

INTRODUCTION

Beauty and truth

The experience of beauty and the many ways in which we give expression to it arise from defined, delineated and limited experiences. That moment on a bridge crossing the Nattai river. The people there with me. Everything grey in the fading light of dusk. The sudden rush of ducks disturbing the silence as they splash their wings against the water and head off into the gathering night. The cold with the anticipation of a fire and a pleasant night spent with friends. All this and much more makes that moment a treasured memory that sets it apart from other experiences which have since faded and are lost. Nothing abstract and generalised here. Every element precise, and beautiful.

An early morning in Port Moresby after an evening when the full moon had cast its spell over our companionship. A pure white flower had emerged overnight from a place where I would have least expected to see it – a cactus! The surprise, the contrast, the sheer beauty, has left a memory that will not fade – though the flower itself lasted only for a day. Nothing abstract and generalised here. Every element precise, and beautiful. It is always so. It is our limitations that make us special, that set us apart, and it is precisely in our limitations that beauty lies and is revealed.

It is the same with truth. There is a place for abstraction, for general principles, for learning wisdom that can guide one's life. But every time we have an insight into the way things really are (as distinct from the way we are in the habit of thinking about things, or the way we would like things to be) it is by way of insight into a precise, delineated and necessarily limited experience. We gain insight into truth not in spite of our limitations, but in and through them. This is the way things are in the real world.

This is the way things were for those who composed the Bible. There is a danger that we could be so fascinated by the notion that what we are reading is inspired by God that we might imagine that the precise, delineated and defined parameters of ordinary human experience are not factors to be considered when reading this sacred text. There is a danger that we could think of the Bible as being dictated by God in such a way that the human limitations of the inspired writers and of the circumstances in which they wrote have no relevance to what we find in the text. We could read the Bible texts as though they came straight from God and share in God's transcendent truth, somehow unrelated to history or to human experience. We could read them as if they expressed some abstract and eternal truth that is equally relevant in every age and to every person, because it comes from God who is unchanging Truth, and whose words, therefore, transcend the limitations of time, place and language.

The Bible is not like that. It is a record of limited human insights into the mystery of God, insights that real people have expressed to other real people in limited human words and in specific cultural and historical circumstances. There is beauty and truth in the Bible texts. To find them (as distinct from imposing on the text our own preconceived notions) we will need to explore the historically conditioned and necessarily limited human experiences that gave rise to their inspired insights. The aim of this Introductory Commentary is to discover and express what it was that the prophets of seventh century Israel, Zephaniah, Nahum, Jeremiah and Habakkuk, intended to say by their words, how their contemporaries understood them, and why people cherished, preserved, copied, handed on, commented on and edited their words.

The profile of a prophet

1. Belonging to a tradition

Before examining the scrolls that have come down to us with texts connected to the names of Zephaniah, Nahum, Jeremiah, and Habakkuk, it is important to recognise that they were (and knew they were) part of a prophetic tradition the beginnings of which are lost in the mists of pre-history. Abraham is called a prophet' (Genesis 20:7), and in Genesis 18:2 we are told that he 'stood before YHWH*'. Hosea speaks of Moses as a prophet (Hosea 12:13), and in the community there was an accepted trust that YHWH would continue to raise up prophets like Moses (see Deuteronomy 18:15-18; Exodus 20:18-20; Numbers 11:10-30). Samuel stands out (see 1Samuel 3). Among others we read of Nathan at the time of David (2Samuel 7,12; 1 Kings 1); also Gad from the same period (1Samuel 22:5; 2Samuel 24:11-14). In the tenth century we know of Ahijah at Shiloh in the reign of Jeroboam I (1Kings 11:26-40; 14:1-17); Shemaiah in Judah (1Kings 12:22), as well as Azariah (2Chronicles 15:1) and Hanani (2Chronicles 16:7). In the ninth century we know of Jehu ben Hanani in Israel during the reign of Baasha (1Kings 16:1-4); Jahaziel and Eliezer in Judah (2Chronicles 20:4,37); Micaiah ben Imlah in Israel during the reign of Ahab (1 Kings 22:1-36), and Zechariah ben Jehoiada in Judah (2Chronicles 24:20ff). The legends surrounding the epic figures of Elijah and Elisha (see 1Kings 17 – 2Kings 13) highlight their special significance. In the eighth century, besides Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Micah (see my accompanying commentary on writings of these four prophets), we know of Jonah ben Amittai in Israel in the reign of Jeroboam II (2Kings 14:25-27), and Zechariah, a mentor of Uzziah of Judah (2Chronicles 26:5).

2. 'Prophecy' outside Israel

The uttering of prophetic oracles is not something that was peculiar to Israel. Replace the name of the pagan god in the following texts by YHWH, and you could easily think you were reading from the Bible.

I lifted up my hands to Baalshamayn, and Baalshamayn answered me,
and Baalshamayn spoke to me through seers and messengers;
and Baalshamayn said to me: Fear not because it was I who made you king,
and I shall stand with you, and I shall deliver you
from all these kings who have forced a siege upon you.

(from the period of king Zakir of Hamath about 780BC. See Coggins, Phillips and Knibb *Israel's Prophetic Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 1982 page 9).

I, Ishtar, will go before you and behind you. Fear not.

(from Assyria about 680BC. See Coggins op.cit. page 5).

[The goddess Ninlil is speaking] Fear not, Ashurbanipal!

Now, as I have spoken it will come to pass: I shall grant it to you.

Over the people of the four languages and over the armament of the princes
you will exercise sovereignty ...

