' (Ezekiel 1:12) and 'fire' (Ezekiel 1:13, 27; 8:2). The destruction of the temple does not end God's presence with his people. The glorious (and always transcendent and mysterious) YHWH is 'a sanctuary for them in the countries where they have gone' (Ezekiel 11:16). This is surely a consoling message for all of us, whatever state we find ourselves in.

Scholars speak of a 'Deuteronomic School', a 'Priestly School', a 'Jeremiah School' and an 'Isaiah School'. They speak also of an 'Ezekiel School'. Because as a priest Ezekiel belonged to a learned elite, who were practised in writing, it is not unlikely that he himself composed parts of the scroll that bears his name. However we should expect that Ezekiel's disciples had a significant role in composing the written text as is the case for other prophetic scrolls. They treasured Ezekiel's words. They also reflected on them in the light of their experience. It should not surprise us that they kept discovering new depths of meaning in his words. They believed that YHWH had spoken to them through Ezekiel. They knew that YHWH is a living God, and so, to keep the word fresh and relevant they felt free to 'clarify', update and expand the oracles in the light of historical events and changed circumstances.

In reference to this 'Ezekiel School' Walther Zimmerli states in his commentary that they 'edited the prophecies of Ezekiel, commented upon them, and gave them a fuller theological exposition' (page 70). Later he writes: 'We must see here a serious effort to grasp the meaning of what was revealed to the prophet by Yahweh and an attempt at further clarification' (page 124). Joseph Blenkinsopp (Ezekiel, John Knox Press, 1990, page 8) writes: 'Most critical scholars accept the basic authenticity of the work, while admitting significant contributions from a "school" of Ezekiel.'

The Book of Lamentations

The Book of Lamentations is listed among the 'Writings' in the Tanak. These lamentations were composed in the wake of the siege and capture of Jerusalem in 587BC. The Second Book of Kings reports this catastrophe:

In the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month—which was the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon—Nebuzaradan, the captain of the bodyguard, a servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. He burned the house of YHWH, the king's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem; every great house he burned down. All the army of the Chaldeans who were with the captain of the guard broke down the walls around Jerusalem. Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carried into exile the rest of the people who were left in the city and the deserters who had defected to the king of Babylon—all the rest of the population. But the captain of the guard left some of the poorest people of the land to be vine dressers and tillers of the soil.

– 2Kings 25:8-12

Unlike the above report, the Book of Lamentations does not speak about what happened. It records the cries from the heart directed to God by people who have been through the experience. We are listening to those left behind in Judah during the exile.

Isaiah 40:27 and 49:14 express laments. Zechariah 7:3-5, composed in 518, witnesses to the practice of fasting and mourning in the fifth month 'during these seventy years' (588-518). These lamentations were part of the mourning ritual. The text from 2 Kings dates the fall of Jerusalem to 'the seventh day of the month'. Jeremiah 52:12 gives the date as the tenth. In Jewish tradition the Lamentations are read on the ninth day of the fifth month (July-August in the modern calendar), because of the tradition that the second temple fell to Titus on the ninth. Both catastrophes are being commemorated.

The first, second and fourth song are the central core of this Book. They are communal laments (compare Isaiah 23:1-14 and a number of the Psalms) that give expression to the bewilderment of those who have gone through the horrors of the siege and the destruction, and who have seen their families starving and slaughtered, their king and leaders deported, and God's sanctuary defiled. They are aware of their sin, but this awareness does not add up to what has happened, which is out of proportion to their guilt. In keeping with their theology of God as controlling events (we will return to this shortly), they see God as the ultimate cause of the horrors they have been through. But this is equally bewildering. How could the just God, the God who remains faithful to the covenant even when we sin, how could this God have willed such a dreadful holocaust?

The inspiring thing about these communal laments is that the people have somehow retained their faith. They have not discarded their God. They have not rejected their belief. These laments are addressed to God. The community is pouring out its heart to God, pleading for God to take notice, and to intervene. For reasons that are beyond their comprehension, God has willed the horrors. Only God can intervene to bring relief.

There is a time and place for acceptance. But there is a time and place to cry out to God in pain and bewilderment. This is the gift of the Book of Lamentations. A Christian cannot help but think of Jesus' lament over the coming destruction of Jerusalem (see Luke 19:41), as well as his cry from the cross: 'My God, my God, why, but why have you abandoned me?' (Mark 15:34). This cry arises from a visceral experience of being abandoned. It arises because the situation makes no sense. But, like the laments of this book, it is still a cry of profound faith. Jesus is crying out to one whom he calls 'My God, my God!'

