

CHAPTER Sixteen

Judah in the 5th century BC

Throughout the fifth century BC Judah, was a small province of the Ebed-Nahara (across the River [west of the Euphrates]) satrapy of the Persian Empire. The accession of Darius to the Persian throne issued in a century of political stability. Darius reigned from 522-486; Xerxes I from 486-465 and Artaxerxes I from 465-424.

The key international factors that influenced Judah throughout the fifth century were the increasing power of Greece, the attempts of Babylon and Egypt to achieve independence from Persia, and Persia's response in strengthening its presence in Judah and the adjoining states. In 490BC the Athenian army repulsed the Persians at Marathon. In 480 the Greek city states defeated the Persian navy at the Battle of Salamis. Throughout the 480's the destabilizing effect of the Greco-Persian wars was felt throughout the Persian Empire, including in Judah.

Babylon became to all intents and purposes independent in 481BC. This would have had an effect on the Jews who remained behind there, and also on those living in Judah. Likewise, the defeat of the Persian army in 458BC by Egypt, backed by the Athenian navy. However this revolt was suppressed by Megabyzus, the governor of the Ebed-Nahara satrapy. The 450's was a decade of constant struggle between Persia and Egypt. This led to an increase of Persian control in Judah and neighbouring regions – something that needs to be remembered when we are reading material composed in Judah in these years.

There are two other factors that are essential if we are to understand something of the situation of Judah in the period after the exile. We noted them in Chapter Fifteen. The first is the dramatic loss of population as compared to how things were at the beginning of the sixth century, before the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem, and the exile of its leading citizens to Babylon. Furthermore, Judah was of little economic interest to Persia and remained economically stagnant through till the middle of the fifth century. The second significant factor is the change in the place of the temple in the life of Jerusalem.

We have no evidence to assist us in ascertaining when or how Zerubbabel's governorship ended. Persia may have lost confidence in him because of the local desire to reconstitute the Davidic kingship (see Haggai). The only governor in the first half of the fifth century whose name we can be confident of is Elnathan. The high priests who succeeded Joshua in the same period were Joiakim, Eliashib I, Johanan I and Eliashib II.

The prophets in 5th century Judah

A major change in thinking is obvious when we compare the writings of this and later periods with those of the pre-exilic and exilic prophets. Firstly, in the pre-exilic period when Judah was ruled by its king, the injustice that troubled the prophets came from within the state of Israel, and the prophets attacked the leaders who were able to do something about the situation. In post-exilic Judah, the major injustices were perpetrated by dominating foreign powers: Persia in the fifth century, and later Greek-Egyptian, Greek-Syrian, and Roman. What could a small community do about these injustices?

Unlike the other religions of the ancient Near East, which were bound into the circular movement of the seasons, the religion of Israel was always a ‘linear’ religion. They saw themselves as a people living in history, a history that was guided by God towards a goal determined by God. Israel saw itself as having a special role in the movement towards this goal. In this sense the religion of Israel is essentially ‘eschatological’ – heading towards a final goal. This was always the case. It became especially significant in the Judaism of the period after the exile. It is this eschatological outlook, with little reference to current history, that makes it especially hard to date the prophetic books of this period.

The prophets who were striving to keep the spirit of the people alive did not pretend to see in their circumstances the seeds of hope for a renewed Israel. They encouraged their people to look beyond history to an intervention of their God, YHWH, the Lord of nature and the Lord of history. Only such an intervention could liberate them and bring about the fulfilment of God’s promises. They kept alive the writings of the past, and gave new life to them by applying them to the new circumstances in which they found themselves. They kept pointing the people to look beyond their present experience of hopelessness and powerlessness, to a faithful God who would keep his promises and the covenant that made them God’s special and treasured people.

Their sense of mission was neutralized, as they came to feel insignificant in the vast empires that engulfed them. The prophets encouraged them to take their delight in the Law, to attempt to keep it perfectly, and to wait for God to act.

We should be looking for allusions to these local happenings and to these ideas in reading the prophetic material emerging in the early and middle 5th century.

Judah 500-458BC

The Bible provides next to no information in regard to the first half of the fifth century. The Second Book of Kings and the Second Book of Chronicles do not go beyond the sixth century. The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah pick up from the middle of the fifth century. This also makes the dating of the prophets difficult. Furthermore the prophets we are about to introduce make little or no explicit reference to the times in which they ministered. It is likely that Obadiah exercised his prophetic ministry in these decades. Zechariah 9-14 may also fit best there.