*spelt thus throughout to highlight the fact that it is a proper name, and in deference to Jewish practice of not pronouncing the divine name or writing it in its pronounceable form. When they read YHWH, they bow their head and say 'ādonāy ('Lord').

Introduction

[The kings] of the countries confer together:
Come, [let us rise] against Ashurbanipal ...
Ninlil answered: [The kings] of the lands I shall overthrow,
place under the yoke, their feet in [strong fetters] ...
Fear not! As she that bears for her child, so I care for you;
I have placed you like an amulet on my breast. Fear not, my son whom I have raised.
(from Assyria about 660BC See Coggins op.cit. page 6).

Within the Bible itself reference is made to ‘prophets’ outside Israel. The most well-known example is Balaam who was hired by Balak to curse Israel, but who was unable to resist the power that caused him to utter a blessing instead (see Numbers 22-24).

3. Future prediction

At times the prophets look to the past, for they were conscious of belonging to a sacred tradition to which they were striving to be faithful. At times they refer to the future: the future which their contemporaries were bringing upon themselves, for good or ill, and the future that was assured because of the fidelity of their God, YHWH. The key focus of the prophets, however, was not on the past or the future; it was on the present. From their communion with God they came to inspired insights into what was to be done or not done if the people were to be open to the grace God was offering them.

However, the prophets frequently backed up their words with threats and/or promises. Sometimes, as we will see, they judged that things had gone so far as to be irreversible. Mostly, however, their predictions were conditional on how the people responded: whether they repented or went on behaving badly while ignoring the prophetic warnings.

To grasp the way future prediction was understood in the Older Testament we need to examine the ways in which the theologians of that time thought of the interaction between the divine and the human. At first glance their approach appears simple. God knows everything. It follows that God knows (‘sees’) the future (Isaiah 41:21-24; 44:7,24-26; 45:21; 46:9-10; 48:3-8; 55:10-11), and can reveal the future to his prophets. Closer examination reveals that the theological understanding of the relationship between the divine and the human is more subtle. The Older Testament theologians looked at reality as taking place on two levels. There is the observable arena of human historical events and there is the mysterious, transcendent level of divine purpose and will. The second level is the one of ultimate significance and it is constantly influencing the first, but it does not remove the reality of human freedom, the importance of repentance, the necessity of co-operation with grace, and the possibility of sin delaying and even thwarting God’s will in the short term.

On the horizontal plane of human history, the future is necessarily unpredictable, for it emerges as a result of the intersecting of many independent free decisions. We can sometimes see the way things are heading, and we can make probable predictions in limited areas with some confidence, but we cannot foresee the future in any definitive sense. God, to whom everything is present, sees these future, free decisions, but it is inaccurate to say that God *foresees* them, for this implies that he sees the future before it happens. God, who does not exist in time, sees what is future to us, not because he sees it before it happens, but because its actual happening is present to God.

4. Various phenomena connected with prophecy

We should avoid having a too narrow idea of the kinds of experiences and ways of expressing them that were included under the umbrella of ‘prophecy’. We might start with rational forms of prediction based on observable data, which were practised in the ancient world, as they are in the modern. The build up of military forces, the effects of social unrest, the probable results of political alliances, and other factors, played a significant role in attempts to predict the future. Even the prophecies associated with the Pythian prophētēs at Delphi were based on a gathering of information from the wide clientèle who consulted the oracle, even though it was thought of more as a form of intuitive divination based on inspiration which was judged to be from the gods. Helmer Ringgren in his article ‘Prophecy in the Near East’ (see *Israel’s Prophetic Tradition*, Cambridge University Press 1984 pages 1-11) gives a number of interesting examples of this form of prophecy from ancient Assyrian texts.

We are going to see examples of this astute reading of the signs of the times by Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Nahum and Jeremiah. In fact it was because events showed that they were right that their words, generally ignored at the time, were recognised as true and so from God. People came to acknowledge them as real prophets, and saw to it that their words were preserved, in the hope that later generations, through prayerful reflecting on their words, would not repeat the same mistake.

Astute observation of the signs of the times was not the only ‘tool’ at the disposal of ‘prophets’ in the ancient world. In ancient Babylon, for example, we find predictions based on observation of the movement of the stars (astrology), and of the condition of the liver of sacrificial animals, and other phenomena. These observable data were regarded as signs of the divine presence, action and will in history, and so as indications of the kind of appropriate behaviour that would please the gods and so ensure a favourable future.

In Israel predictions based on what was considered magic were forbidden (Leviticus 19:26; Deuteronomy 18:10-12; Isaiah 44:24-26; 47:13-14; Jeremiah 10:2). This is expressed well in the following statement from the Book of Deuteronomy. Moses is speaking:

Though these nations whom you are to dispossess listen to their soothsayers and fortune-tellers, the Lord your God will not permit you to do so. A prophet like me will the Lord your God raise up for you from among your own kinsmen; to him you shall listen.

– Deuteronomy 18:14-15

However, the fact that such statutes needed to be repeated suggests that the behaviour they were attempting to eliminate was a continuing problem.

It would be wrong for us to limit Israel’s prophets to intelligent and prayerful discernment of their times. Furthermore, we should not think of prophets as being in the one mould. The fact that a number of different words are used to describe them is an indication of this – names such as nābî’ (‘prophet’), rō’eh (‘seer’), hōzeh (‘one who enlightens’), ’iš ’ēlohîm (‘man of God’). Dreams, visions, ecstasy, trance, as well as perceptive and critical judgment, both of the times and of the will of YHWH, and many other factors were at play in the prophetic experience and in the way this experience was conveyed.