The fifth song is like the others, but appears to be a later addition. The third song is very different. It is a personal lament, composed by a later author who is distant from the experience of the siege and destruction of the city.

In the Hebrew Bible the title of the Book of Lamentations comes from the initial word *'ēkkâ* ('how?'). In the Greek Septuagint it is entitled *'threnoi*' ('lamentations'). The Septuagint attributes the work to Jeremiah. This idea found encouragement in the words of Jeremiah: 'For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me' (8:21), and in the claim in 2 Chronicles: 'Jeremiah also uttered a lament for Josiah, and all the singing men and singing women have spoken of Josiah in their laments to this day. They made these a custom in Israel; they are recorded in the Laments' (35:25).

Though some of the content of the Book of Lamentations fits well with Jeremiah's theology and outlook, some does not. As the text stands in the Hebrew Bible, it is, of course, a written document. It is important to recognise that the cries that we read were at first spontaneous expression of pain and bewilderment. There is no reason to exclude Jeremiah from being one of those whose cries we can hear in some parts of the laments, but he is not the author of the Book, which in the Hebrew Bible is listed among the Writings, and is not attached to Jeremiah.

Because the catastrophe is experienced as a 'death' (of the city, the monarchy, and the temple, as well as many of the inhabitants), in the laments we will find echoes of the funeral dirge (Hebrew: *qināh*; see especially 1:1-6).

Whoever is responsible for writing down the first, second and fourth laments has picked up the heartfelt cries. The writing down ensures that the experience is not lost for future generations. The writer has also imposed a form on the text – something that is especially obvious from the way he has organised the material of all five laments to fit the Hebrew alphabet. As Claus Westermann states in his *'Lamentations: issues and interpretation'* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1994, page 100): 'The acrostic form was imposed on the text at a later stage'. The first and second laments consist of 22 stanzas of 3 lines. The first word in line one of the first stanza begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The first word in line one of the second stanza begins with the second letter, and so on through the 22 stanzas, one for each of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Similarly for the third Lamentation, though here the appropriate letter is found at the beginning of each of the three lines (not only the first) in the stanza. The fourth Lamentation has two (not three) lines in each stanza. Like Lamentations 1 and 2 only the first line of each stanza has the appropriate letter. The fifth Lamentation is not acrostic, but, like Psalms 33, 38 and 103, it keeps a link with the alphabet in having 22 stanzas. One effect of having 22 stanzas is to underline the all-encompassing (from A to Z) nature of the suffering, bewilderment and grief. Clearly we are dealing with a literary work. There is nothing of the spontaneous in this pattern.

What is special about the Book of Lamentations is that it is not a reflection on events by an inspired prophet. It is not a teaching text, listing the lessons that need to be learned. It is (for the most part) a cry of the heart addressed to God by people who are bewildered by the horror of their experience, who can make no sense of it. The only one to whom they can turn is God, and their intuition is right. They are allowed to give expression to their anger, their bewilderment, their pain. While their understanding of God's role in the catastrophe should be questioned, they continue to look to God, knowing that God will hear their cry and respond as only God knows best. Surely there is a precious lesson in this for us?

The Isaiah School in Exile

A dramatic turn of events came with the victories of Cyrus II of Persia. The ailing Babylonian Empire was ruled by the usurper Nabonidus who reigned from 555 to 539. In 550 Cyrus of Persia conquered Ecbatana, the capital of Media (west-central Iran). Three years later he captured Sardis, the capital of Lydia (western Turkey). Then he took Susa, the capital of Elam (at the foot of the Zagros Mountains in the Khuzistan region of Iran). News of Cyrus's victories and of his policy of allowing exiles to return to their homeland awakened a similar hope in the exiles from Judah.

Most scholars agree that the bulk of the material in Isaiah 40-55 was composed in Babylon during the years of the Babylonian exile. It is often assumed to be the work of an unnamed individual prophet, called for convenience 'Deutero-Isaiah'. I am following those who attribute it to a 'School' of prophet-preachers. These prophet-preachers show familiarity with the Isaiah tradition, as they do with other prophetic and Deuteronomic material, but their writing has its own distinct character, which has most in common with the temple singers responsible for the psalms.

