

# **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 sixth century Israel, Ezekiel, the Isaiah School, Haggai and Zechariah, 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

If we want to attempt to understand the inspired words of the prophets, it is essential that we attempt to understand the situation of the people whom they were addressing. At times the prophets looked 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. That a certain prophet’s words were treasured, copied and handed on is proof that the community recognised the importance of his words. If they failed to listen to him at the time, they wanted their children not to repeat the mistake, for they knew that their future depended on their listening to God’s word and obeying God’s will.

The prophets frequently backed up their words with threats and 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.

## Introduction

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.

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. Prior to the destruction of Jerusalem the prophets desperately tried to get their contemporaries to change their ways in the hope of avoiding the approaching calamity. In the sixth century we still hear words of warning, but the main need was for the people to hear words that assured them that all was not lost. They needed to be reminded of the fidelity of their God.

## 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.

## Introduction

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.'

### 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 sixth century BC

The sixth century in Judah began with the capture of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army under Nebuchadnezzar in 597 and the destruction of the city and temple a decade later. Both catastrophes issued in the exile of leading citizens in Babylon. In the first decade of the sixth century the prophets Jeremiah and Habakkuk were still ministering in Jerusalem. We examined their oracles in an earlier commentary devoted to seventh century prophets. This volume begins in the early years of the exile with the oracles of Ezekiel, a priest-prophet who ministered to his fellow exiles. Towards the end of the exile we have oracles from the Isaiah School.

#### Exile in Babylon (597-538)

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

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 success.

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.

## The historical context

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.

The Deuteronomistic School was working on a comprehensive 'history' to reflect on what had gone wrong and to provide a guide for future leaders. 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 first prophet of the exile period was Ezekiel. He may have been part of the Priestly School.

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.

It is in the final years of the exile that we have the prophets of the Isaiah School who gave expression to the excitement and hope that characterised the final years of the exile. These prophet-scribes saw Cyrus as the instrument raised up by YHWH, the lord of creation and the lord of history, to liberate his people. Their exile, which the Babylonians saw as proof of the superiority of their god over YHWH, is presented by the Isaiah School as a victory for YHWH who raised up the Babylonian power to purify Judah. Now YHWH, in fulfilment of earlier prophecies, was raising up another foreign power, Persia, to take his purified people back to the Promised Land.

### 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 the financial support to rebuild their temple (see Ezra 1:2-4; 6:2-5). It seems that a relatively small group of exiles went to Judah under Sheshbazzar to assess the situation. At this time Judah, much reduced in size, was a small province in the Persian satrapy that comprised the area west of the Euphrates. 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, when the temple functioned as Jerusalem's social and economic centre. This is the period of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah who were hoping for a restoration of the Davidic dynasty.

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. 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.

This dashed any hopes of a quick restoration of a Davidic king. The Persian Empire remained stable for a century, partly because there were only three kings throughout this time: Darius I (522-486), Xerxes I (486-465) and Artaxerxes I (465-424).

The record is unclear as to when Zerubbabel, the grandson of King Jeconiah, accompanied by the high priest, Jeshua, arrived in Judah from Babylon. They led a large contingent of over forty thousand exiles (see Ezra 2:64-65). As part of his determination to build up Judah as a buffer with Egypt, Darius instructed Zerubbabel to re-build the temple.

This project was encouraged by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. They, and the others who ministered to their contemporaries in Judah in the last decades of the sixth century, including the members of the Isaiah School, reflected 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 *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. If Judah was under Persian control, that 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.

The Isaiah School continued to enrich the community with their inspired insights, probably from about 515, when the temple was completed, through to the time of Ezra (458). 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 faithfully in the restored temple and faithful to the covenant made with them long ago by God.

Judah after the return from exile



## 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.

## 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.

## A God who controls everything

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.

\* \* \* \* \*

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.