Introduction

Philo, a Jewish writer of the first century, writes: ‘A prophet has no utterance of his own. All his utterances come from elsewhere. They echo the voice of Another’ (*Who is the Heir*, 259). We have an example of this in Jeremiah, who tells us that he is tired of the rejection he experiences when he relays to the people what comes to him in his prayer. Yet he has to speak, for, as he says: ‘within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot’ (Jeremiah 20:9).

Jeremiah’s experience gives us some insight into certain experiences of individual prophets and into some of the material found in the prophetic scrolls. However, there is no justification for generalising and seeing this as the only kind of experience that merits being called ‘prophetic’. Furthermore, the prophetic scrolls do not claim that everything in them was spoken to the prophet by YHWH. When we claim that the words found in the prophetic scrolls are ‘inspired by God’ we are not claiming that God dictated the words that the inspired authors wrote, though there were times when the prophets experienced something close to this. We read in Jeremiah, for example: ‘YHWH put out his hand and touched my mouth; and YHWH said to me, “Now I have put my words in your mouth”’ (Jeremiah 1:9). On another occasion Jeremiah was told: ‘Take a scroll and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you’ (Jeremiah 36:2).

However, even then, the words spoken or written by the prophets were Hebrew words with their own necessary limitations. If God is going to inspire someone to speak the truth, God must choose a limited, real, human being. There are no others from whom to choose. Furthermore, what the prophet had to say was directed to real people with their own real limitations of language, culture and experience. We might wish it were otherwise. We might wish that the truths inspired by God in the sacred scriptures connected us immediately to God in such a way as to give the reader a share in God’s absolute truth. For then we would not have to undertake the task of finding out what it was that the inspired authors were actually saying, or how they were understood by their contemporaries, or why their words were treasured, copied and handed on. The inspired texts guided people to live their lives in their real world. They did not remove them from it.

5. True and false prophets

In our reflection on the profile of a prophet, we should note that the claim to be a prophet never did then (and never does now) guarantee the truth of the claim. Speaking in a way that was consistent with the essential faith of Israel was one criterion. However, there were plenty of ‘prophets’ who were closely tied to the court and the temple. Their soothing words were welcomed, but proved false. The words of the prophets we are examining here were preserved because they spoke out at a time of crisis in Judah, and events proved that they were right in the general thrust of their challenging words. Zephaniah, Nahum, Jeremiah and Habakkuk tried to warn the political and cult leaders and to get the people to change their ways and be faithful to the covenant with YHWH. They objected to the violence perpetrated against the poor and disadvantaged by those who wielded power in the land. They failed, and the annihilation of Judah as an independent state was the price paid. Too late, the words of the prophets were accepted as true, but at least they were preserved in the hope of not repeating the mistake.

6. Words that reveal YHWH

The key element that reveals a prophet as genuine is his understanding of YHWH, an understanding that is necessarily imperfect, but which is treasured as offering a genuine insight into God. It is here that we are to look to find the essence of prophecy. The prophet's inspired vision penetrates beyond the horizontal plain of historical events. The prophet is primarily concerned with the overarching providence of God which transcends the plain of human decision but is always present to it, gracing it. God's purpose transcends human decision and indecision, as does God's promise for the future. Whether or not we will enjoy God's blessings depends on whether or not we choose to respond to grace. But independent of our response, God's providence covers our future. It is God's grace which now and in the future inspires both our actions and our will to do them.

Prophecies of warning ('curses') were primarily faith-statements, for they reminded the listeners of who God is, of the fact that God's judgments are just, and of God's 'anger', that is to say, God's passionate concern for repentance and passionate determination to right what is wrong. On the human, historical plane, they functioned as warnings to bring about repentance, lest evil bear its rotten fruit. Prophecies of blessing were also primarily faith-statements, reminding people of God's transcendent, loving providence. In addition they were hope-statements, encouraging fidelity and obedience so as to establish the conditions in which God's will could be realised, and God's blessing enjoyed.

Predictions, therefore, are statements concerning God's fidelity, and it is especially this that accounts for the preservation of the prophecies. These prophecies also included statements about human sin and human repentance and their probable effects. The prophets were not always correct when they predicted what the effects of people's behaviour would be. But events did show that the general thrust of their message was true. The community saw to it that their words were preserved, for they did reveal YHWH and they did provide a good critical standpoint from which to look at the behaviour required of people who were in a covenant relationship with YHWH.

W. Eichrodt in his *Ezekiel: A Commentary* (OTL: London, 1970, pages 410-411) writes:

The predictions of prophets ... are always associated with that to which the prophets testify, a direct awareness of the whole control of providence, so they subordinate each single historical event to its context in the activity of God, which makes the whole development of history serve his kingdom. Their limitation consists in the fact that they are trying to show the way along which God is leading, whereas God is always transcendent and far above all human capabilities, and so his march through history cannot be imprisoned in human words. He carries his plans home and attains his objective with all the freedom of the Creator; so, while prediction can make statements clarifying the plan and assuring us of its existence, it can never determine the exact line it will take or calculate beforehand its individual stages. So prediction demands humble obedience to the mystery of the divine work of realisation and, like the rest of what prophets preach, it confronts the hearer with the question of a faith which refuses to let itself be led astray by unexpected delays, changes of front, or reconstruction.'