Scholars point out the many links between Isaiah 35 and Isaiah 40-55, but most agree that this is because Isaiah 35 was composed in post-exilic Judah precisely to bind chapters 40-55 to the Isaiah material in 2-39. For the same reason the historical appendix (Isaiah 36-39) was added as a bridge between these two blocks of prophetic writing. The key link is that the exilic writers of the Isaiah School offer an assurance that the sins of Jerusalem, so prominent in the criticisms made by Isaiah ben Amoz, have been pardoned, and a new beginning is being offered.

It is likely that the oratorical nature of the material in Isaiah 40-55 is because it was composed for the preaching that took place in the synagogue. Some of the content, too, is better understood when we realise the pressure the deported Judeans were under in this multicultural environment with its powerful imperial deities. This helps account for the polemic against idols, but more importantly for the stress throughout that YHWH, the God is Israel, is the lord of creation and the lord of history.

The rise to power of the Persian king, Cyrus, provides essential background especially for chapters 40-48. Further background is provided by knowledge of the Babylonian New Year festival that celebrated the power of their god, Marduk. As we examine the Isaiah text it will appear that it sets out to parody the Babylonian liturgy and to contrast the real power of YHWH with the supposed power of Marduk. A highlight of the Marduk festival was the dramatic presentation of the creation myth, the Enuma Elish. Blenkinsopp in his commentary on Isaiah 40-55 (Anchor Bible Series, 2002) sums it up in the following words (page 106):

In the beginning there was nothing but the divine pair Apsū and Tiamat. From these primordial deities several generations of gods were begotten, but the repose of Apsū was disturbed by the secondary gods, whom he therefore decided to destroy, a proposal rejected by his consort, Tiamat. The wise god Ea then discovers the plan and takes pre-emptive action by killing Apsū with the help of magic.

The birth of Marduk follows, and his many attributes are described. Meanwhile, Tiamat prepares for battle to avenge the death of her consort and appoints Kingu as head of the divine assembly, leader of her army, and keeper of the tablets of destiny. Since the gods are afraid to take on Tiamat, Marduk, also known as Bēl, agrees to do so with the condition that he is appointed supreme god in the divine assembly. The gods accept with the acclamation “Marduk is king!” (Enuma Elish IV 28) and equip him with a sceptre, royal robe, throne and magical weapons. In the contest that follows, Tiamat is defeated and killed, and out of her body are created the sky, the stars, constellations, sun and moon, the earth and the circumfluent waters. The human being, a lowly creature (*lullu*), is created by the god Ea out of the blood of the slaughtered Kingu, mixed with slime.

To humanity is assigned the task of relieving the secondary gods of the duty of serving the high gods. In gratitude, the gods erect the *esagila* sanctuary for Marduk, Enlil, and Ea. A banquet follows, and the destinies are fixed. The poem ends with the recital of a litany of the fifty names of Marduk and the praise of his incomparable greatness: “none among the gods can equal him” (Enuma Elish VII 14).

Once the creation myth is presented, the statues of Marduk (Bēl) and his son, Nabū (Nebo), were led in procession to the *akitu* house (*bit akiti*), outside the city. Isaiah 46:1-2 parodies this procession. It will not be long before the Babylonians will be packing up their gods in an effort to save them and processing out of the city – into exile! Isaiah 51:9-10 portrays YHWH (not Marduk) as slaying the beast of chaos. YHWH is presented as the cosmic creator throughout, and, against the Babylonian story of many gods, it is declared “Before me no god was formed, and there will be none after me” (Isaiah 43:10). YHWH has no need of a counsellor such as Ea (Isaiah 40:13-14; 41:28). YHWH alone (not Marduk) controls the heavens (Isaiah 40:26; 45:12). YHWH (not Marduk) ‘reigns as king’ (Isaiah 52:7). The Babylonians shout: ‘None among the gods can equal Marduk!’. Again and again the prophet-scribes proclaim that nothing can compare to YHWH: ‘I am YHWH and there is no other’ (Isaiah 45:5, 6, 18, 22; 46:9).

The material found in the Isaiah scroll chapters 40-48 appears to have been composed some time in the years between 545 and 540. The hopes of the exiles were realised when Cyrus entered Babylon in triumph in 539. However, Cyrus did not live up to the expectations of this School of writers. In any case Cyrus was killed in battle in 530.