The prophet Obadiah

The prophecy of Obadiah is entirely focused on proclaiming God’s judgment against Edom. On its own this gives us no precise indication as to the historical context within which it was uttered, for in spite of the fact that the Edomites were recognised as being ethnically related to the people of Judah, their relationship, from the beginning, was one of intense rivalry. Both these dimensions find expression in the stories of Jacob and Esau (see Genesis 25, 27 and 36). The Edomites were a problem for Israel’s first king, Saul (see 1Samuel 14:47). David subdued them (see 2Samuel 8:13-14), but in the ninth century Edom regained its independence (see 2Kings 8:20), and the two nations were in conflict from that time on. The prophet Amos spoke out against Edom in the years just before the middle of the eighth century (see Amos 1:11-12).

Most scholars agree that Obadiah is writing some time after Edom sided with Babylon in bringing about the collapse of Judah and Jerusalem in 587 and the destruction of the city in 587. These tragic events led to the exile in Babylon and a huge loss of population as well as economic depression in Judah. The map of Judah after the return from exile (see page 163) shows that the Edomites occupied the land that was formerly part of southern Judah. The traditional land of Edom was further east. It was bordered on the east and south by the Arabian desert. Its western border was the Negeb of southern Judah and a mountainous area that extended down to the Gulf of Aqaba. To the north was the Zered Gorge which marked its border with Moab. The traditional land of Edom had been overrun by the Nabatean Arabs. It was this that forced the Edomites to move west into the area formerly part of southern Judah.

The skirmishes that were a constant feature of the rivalry between these two nations was one thing, quite another was the (from Judah's point of view) unforgivable way in which the Edomites cooperated with the Babylonians in bringing about the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 587. Obadiah accuses them of 'slaughter and violence' against Judah (verse 10). He blames them for not coming to Judah's aid (verse 11), for gloating over her ruin (verse 12), for looting (verse 13), and for handed over to the enemy those who had escaped (verse 14). Such sentiments could have been expressed any time after 587. A violent oracle against Edom is included in the Jeremiah scroll (49:7-22). Writing in the early years of the exile, Ezekiel, too, condemns Edom for its role in the catastrophe (see Ezekiel 25:12-14).

However, Obadiah confidently holds out hope that Judah will reclaim the land occupied when Judah was unable to protect itself (verses 17-21). This fits better some time after the return of the exiles in 538. Without claiming certainty, we join those scholars who place Obadiah some time in the first half of the fifth century.

Zechariah 9-14

There are 14 chapters in the Zechariah scroll as it has come down to us in the Bible. Scholars are unanimous in seeing chapters 9-14 as a collection of material that comes from a different period of history from the first eight chapters of the scroll. The late 6th century was the period of the ministry of the prophet Zechariah (520-518). Chapters 1-8 of the scroll that bears his name reveal the prophet Zechariah as confident that the dire situation in Jerusalem and Judah would be reversed when YHWH returned. Like Haggai, Zechariah was confident that YHWH would bring in a new order, for YHWH is 'YHWH of hosts' (Zechariah 1:3), the 'lord of the whole earth' (Zechariah 4:14). Haggai, Zechariah's contemporary, looked to Zerubbabel to restore the Davidic dynasty. Zechariah spoke more vaguely of a coming 'Branch' of the Davidic line, who would be YHWH's instrument in reconstructing the temple. They both anticipated the coming of a David-like Messiah.

Zechariah 9-14 fit best with a period some sixty or so years after Zechariah, some time in the first half of the fifth century. Some parts could be earlier and some later. The hopes expressed by Zechariah had still not been realised. Judah was still in an economically depressed and politically powerless state.

Remarkably the author(s) of the second part of the Zechariah scroll, and the other contemporary prophets, kept alive the hope that there would be a new order. They did so by keeping before the eyes of the people the oracles of earlier prophets, significantly Zechariah, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. They also endorsed the vision of the Deuteronomic School that continued its work during the first half of the fifth century. The author(s) of Zechariah 9-14 applied the inspired insights of these older prophets to the new situation in which the Jews found themselves. Significantly, they asserted that the new order promised in the past would come, but they would have to wait on God, for their only hope was in a direct divine intervention in history.

For Christians these five chapters have a special interest because of the number of times verses are quoted in the New Testament (see Zechariah 9:9; 11:12; 12:10; 13:1; 13:7; 14:21). Jesus' Jewish disciples saw him as fulfilling the dream entertained by the authors of these chapters: 'On that day a fountain shall be opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity' (Zechariah 13:1). God is watching over those he loves to protect them (9:8; 12:4).

The authors follow tradition in being critical of those who claim to speak for God, but are not sent by God (see Zechariah 11; and 13:2-6). They see the nations of the world coming to Jerusalem, and so to YHWH (14:16).