Introduction

7. Critique of contemporary behaviour

Far more significant in Old Testament prophecy than prediction of the future is the critique which the prophets make of their contemporary society in God's name. Personal encounter with YHWH sharpened their awareness of the contrast between social behaviour and the authentic Yahwist religious insights. Their task was to 'declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin' (Amos 4:12), insisting that sin must be punished (so including a call to repentance), but also insisting that there was something that transcended punishment, namely, YHWH's fidelity to himself: YHWH's promises would be kept. The prophets express the conviction that authentic divine communion demands and expresses itself in authentic human behaviour, and where this behaviour was not present they challenged their contemporaries to change their ways.

The Genesis of a Prophetic Scroll

The Older Testament is the fruit of centuries of reflection by people who were convinced that their God, YHWH, the lord of creation and the lord of history, had chosen them in love and had a special mission for them in the world. They believed that there was a special providence guiding their history. They kept reflecting on it to remember God's love and covenant with them, and to discern God's will, as well as to learn from their mistakes, and so become more sensitive, attentive and faithful. They cherished their traditions, including the reflections of those who went before them, but they knew that no words, however sacred, can comprehend the mystery that is God, and so they kept questioning, refining and adapting earlier insights in the light of newer revelation.

Since they believed that it was God himself who was communicating with his people through the events of their history, the authors readily prefaced their inspired insights with expressions such as 'YHWH said' – a way of stating that the words that followed expressed God's will as best they were able to discern it. They expected that God's will would be beyond their ability to comprehend fully, and so they approached the inspired word expecting that there would be many hidden meanings to be discovered there. They liked to break it open to see the sparks of light that issued from it, revealing the divine enlightenment hidden within. The more meanings they were able to discover, the better. Those who inherited the prophetic word (as well as other words considered sacred) delighted in playing with the text as one might play with a prism, enjoying the hundred and one reflections and flashes of colour that delight the eye and enlighten the heart. The texts expressed inspired insights into the presence and action of a living God in their history. No text could hold it all, and so the history of the development of the Older Testament is a history of prayerful debate, discussion and refinement, always in the light of historical experience.

This continued into the Newer Testament. Jesus' disciples reflected on the sacred texts in the light of the new revelation that they experienced in Jesus of Nazareth. They came to what they believed was a deeper understanding of God's intention in inspiring the Scriptures – an understanding that was hidden prior to God's revelation in Jesus. The authors of the Newer Testament carried on the tradition of the inspired authors who went before them in recognising the limits of earlier insights and earlier expressions, limits that were brought to light by the presence and action of God in history.

Modern scholarship shares the attempt of earlier times to reflect on the sacred texts in order to remember the past and to discern in the present the presence and action of God. It is also committed to attempt something that was scarcely possible in earlier times; namely, to discover the meaning the texts had for those who were inspired to speak them. The tools to attempt this were not previously available. It is not always an easy task to know when texts were composed, what words and phrases meant in their original context, and what kinds of questions ancient writers were addressing when they composed their texts. However, to the extent that our attempt is successful it does help us avoid the danger of reading meanings into a text that are alien to the meaning intended by its authors and the meaning understood by those to whom the words were originally addressed. The attempt to enter into the world of the inspired authors can also have the advantage of opening us up to the fresh surprise of the inspired texts, and in this way enrich the reflections we must make on God's presence and action in our times.

In his *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (Westminster, John Knox Press, Louisville, 1996, page 3) Joseph Blenkinsopp states that the prophetic books of the Old Testament reveal:

a cumulative process of appropriation, assimilation, and adaption that ... shades off into an increasingly frequent recycling and reinterpreting of older prophetic material.

The editors responsible for the prophetic scrolls were faithful to the words (originally spoken, but later written) that they inherited, for they saw them as an inspired expression of the action of YHWH in their history. They pored over them, wanting to discover the will of YHWH. They also reflected on the meaning of past events for them and for their contemporaries. It would make life easier for us if they had kept their comments and reflections separate from the inherited texts, but that was not their way. They expressed their reflections in comments within the text, and in the way they restructured and rearranged the material. They also reinterpreted the texts in the light of their contemporary experience and presented the text in ways that shed light on what was happening to them and to their contemporaries.

This makes it difficult at times to know with certainty which parts of the text can safely be attributed to the original prophet, and which parts are the result of later scribal-prophetic reflection. In any case, inspiration has to be thought of as covering the whole process of transmission including the insights of the prophets and scribes that diligently explored, reshaped, and added to, the material that they inherited. It is good to take the text as we have it and to explore why the final editors presented in the way it is. However, as Blenkinsopp also states (page 22):

As difficult and hypothetical as it no doubt is, the reconstruction of the editorial history of prophetic books remains a task of major importance both historically and theologically.

Inspiration

Surely inspiration must be speaking about the presence of God's Spirit guiding people in their lives and in their teaching, including those who composed the final text and those who welcomed it as a true (though, of course, necessarily, limited) expression of their faith convictions. For, in the final analysis, it is the community of believers that recognises the texts as inspired, because it is the community that continues to find them inspiring.

Inspiration

Those responsible for the texts that we experience as inspired wanted their contemporaries to listen to the past so as to listen to the ways – at times the surprisingly new ways – that God was inspiring them to live now. The texts are religious texts intended to encourage fidelity and prayer. Saint Augustine insists that all the scriptures are there to provoke love – and we could add gratitude, repentance, praise and joy.