Isaiah 40-48 is like nothing that has preceded it. The 8th century prophets carried out their ministry against the background of Assyrian aggression. The prophets of the last decades of the 7th century and the early decades of the 6th century ministered in the catastrophic years of the rise of Babylon and the collapse of Judah. These nine chapters of the Isaiah scroll promise an end to exile and a return to the Promised Land. They call for hope and trust and look forward to the excitement of taking part in a second Exodus. YHWH, the Lord of creation and the lord of history, is coming, not to punish, but to comfort and redeem (40:1; see 41:10; 43:1). We have in these chapters an inspired response to the call to ‘sing a new song’ (42:10). It is a call, also, to mission (42:1-7).

However, the preaching of the prophet-preachers fell, for the most part, on deaf ears. We notice a shift in direction in Isaiah 49-55. The prophet-preachers, experiencing indifference and rejection, realise that it is up to them to keep the prophetic word alive.

As we will note shortly, it is these ‘servants’ of YHWH and their followers, who, back in Judah, compose Isaiah 56-66, continue to update the sayings of Isaiah in Isaiah 2-39, include the exilic reflections of Isaiah 40-55, and then prefaced the book with Isaiah chapter 1. These three blocks of prophetic writing combine to produce what we know as the Isaiah scroll.

The material found in the Isaiah scroll from chapters 49 to 55 appears to have been composed shortly after Babylon’s capture by Cyrus in 539. From the opening words of chapter 49 it is clear that there has been a significant shift of focus. Two things have happened. The first is that Cyrus did not live up to the expectations that the composers of Isaiah 40-48 had of him. Though Cyrus conquered the Babylonian Empire, Judah is still devastated and Jerusalem and its temple are still in ruins. The second is partly a consequence of this: the doubts already expressed by the community have hardened into rejection of this School and of their prophetic message.

Yet the prophet-preachers remain convinced that it is YHWH’s will to bring about the return of the exiles and to build up Judah so that the people can carry out the mission that they have inherited from Abraham and Jacob; namely, to reveal YHWH to the nations. Since the people are not in a position yet to do this, and since they are no longer listening to the prophetic message, the members of this exilic School realise that it is they who are called to be YHWH’s ‘servants’, to keep the flame burning and to realise the mission given to Israel. They must, in that sense, be Israel.

Their opening words, then, are no longer addressed to the people of Judah, whether in Jerusalem or in exile. They are addressed to the nations, for it is YHWH’s will for the nations to come to know him and experience freedom and salvation through following the way of the Torah, the way YHWH has revealed to Israel, the way that has its source in communion with YHWH and flows into a world order characterised by justice.

In the following quotation Carroll Stuhlmueller in his *New Paths through the Old Testament* (Paulist Press, 1989) speaks in terms of an individual prophet (the supposed anonymous prophet of the exile referred to as ‘Deutero-Isaiah’) rather than a School of prophet-preachers. If we substitute ‘prophets’ for ‘prophet’, Stuhlmueller (page 99) captures well the mood of Isaiah 49-55:

A sombre sadness now muffles the enthusiasm. The people could not believe that God’s compassion would reach this tenderly to the ends of the earth, nor could the people accept the price of sharing the covenant and its God with other nations. Worst of all, the prophet acclaimed the Persian Cyrus as another Moses in 44:24 - 45:7. Such openness clashed with the narrow prejudice of the people. The prophet was spurned, publicly humiliated, cast aside. In the solitary darkness he saw himself reliving the history of his people in their dreadful suffering. He also sustained hopes beyond despair, life beyond death, absorbed from the tradition of Moses and the earlier prophets.

Isaiah 49-55 continue to speak of the redeeming action of YHWH, the Lord of creation and the Lord of history. They continue the theme of mission (49:5-7) and the call to leave the land of captivity (52:11). They add a call to be faithful to one’s mission even when faced with rejection (see 50:4-10; 52:13 - 53:12). They speak of God’s tender love (49:14-15) and of the offer of a covenant that will last forever (55:3).

Back in Judah after the Return from Exile

In 538, having been welcomed into Babylon as a liberator, Cyrus issued an edict that the exiles from Judah could return home, with financial support to rebuild their temple (see Ezra 1:2-4; 6:2-5). They were led by a man called Sheshbazzar. He is called a 'prince of Judah' (Ezra 1:8), which may imply that he belonged to the royal family. Though he is described as 'governor' (*pehāh*; Ezra 5:14) it is not clear that Judah was at this stage an independent province in the satrapy. Cyrus entrusted him with the return of the Temple vessels (1:7-11) and he began repairing the Temple (5:14-16).