God's inspiration is everywhere. God's grace bears its marvellous fruit wherever people are attentive to this inspiration and let it guide them. What is special to the texts of the sacred scriptures is that the people of Israel (not just individual Israelites) considered them to give expression to God's action among them and so to their faith. Disciples of Jesus continued to see them in this way in so far as these sacred writings reached their fulfilment in Jesus. As the Second Vatican Council states, we can be confident that these texts express 'without error *that truth which God willed to be put down in the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation*' (*Dei Verbum*, 11). Before all else the Bible is a truthful statement of God's faithful love, expressed of course in the limited, imperfect, and historically conditioned way in which human authors necessarily speak and write of such matters. The community considers these texts foundational, and continues to experience God's inspiration through them. If we are to be open to the movements of God's Spirit as we read them, if we are to read these texts in the spirit in which they were written and preserved, and be guided in our response to God's will in the changing circumstances of our lives, we must do all we can to understand what the texts aimed to say and why they were preserved and handed down to us.

While doing all we can to read the texts of the Older Testament within their own context, it remains important that the texts be read from within the faith community to which they belong. For Christians, this means to read the texts in the light of Jesus, the one in whom God's word was made flesh, and in our reading to be guided by his Spirit. Yet even here, this is not enough. Even with the help of Jesus walking with them the disciples on the road to Emmaus did not understand the meaning of the scriptures till they encountered Jesus 'in the breaking of bread' (Luke 24:35). It is at the Eucharist, when Jesus' disciples assemble, that the texts have their proper place, just as they were read when the people of Israel assembled in the temple or the synagogue to remember and to celebrate their faith.

Those who claim that the sacred scriptures are inspired are not claiming that they are free from error in areas that are not central to the witness that they give of God's action in the history of Israel and of how the people ought to respond. It is essential also to recognise that even in this their central thrust, they are human documents and, as we shall hope to show, they are not free from mistaken assumptions that were part of their time and their culture. However, with all these necessary limitations, they continue to inspire, for in their precise beauty they reveal God. To say that these texts are inspired is to say that God was guiding his people, and that this guidance includes a special providence in guiding the writings in which their history is expressed. In much the same way Christians trust that the Spirit of Jesus is with us guiding us to the fullness of truth (see John 16:13; Matthew 28:20). The authority of scripture lies in the power these texts have to transform people's lives.

The seventh century BC

The seventh century in Judah began with the devastation of Judah by the Assyrian army under Sennacherib (701), and ended with the siege and capture of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army under Nebuchadrezzar (598).

Though Judah was devastated in 701, Jerusalem itself survived intact. The authors of the Deuteronomic History give the following account (which is consistent with the account in the Assyrian annals):

King Sennacherib of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them. King Hezekiah of Judah sent to the king of Assyria at Lachish, saying, "I have done wrong; withdraw from me; whatever you impose on me I will bear." The king of Assyria demanded of King Hezekiah of Judah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold. Hezekiah gave him all the silver that was found in the house of YHWH and in the treasuries of the king's house. At that time Hezekiah stripped the gold from the doors of the temple of YHWH, and from the doorposts that King Hezekiah of Judah had overlaid and gave it to the king of Assyria.

– 2Kings 18:13-16

Hezekiah died in 699. It was during his reign that refugees from the north swelled the city. Jerusalem had to expand to the western hill. He strengthened the fortifications and built an underground tunnel to bring water into the city from the Gihon spring, which was outside the city walls in the Kidron Valley. The oracles of Amos and Hosea found their way to Judah, and we should imagine scribes working to preserve their oracles as well as those of Isaiah and Micah. The members of the Deuteronomic School would have supported Hezekiah's desire for reform. They are fulsome in their praise of his reign:

Hezekiah did what was right in the sight of the YHWH just as his ancestor David had done. He removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole. He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it; it was called Nehushtan. He trusted in YHWH the God of Israel; so that there was no one like him among all the kings of Judah after him, or among those who were before him. For he held fast to YHWH; he did not depart from following him but kept the commandments that YHWH commanded Moses. YHWH was with him; wherever he went, he prospered. He rebelled against the king of Assyria and would not serve him.

– 2Kings 18:3-7

Hezekiah's son, Manasseh, came to the throne as a boy of 12 in 698 and reigned till 643. He had no choice but to submit to being a vassal of the Assyrian king. There would have been those in Judah, probably including priests from the smaller sanctuaries, who blamed Hezekiah for the way things turned out, and many welcomed Manasseh's long reign. Things fell apart religiously, but because he was a loyal vassal of the powerful Assyrian king there was peace in Judah and growing economic prosperity.

During Manasseh's reign Egypt was conquered by Assyria. A puppet regime was created (the 25th Saite Dynasty). However, by the middle of the seventh century, Assyria's dominance in the region was beginning to wane. When Babylon revolted in 652, it took the Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal four years to assert his authority.

The historical context

Since Manasseh's reign took up nearly half the seventh century it is worth giving the damning appraisal composed by the authors of the Deuteronomic History:

Manasseh did what was evil in the sight of YHWH, following the abominable practices of the nations that YHWH drove out before the people of Israel. For he rebuilt the high places that his father Hezekiah had destroyed; he erected altars for Baal, made a sacred pole, as King Ahab of Israel had done, worshipped all the host of heaven, and served them. He built altars in the house of YHWH, of which YHWH had said, "In Jerusalem I will put my name." He built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of YHWH. He made his son pass through fire; he practised soothsaying and augury, and dealt with mediums and with wizards. He did much evil in the sight of YHWH, provoking him to anger. The carved image of Asherah that he had made he set in the house of which YHWH said to David and to his son Solomon, "In this house, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my name forever; I will not cause the feet of Israel to wander any more out of the land that I gave to their ancestors, if only they will be careful to do according to all that I have commanded them, and according to all the law that my servant Moses commanded them." But they did not listen; Manasseh misled them to do more evil than the nations had done that YHWH destroyed before the people of Israel.