The first group of exiles returned to Judah (Yehud) in 538. The Judah to which they returned was an area of about 1,500 square kilometres. It was a small and relatively insignificant province of the huge Persian satrapy which took in everything west of the Euphrates. The population was drastically reduced by pestilence and starvation associated with the sieges, the war casualties, and the exiles, in the early years of the sixth century. Little progress was made during the first twenty years after the return. As we know from Haggai, the temple was still in ruins, as was the economy generally.

Much of our information about the return of the exiles from Babylon comes from the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, composed in the second half of the fifth century. The author of the Book of Ezra devotes the first six chapters to an account of the return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon, focusing especially on the rebuilding of the temple, which had been destroyed in 587, and the restoration of the cult. Judah (Yehud) was a small part of the Ebed-Nahara satrapy of the Persian Empire. This satrapy covered the vast area west of the Euphrates River.

The Judah to which the exiles returned was a very different place from the Judah they had been exiled from some sixty years earlier. The Edomites, under pressure from the Nabatean Arabs had occupied southern Judah, and the population had been drastically reduced and impoverished. Not surprisingly there were those in Judah who were reluctant to welcome the returning exiles (see Ezra 3:3; Zechariah 8:10). They were not happy to hand back the land they had occupied. The mixed population in Samaria, north of Jerusalem, did not want to revert to having a strong neighbour on their southern border. The zeal of the returning exiles met with strong resistance and their attempts to carry out their mission of rebuilding the temple were thwarted (see Ezra 4:4-5).

Cyrus was killed in battle in 530 and was succeeded by his son, Cambyses, who died rather mysteriously on his way back from a successful campaign in Egypt in 522. Darius claimed the throne. It took him some years to consolidate his power, but once successful he issued in a century of stable political leadership. Darius reigned from 522-486; Xerxes I from 486-465 and Artaxerxes I from 465-424. In *The Hebrew Bible* (Fortress Press, 1985, page 430) Norman Gottwald writes:

With the death of Cyrus's successor Cambyses, a major uprising shook the Persian Empire. As part of an effort to pacify the empire, Darius decided to launch a more serious drive to recolonize Judah as a strategic military and political salient on the frontier with troublesome Egypt.

Among the returning exiles were Zerubbabel, who is described as the ‘son of Shealtiel’ (see Ezra 3:2, 8; 5:2; Nehemiah 12:1; Haggai 1:1, 12, 14; 2:2, 23), and so the grandson of King Jechoniah. The Ezra scroll does not indicate his position in Judah, but he is called ‘governor of Judah’ in Haggai 1:1, 14; 2:2, 21. With him was Jeshua, who was appointed high priest (Ezra 2:2). They led a large contingent of over forty thousand exiles (see Ezra 2:64-65). The record is unclear as to when exactly they arrived.

The Persian government had no interest in imposing any religion on the many and varied peoples in its vast empire. Its strength, however, was in its highly developed and efficient organisation. Subject peoples could follow their own laws, but the central government wanted a record of what those laws were. It was also determined to ensure that the laws of a province did not interfere with trade or taxation.

As part of his determination to build up Judah as a buffer with Egypt, Darius instructed Zerubbabel to re-build the temple, a task that had been neglected for nearly twenty years (see Ezra Chapter 6). Assisted by Jeshua, he set up an altar and re-established the cult (see Ezra chapter 3). He received the support of two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah (see Ezra 5:15). The temple was completed in 516BC, ‘on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius’ (Ezra 5:15). This was in spite of local pressure (Ezra 3:3) and strong resistance from the Samaritans (see Ezra 4:1). The antipathy between the Jews and Samaritans had its origin at this time and continued to grow over the centuries. We find it expressed in 2Chronicles 13:3-18; Zechariah 11:14 and Sirach 50:25-26.

It is not surprising that the presence of King Jechoniah’s grandson in Judah awakened a desire for a restoration of the Davidic kingship (see Haggai 2:23). The prophet Zechariah is confident that the dire situation in Jerusalem and Judah will be reversed when YHWH returns. Like Haggai, Zechariah is confident that YHWH will bring in a new order, for YHWH is ‘YHWH of hosts’ (1:3), the ‘lord of the whole earth’ (4:14). Unlike Haggai who looks to Zerubbabel to restore the Davidic dynasty, Zechariah speaks more vaguely of a coming ‘Branch’ (3:8; 6:12) of the Davidic line, who will be YHWH’s instrument in reconstructing the temple. His vision is more expansive than Haggai’s in that he sees other nations as joining Judah in YHWH’s new order (2:11; 8:20-23).