YHWH said by his servants the prophets, "Because King Manasseh of Judah has committed these abominations, has done things more wicked than all that the Amorites did, who were before him, and has caused Judah also to sin with his idols; therefore thus says YHWH, the God of Israel, I am bringing upon Jerusalem and Judah such evil that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle. I will stretch over Jerusalem the measuring line for Samaria, and the plummet for the house of Ahab; I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down. I will cast off the remnant of my heritage, and give them into the hand of their enemies; they shall become a prey and a spoil to all their enemies, because they have done what is evil in my sight and have provoked me to anger, since the day their ancestors came out of Egypt, even to this day."

Moreover Manasseh shed very much innocent blood, until he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another, besides the sin that he caused Judah to sin so that they did what was evil in the sight of YHWH.

– 2Kings 21:5-16

In 640 Manasseh's son, Amon, was assassinated. His eight-year old son, Josiah, inherited the throne. We read in the Second Book of Chronicles 34:3

In the eighth year of Josiah's reign [632], while he was still a boy, he began to seek the God of his ancestor David, and in the twelfth year [628] he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of the high places, the sacred poles, and the carved and the cast images.

Josiah's twelfth year was the year of the death of Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria. Josiah seized the opportunity to throw off the vassalage that had kept Judah subject to Assyria for a century. He was determined to win back for Judah the kingdom reigned over by David, and he brooked no opposition in his determination to reform the religious life of his people. This was the opportunity that the Deuteronomic School had been waiting for. At last they had a champion ready to carry out with rigorous efficiency the reform for which they had been preparing. In 622 on Josiah's orders, the temple was being cleared of Assyrian altars with a view to being reconsecrated, when a document, called 'the book of the law', was discovered (1Kings 22:3; 2Chronicles 34:8).

We are told that when Josiah heard ‘the words of the book of the law’ he made a covenant before YHWH, to follow YHWH, keeping his commandments, his decrees, and his statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. All the people joined in the covenant.

– 2Kings 23:3

According to the account in the Book of Kings, the document expressed YHWH’s anger against his people and threatened punishment for just the kind of behaviour that had brought about the collapse of Israel and that had flourished in Judah under Josiah’s grandfather, Manasseh. This discovery reinforced Josiah’s determination to purify Judah and the reconquered territories of all signs of cult to any other deity but YHWH. Josiah insisted that all cult had to take place in the Jerusalem Temple, and nowhere else. This centralising of the cult was the single most influential change brought about by Josiah’s reform. It is backed up again and again in Deuteronomy, and accounts for many changes that dramatically affected the way worship was carried out in Judah. Things would never be the same again. Did this document contain the blueprint of the reform that the Deuteronomists had been sedulously preparing? There is not enough evidence to draw a certain conclusion, but what is certain is the close parallel between the reforms that Josiah put in place and the material that we read in Deuteronomy.

The four seventh century prophets were active in the last quarter of the century. The first of them, Zephaniah, was inspired to support Josiah’s efforts at reform (see Marvin A. Sweeney, *Augsburg Fortress* 2003 page 17). Josiah cleared Judah and the reconquered territories of cult sites, and expanded the borders in every direction. This was possible because Egypt was still not strong, and Assyria was fighting a losing battle with Babylon and with the Medes. In 614 Ashur was sacked by the Medes. Two years later it was Nineveh’s turn. The oracle of Nahum is spoken against Nineveh. In relation to the dating of Nahum’s oracle, the Anchor Bible writes:

Two possibilities have been suggested. The first dates the book to ca. 625 B.C., when Nabopolassar emerged as the leader of an aggressive Babylonia, a development which must have given heart to those peoples who hated the oppressing Assyrians. The second possible date is shortly before 612 B.C., just as the Assyrian empire was entering its death throes, since in 614 B.C. the Medes (under Cyaxares) had already taken Assur and would soon take Nineveh.

In 609 the Assyrian army suffered a crushing defeat at Haran. Necho, Pharaoh of Egypt, was heading north to assist Assyria, but was delayed by Josiah in the plain of Megiddo. Josiah, the young king (he was only thirty-nine) who carried with him the ideals of the Deuteronomic School was killed. Summarising Josiah’s reign, the historians of the Deuteronomic School wrote:

Before him there was no king like him, who turned to YHWH with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him.

– 2Kings 23:25

The king-makers of Judah bypassed Josiah’s eldest son, Eliakim, and chose as king his younger brother, Shallum, who took the throne name Jehoahaz (see Jeremiah 22:11; 1Chronicles 3:15). They hoped he would continue the policies of his father, Josiah.

The historical context

However, Necho deposed him in favour of Eliakim, who was given the throne name, Jehoiakim. This began the unravelling of the independence that Josiah had achieved. Most of Jeremiah's oracles were proclaimed during the declining years of Judah, which corresponded to the years of Jehoiakim's reign (608-598), and that of Zedekiah (597-587).

In 605 the Babylonian army defeated the combined forces of Assyria and Egypt in the battle of Carchemish. The oracles of Habakkuk were delivered during the years of Judah's subjugation to Babylon, some time after 605. He seems to have continued through to about 590.

In 598 Nebuchadrezzar attacked Judah and besieged Jerusalem. Jehoiakim died during the siege. He was succeeded briefly by his eighteen year old son, Jeconiah (Coniah), who took the throne name Jehoiachin. He reigned for the first three months of 597BC. He decided to surrender, and the siege was lifted. He was taken into exile in Babylon, along with all the leading citizens. Nebuchadrezzar replaced him with another of Josiah's sons, Mattaniah, Jehoiachin's uncle, who was given the throne name Zedekiah. Jeremiah lived through these tumultuous years. He witnessed the siege and capture of Jerusalem and the exile of Jehoiachin.