A number of factors need to be kept in mind if we are to understand something of the situation of Judah in the period after the exile. One is the dramatic loss of population. Most of those who were dispersed to Babylon or Egypt never returned. Another is that Judah was landlocked, surrounded by unfriendly neighbours and was of little economic interest to Persia. Judah remained economically stagnant through till the middle of the fifth century.

This highlights the extraordinary achievement of such a small population living in such a depressed environment. Everything being equal, it is a wonder that the Jews in Judah did not disintegrate and disappear, as did many of the small nations around them.

**JUDAH AS A PROVINCE
OF THE PERSIAN EMPIRE
445-333 B.C.E.**



We should also consider the change in the place of the temple in the life of Jerusalem. Prior to the exile the temple was closely linked with the king's palace. The ordinary populace came to it only on special occasions. This changed after the exile. There was no king, and the temple functioned as Jerusalem's social and economic, as well as religious, centre. The local leadership of the Jews was in the hands of a governor, the temple priests and the leading landowners.

Then there was the problem of taxation. The Persian empire was built on a tightly controlled public service, to facilitate trade, and to ensure the collection of taxes. Like other subject peoples, the people of Judah had to support the king, the satraps and the local governors. Added to this was a temple tax for the support of the temple building and the cult.

We have no evidence to assist us in ascertaining when or how Zerubbabel's governorship ended. Persia may have lost confidence in him because of the local desire to reconstitute the Davidic kingship (see Haggai). The only governor in the first half of the fifth century whose name we can be confident of is Elnathan (not mentioned in the Bible, but known from an inscription). The high priests who succeeded Jeshua in the same period were Joiakim and Eliashib (see Nehemiah 12:10).

The prophet Haggai

Those responsible for the Haggai scroll introduce the prophet with the following words:

In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of YHWH came by the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest.

– Haggai 1:1

From this we know that Haggai made his first proclamation in 520. This was after Zerubbabel, the grandson of the exiled King Jehoiachin, had been sent from Babylon to Jerusalem as governor. Haggai's main aim was to encourage the rebuilding of the temple that had been destroyed in 587. The temple was a constant reminder of the presence of YHWH in Jerusalem. It was also the centre of the social and economic life of Judah. With the temple still in ruins after 19 years since the return from Babylon, the populace were not able to offer appropriate sacrifices in the proper way.

We know nothing of Haggai's lineage, nor are we told whether he was among those who were left behind in Judah or was part of the group who returned from exile. He is called a 'prophet' (*nābî*); see also Haggai 1:3, 12; 2:1, 10; and Ezra 5:1; 6:4). Haggai's words were addressed to Zerubbabel, the governor, and, because his interest lies especially in the reconstruction of the temple, he addresses also the high priest, Joshua. In the difficult circumstances of Jerusalem in the years after the return from exile, the people are doing their best to get their lives together, but they are neglecting the worship of God (see Haggai 1:4-9). However, once alerted to this by the prophet, they obey (Haggai 1:12), and set about rebuilding the temple. God assures them: 'I am with you' (Haggai 1:13; 2:4); 'my spirit abides among you; do not fear' (Haggai 2:5).

The prophet Zechariah

There are 14 chapters in the Zechariah scroll as it has come down to us in the Bible. Scholars are unanimous in seeing chapters 9-14 as a collection of material with no direct connection to the prophet Zechariah. We will limit our attention here to the first 8 chapters of the scroll. We will deal with the remaining chapters in Chapter Sixteen.

Ezra 5:1-2 and 6:14 link Zechariah with the prophet Haggai. This is reinforced by the chronological framework provided in the text. Chapter 1 verses 1 and 7 are dated in the second year of Darius (520-519), the year of Haggai's oracles. Chapter 7 verse 1 is dated two years later, in 518.

Zechariah is confident that the dire situation in Jerusalem and Judah will be reversed when YHWH returns. Like Haggai, Zechariah is confident that YHWH will bring in a new order, for YHWH is 'YHWH of hosts' (Zechariah 1:3), the 'lord of the whole earth' (Zechariah 4:14). Unlike Haggai who looks to Zerubbabel to restore the Davidic dynasty, Zechariah speaks more vaguely of a coming 'Branch' (Zechariah 3:8; 6:12) of the Davidic line, who will be YHWH's instrument in reconstructing the temple. His vision is more expansive than Haggai's in that he sees other nations as joining Judah in YHWH's new order (Zechariah 2:11; 8:20-23).