Jeremiah stayed on in Jerusalem and continued to be critical of the policies (and lack of religious fidelity) of Zedekiah. Again and again Zedekiah was tempted to seek alliance with Egypt and revolt against Babylon. Jeremiah spoke out in YHWH's name against such a misguided policy. When Zedekiah finally allied himself with Egypt, Nebuchadrezzar decided to lay siege to Jerusalem. This time he was determined to raze the city to the ground. He succeeded in 586BC. Zedekiah was taken into exile along with another wave of exiles.

Jeremiah had the difficult task of speaking out against the policies of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, and calling the populace to repent and to reform its ways in conformity with the Torah and the covenant that YHWH had made with his people. Other self-acclaimed 'prophets' kept reassuring the people that it was impossible for Jerusalem to fall, since its security was guaranteed by YHWH. Jeremiah kept insisting that their security depended on their fidelity. No one wanted to listen to him.

Defective concepts of God

We began this Introduction by pointing out that beauty and truth are always precise, delineated, defined. In the light of what we have written about the necessarily limited views of those inspired by God to compose these texts, we should now look at some of the main limitations of understanding that pervade the literature we are about to study, both in regard to their way of conceiving God, and in their way of understanding the appropriate human response to God's revelation. I am encouraged to do this by the words of Karl Rahner:

Theology can create openings for adventures of the mind and heart, if we have but the courage to embark upon them, and both the courage and the humility to retrace our steps as soon as we become aware of having erred.

– *Inspiration in the Bible*, page 7

There are as many concepts of God as there are minds that conceive, for God cannot be observed directly, put to the test, and made subject to human comprehension and definition. Many concepts of God are clearly erroneous: the so-called 'god' who controls the world from outside; the so-called 'god' who is exalted at the expense of humanity; the so-called 'god' who upholds vested interests, who justifies the successful, who supports apartheid, patriarchy, hypocritical piety, immature dependency and infantile illusions. 'God' can be a projection of our fears: another word for fate, the stars, demons. 'God' can be a projection of our needs for self-indulgence, prestige, or power. 'God' can be a support for our insecurity, anchoring a meaningless life in submission to a power-object. We should not expect the prophets to be completely free from some of these erroneous ways of thinking. As we emphasised when we looked at inspiration, if God is going to inspire someone to communicate a truth, God is going to have to inspire a limited human being. There are no unlimited human beings to inspire! We do not have to assume that the authors of the texts we are going to study knew everything about everything, and, if we are going to appreciate the truth that they were inspired to write, we need to be aware of where their thinking was limited. Two key areas stand out.

1. A defective monotheism

Firstly, not all the material we are about to study is clear on the subject of monotheism. Genuine monotheism includes the amazing insight that the mysterious divine presence with whom we experience a profound communion is the one 'God' present and revealed in different ways in different cultures. The writings we are going to study often show the kind of profound respect for other peoples that is surely essential to genuine monotheism. But not always. Where they fall short they fall short of genuine monotheism, for if one genuinely believes that it is the one God who is at the heart of everything, and is expressed and revealed through everything, then one would not disrespect others just because they are different from 'us'. We would still have to deal with error – our own and other people's, but surely monotheism includes the insight that present in every genuine human response to the divine there is a genuine sense of the mystery of the sacred, however limited and distorted.

A God who controls everything

2. A God who controls the world

A second assumption, prevalent throughout the Older Testament, is that God controls nature and history, such that happenings that are judged to be good are seen as expressions of God's blessing, whereas happenings that are judged to be bad are seen as expressions of God's disapproval and punishment. This way of thinking permeates the texts we are studying.

The basis for this misunderstanding is their way of thinking of 'power'. In our human experience power is often abused. It is often expressed as control. When the authors think of God as 'Almighty', declaring their faith that there are no limits to God's power, they have not yet come to the insight (so clear in the life and words of Jesus) that God is love, and consequently that the power God has is the power of love. It is God's love-power that has no limits. God has chosen not to control. No wonder it was difficult for Jesus' contemporaries to see God's 'almighty power' revealed in the one who was crucified on Calvary. Paul recognised this as 'a stumbling block for the Jews'(1Corinthians 1:23).

When, as adults, we experience someone attempting to control us, we do not experience this as love. While love is demanding, and is willing to challenge and correct, it never controls. Love respects others as sacred and respects their freedom. Love does not (cannot) protect us from suffering the consequences of our misuse or abuse of freedom, for love loves; it does not control. The idea of God controlling is so embedded in our psyche that we have to be determined if we are to listen attentively to Jesus, and watch him reveal God as precisely not controlling. Jesus wept with disappointment over Jerusalem; he did not reorganize it. He could see what would happen to the city if people did not change, but he didn't punish it. Jesus pleaded with Judas; he did not take control.

The texts we are about to study are clear in presenting the compassion and fidelity of God. They are also aware of the responsibility of human beings for bringing about the suffering that we experience. However, they still portray God as the one who organised the disasters that afflicted Israel (significantly, the fall of Samaria in 721), in order to purify the people. They were convinced that God chose Assyria as his instrument in this.