The most obvious characteristic of the Zechariah scroll is its visions. Zechariah has three visions that reveal the transformation that YHWH is intent on bringing about for the whole earth. In the first vision (1:8-17), Zechariah sees horses and riders patrolling the earth: YHWH is returning to Jerusalem. This is followed by a second vision of four horns and four blacksmiths (1:18-21), and a third in which Jerusalem is wondrously expanded and is attracting foreign nations (2:1-5). There are two visions in which Zechariah sees the restoration brought about by the divine presence: one focuses on the high priest Joshua (3:1-10); the other on the governor Zerubbabel (4:1-14). Finally there is another set of three visions (5:1 - 6:8). In the last vision (6:1-8), the prophet once again sees horses and chariots patrolling the earth.

Zechariah makes the point that return of communion is always a divine initiative (Zechariah 1:17; 2:5, 8; 8:3, 8), but it depends on our turning to God (Zechariah 1:3). He offers us a powerful image of forgiveness: the filthy clothing of the high priest is replaced by festive apparel (Zechariah 3:1-10). He holds out the prospect of the nations coming to Jerusalem to know YHWH (Zechariah 2:11; 8:22-23).

The Isaiah School back in Judah

Among the returned exiles were members of the School of exilic prophets who were responsible for Isaiah 40-55. It is to them and those who followed them that we owe chapters 56-66 of the Isaiah scroll. They show no interest in a Davidic king. They look to YHWH to intervene and put things right. There are many themes that are consistent with those of Isaiah 40-55, and a number of references to the prophecies found there. They continue to speak of the breaking in of a new age of salvation (compare Isaiah 62:11-12 with the opening words of Isaiah 40). They continue to speak of the central role of Zion in the promised New Age (compare Isaiah 62:1ff with Isaiah 49:14ff). They see their servant ministry as a continuing of the ministry of the ‘servants’ of the exile (see Isaiah 56:6; 63:17; 65:8, 13-15).

Chapters 56-66 focus on the internal wrangling of the community back in Jerusalem. These chapters do not have a single author. The exhortations and criticisms come from a minority movement in Jerusalem that is discontent with the way things are working out since the erection of the Second Temple in 516, and the material seems to range from the return from exile through to the time of Ezra (458).

Like the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, the members of the Isaiah School, were able to reflect on the ‘miracle’ of the fall of Babylon to Cyrus of Persia in 539, and his edict allowing the exiles to return home to the Promised Land. In his *Introduction to Reading the Pentateuch* (Eisenbrauns 2006, page 141) Jean Louis Ska SJ writes:

The reconstruction of the temple and the restoration of a faith-community within the Persian Empire created a new situation that undoubtedly called for the revision and reinterpretation of the “data” presented by the sources and the most ancient traditions.

Ska is speaking of the authors of the Pentateuch, but his words hold true also of those who reflected on the Isaiah heritage and reapplied it to the post-exilic situation in Judah. They continued to comment on, update, and rearrange the oracles of Isaiah as well as the material they brought back with them from the members of their School in exile.

They had experienced a terrible disaster, but also an amazing resurrection. Faced with the need to re-establish themselves as a people in the very different circumstances of a reduced Judah ruled from Persia, it was all the more important to assert that their God, YHWH, is the God who created the universe and the nations. Judah being under Persian control must be God’s will, and so it must have a good purpose. Their return was itself a proof of the power and fidelity of YHWH to the promises made to their ancestors. The people must continue to put their faith in this God and to trust that they were still God’s chosen people. Hence the insistence that it is YHWH who created the earth. Hence the insistence that the God who revealed Himself to Moses, the God of Israel, is the God of the patriarchs – the same God who brought them back to their land.

During this period Judah was under a governor appointed from Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire. It is important to remember that from the Persian point of view, the Second Temple was an instrument of Persian control in Judah and was under the authority of the governor, not the temple priests.

Those who composed Isaiah 56-66 have nothing good to say about the leadership, including the temple priesthood (see Isaiah 63:18-19; 65:5,13-16; 66:5), and they rail against the prevailing religious compromise in the cult, and the rampant injustice that is contradictory to the religion of Israel. However they were not in a position to do anything about it apart from complaining and continuing to point out the will of YHWH as expressed in the Torah and the Prophets. They shared the fate of those responsible for Isaiah 40-55, in that they were a persecuted and shunned minority. Things would change with the coming of Ezra (458), but that is another story.