In saying that God does not control the world we are not saying that God is doing nothing. God loves. This is the love of which Paul speaks: 'Love has space enough to hold and to bear everything and everyone. Love believes all things, hopes all things, and endures whatever comes. Love does not come to an end' (1Corinthians 13:7-8). We have come to see that creation is free to evolve according to the natural interaction of its energies. God does not intervene to cut across this. God is constantly acting in creation, by loving. When creation is open to God's action, beautiful, 'miraculous' things happen. This is the way God has chosen creation to be: an explosion of love, and so an explosion of being that is essentially free and not determined. We experience this. When we open ourselves to welcome God's providence, divine love bears fruit in our lives. Closing ourselves to God's gracious will is what we call sin. God respects our freedom even when our choices hurt us and hurt others. But God continues to offer healing, forgiving, creating love. Many of the texts we will be reading state this, and state it beautifully, but they are not consistent, and the way the authors understand God's relationship with the world is quite different.

We do not see God favouring the Assyrians over the northern kingdom of Israel, or the southern kingdom of Judah just because Assyria was victorious. So we do not assume that Samaria was destroyed because of human sin. However, it is clear that the authors of the prophetic scrolls we are studying thought this way. Jesus' contemporaries assumed that a person was blind because he was being punished for sin (see John 9:2). They assumed Jesus was being punished by God when they saw him being crucified. They were wrong.

We no longer assume that things happen because they are either directly willed or directly allowed by a God who controls everything. If we are looking for what God is doing we have learned to look for love. We don't – or at least we shouldn't – assume that it was God who determined that Jesus would be crucified. Jesus was crucified by people who chose to resist God's will. What God willed was that Jesus respond in love, and that is what happened, because Jesus chose to listen and to respond to grace.

The authors of the texts we are about to read understood miracles as divine intervention, rather than as examples of what happens when we human beings open ourselves to God's constant loving action in our lives and in our world. To use Jesus' image, the sun and the rain are constant and are offered to everyone. 'Miracles' are what happens when we welcome God's action and allow God's grace to bear fruit in our lives.

The understanding present in the texts we are about to read is still shared by many. Some still want God to intervene when what we should be doing is opening ourselves to love, and helping others do the same. If we were to do this, think of the 'miracles' that would happen in this world: miracles that only God's love can make possible. Jesus revealed God as love. God's love is all-powerful. We can pray, like a child, for whatever it is we desire, so long as we open ourselves to love and allow love to work its purifying and energising effect in us and in our world – so long as we conclude our prayer, as Jesus did, with the words: 'Not my will but yours be done' (Mark 14:36).

The habit of looking at reality simultaneously on two levels enabled Older Testament writers to see any disagreeable situation as being the self-inflicted results of bad human decisions, and as being at the same time evidence of divine punishment for sin. So they readily understood suffering as being a punishment by God, and repentance as a means of avoiding catastrophe. They thought of YHWH as the cause of hurt and deception when these occur, and as the ultimate cause of everything that happens.

If we understand this as eliminating or bypassing human causality we are failing to grasp the subtlety of Older Testament theology. God is not another and a dominant actor in human history. God is the transcendent one. The gift of the prophet was to see beyond the human arena to the transcendent will of YHWH, to point to the evidence of God's action in history, to stir people to listen to God's word and to heed it, in order that they might be effective instruments of God in the world and carry out faithfully the mission given to them. Their aim in speaking as they did was to direct people's attention in the actual circumstances of their life to the presence and action of God offering them life and calling them to respond in faith.

The ‘Spiritual’ (‘Fuller’) Sense of Scripture

Finally, it is important to note here what biblical scholars mean when they speak of the ‘spiritual sense’ (the ‘fuller sense’) of scripture. The Pontifical Biblical Commission in *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993, page 85) explains:

We can define the spiritual sense as understood by Christian faith, as the meaning expressed by the biblical texts when read, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, in the context of the paschal mystery of Christ and of the new life which flows from it ... While there is a distinction between the two senses, the spiritual sense can never be stripped of its connection with the literal sense. The latter remains the indispensable foundation. Otherwise, one could not speak of the ‘fulfilment’ of Scripture. Indeed, in order that there be fulfilment, a relationship of continuity and of conformity is essential. But it is also necessary that there be transition to a higher level of reality.

* * * * *

Inspired by the prophets?

After each of the prophets I will be suggesting some inspiration that we might profitably draw from these four ancient texts. In the light of what I have written on pages 16-17, I would like to draw out here one significant lesson from all four scrolls. A strong message in each of them is that natural disasters, and especially military invasion, are organised by YHWH to punish Judah for its infidelity. The punishment is not vindictive, but is in view of urging a change of heart, so that YHWH would be able to shower blessings upon his chosen people. While we would not share their assumption that a crop failure or a military defeat was intended by God as a punishment, there is still an important lesson for us. These prophets are asserting that what we do matters, and has consequences, which we cannot just wish away. God can use the suffering that comes to us from our own folly to wake us up and to motivate us to change our behaviour.

* * * * *

In the course of history the texts we are about to read have inspired people from every culture. Their meaning has also been covered over, much as wood is covered with layer upon layer of paint till we have no idea of its native beauty. People continue to use the texts to claim divine authority for their own prejudices and unexplored assumptions. The texts have purified cultures. Cultures have also accommodated the texts to support their failure to be converted by them. We cannot avoid bringing our own assumptions to the text in the questions we ask of it, and so in the answers we find. But at least we must make the effort to check what we claim as our insights by examining the meaning of the words used – the meaning then, not now – and the literary forms, and the way the editors chose to link their sources. I hope the value of this undertaking will be clear to those who choose to walk this journey with me. It has been my pleasure and privilege to be guided by the scholars who have devoted their time and talent to guiding me. I hope you enjoy the journey.