Besides the continuing inspiration provided by the prophet-preachers of Isaiah 40-55, the authors of Isaiah 56-66 were strongly influenced by the post-exilic members of the Deuteronomic School. There are similarities in the homiletic style, though this may be because of the growing significance of the synagogues, which provided an ambience for presenting one's ideas in an oratorical style appropriate for such a setting. Deuteronomic influence is seen especially in their religious concerns, notably their stress on the necessity of fidelity to the Law.

The salvation-hopes of the prophet-preachers of the Exile were not realised. Life in post-exilic Judah was defined by economic hardship (Isaiah 60:17; 62:8-9), insecurity in political life (Isaiah 60:10,18), ruin and devastation (Isaiah 61:4), and the burden of continuing shame (Isaiah 61:7, 62:4). Those who, back in Judah, carried on the mission of the prophet-preachers of the Exile blamed the community, who failed to keep the Sabbath (Isaiah 56:2-7; 58:3); failed to observe dietary laws (Isaiah 65:4; 66:17); had a false attitude to fasting (Isaiah 58:1-5); and were involved in immorality and idolatry (Isaiah 57:3-10,13; 65:1-7). Especially to blame were those responsible for cult (Isaiah 57:1-13; 58:1-5; 65:1-7; 66:1-4,17).

However, the members of the Isaiah School continued the proclamation of salvation. This salvation would be a historical one, though Isaiah 60:19-20 and 65:16b-25 speak in more transcendent terms. It would affect the Gentiles (Isaiah 60:3; 60:9b; 60:6, 61:9, 62:2). Cult worship has a place in the promised state (Isaiah 60:7,13; 66:2:9), though it is not stressed the way others are stressing it at the time. God would come 'soon' (Isaiah 56:1) and directly intervene (Isaiah 63:1-6; 65:17-25; 66:12-16).

The Isaiah School continued to enrich the community with their inspired insights, probably from about 515BC, when the temple was completed, through to the time of Ezra (458BC). They were determined to see that the people of Judah not repeat the mistakes of the past, and to form again the people of Israel, worshipping God in the restored temple and faithful to the covenant made with them long ago by God.

These final chapters of the Isaiah scroll have a special interest for Christians because of the way they were appealed to in the early years of the development of Jewish Christianity. Just as the authors in post-exilic Judah saw themselves as the ones who were being faithful to the life and mission confided to Israel by YHWH, and continued to point out the failures of the majority, so the Jews who followed Jesus saw themselves as the ones who were being faithful to their Jewish traditions by following the revelation they received through Jesus, the Messiah whom they believed was sent by YHWH.

They believed that Jesus' mission was to bring to its fulfilment the revelation contained in the Torah and the sayings of the prophets. They saw themselves as faithfully living out the mission given by God to Abraham, their 'father in faith'.

Just as those responsible for Isaiah 56-66 kept appealing to the majority to be converted, so the authors of the Newer Testament, Paul especially, kept reaching out to their co-religionists to re-examine their traditions in the light of Jesus' life and teaching. Like the 'suffering servant', Jesus was scoffed at and rejected by the Jewish authorities. But, again like the suffering servant, in his patience, obedience, prayer and love he revealed who God really is, and opened Judaism up to the surrounding world, sending his disciples out to the nations to bring about the reign of God promised in the scriptures, and to take the blessing given to Israel to the whole world, as YHWH had promised Abraham in the beginning.

The material in Isaiah 56-66 is outstanding for its sense of the all-embracing ('catholic') mission confided by God to Judaism. This is clear from the opening chapter's attitude to foreigners and eunuchs (chapter 56). The temple is to be 'a house of prayer for all peoples' (Isaiah 56:8; see 60:3; 66:18). The Isaiah School is critical of the prevailing narrowness of the leadership of Judah (see, for example, Isaiah 56:9-12).

The authors are critical also of the compromises that were found in the cult (chapter 57). Fasting is no substitute for justice (chapter 58)

YHWH is offering peace and healing (see Isaiah 57:19). If they are not experiencing communion with God it is their own fault. Their behaviour is 'grieving his holy spirit' (Isaiah 63:10).

Your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear ... Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands at a distance; for truth stumbles in the public square, and uprightness cannot enter.

– Isaiah 59:2, 14

This is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word.

– Isaiah 66:2

There is the opportunity for a new beginning, for YHWH is bringing about a new creation (Isaiah 65:17; 66:20), a new redemption (Isaiah 59:20; 60:16; 61:1-2; 62:12).

The spirit of the Lord YHWH is upon me, because YHWH has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of YHWH's favour'.

– Isaiah 61:1-2