Ezra the priest, and Nehemiah the governor

The Persian government had no interest in imposing religion on the many and varied peoples in its vast empire. Its strength was in its highly developed and efficient organisation. Subject peoples could follow their own laws, but the central government wanted a record of what those laws were. Persia was also determined to ensure that the laws of a province did not interfere with trade or taxation. As part of this policy, just after the defeat of Persia by Egypt and Athens in 458BC, the Persian King, Artaxerxes I, sent from Babylon to Judah a priest, Ezra, who was also a scribe (a civil servant). He arrived in Jerusalem with a group of returning exiles (Ezra 7:7-8).

He took with him a version of the Priestly document that had been prepared in Babylon. In negotiation with Palestine traditionalists, among whom the Deuteronomists were of special importance, he facilitated a redaction that put the Priestly version in the leading interpretive position, incorporated the material on the patriarchs and the Judah version of the creation myths, and gave the last word to the Book of Deuteronomy. He was largely influential in establishing the Torah as the constitution of Judah. If Judaism was to survive it was essential that the people of Judah identified what it was about them that was special. The core of their identity was the covenant they had with YHWH and so obedience to the Torah. This was expressed in insistence on racial purity (including the rejection of mixed marriages), in strict observance of the Sabbath, in dedication to the temple and its cult, and in the celebration of special Jewish festivals.

Some time in the 450's, while Persia was battling to keep control of Egypt, it appears that there were disturbances also in Judah. The city wall was broken down and the gates burned (Nehemiah 1:3, 2:3, 2:13, 2:17); the city was laid waste (Nehemiah 2:3,17, 3:34). Not even the Temple was spared (Nehemiah 2:8, 3:34).

Nehemiah was sent from Babylon to govern the province of Judah. He may have been the first governor of Judah when it was set up as an autonomous province within the Ebed-Nahara [Trans-Euphrates] satrapy. His governorship began c. 445BC (see Nehemiah 1:1; 2:1; 5:14) and ran till c. 433BC (see Nehemiah 5:14; 13:6). He returned for a second term some time before 424BC (the end of Artaxerxes' reign; see Nehemiah 13:6-7). There is no record of when his second term ended. He was commissioned to re-construct Jerusalem, to re-populate Judah and Jerusalem and to establish the rule of law based on the injunctions of the Torah. Nehemiah aroused public opinion against harsh creditors (Nehemiah 5:1-13). He also favoured Judahites who were ex-exiles against those who had remained behind. He considered the exiles to be 'holy seed', purified in exile. The Samaritans under the governor Sanballat, appointed by Persia, consistently opposed Nehemiah, especially when he began fortifying Jerusalem.

It seems likely that the Book Ezra-Nehemiah (one book in the Hebrew Bible) received its final form in the last decades of the fourth century BC, over a century after the period of its central characters. It represents an attempt to support a sense of Jewish identity at a time when the collapse of the Persian Empire saw Judah become an even less significant part of the vast Hellenistic world. There was a real danger that the people might lose their identity. It purports to rely on the memoirs of Ezra and Nehemiah. Opinions differ on the reliability of the sources upon which the author draws. Some suspect that they are constructed by the author to help him establish his thesis. Others claim that the book does give us a reliable insight into Judah at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, in the second half of the fifth century BC.

The prophet Malachi

Malachi speaks of a 'governor' (Malachi 1:8), not a king, and there is a functioning temple (Malachi 1:6 - 2:3). The book itself makes no explicit connections with historical events, and the matter covered is of such a general nature that it could apply to any time in the post-exilic period when Judah was under Persian control.

However, the connections between the concerns of Malachi and the concerns expressed in the Book of Nehemiah, yet his apparent ignorance of Nehemiah's divorce legislation (see Nehemiah 13:23-27), suggest that Malachi may fit best in the middle of the fifth century, in the early period of Nehemiah's governorship. Four areas of connection can be named. There is the concern to provide for temple sacrifices (Malachi 1:6-14; see Nehemiah 10:32-39; 13:31). There is concern for tithes (Malachi 3:8-12; see Nehemiah 10:37-39; 13:10-14). There is the concern about appropriate marriage partners (Malachi 2:10-12; see Nehemiah 11:23-27; also Ezra 9-10). Both Malachi and Nehemiah object to the way the disadvantaged are exploited (Malachi 3:5; see Nehemiah 5:1-13). However, this having been said, the content of Malachi is such that precision in dating is not a significant factor in interpreting the text.

Malachi's focus on the temple, the cult and the priesthood is understandable when we remember that after the exile it was the temple that became the social and religious centre of community life in Judah. Prior to the exile the temple was primarily an adjunct to the king's palace, so that the public frequented the temple only on important occasions.

Malachi's passion for justice, including his concern for the widows, orphans and labourers, takes us to the core of the religion of Israel and the reason for the very existence of Judah as a people in a covenant relationship with YHWH. As one would expect from a prophet, Malachi's central focus is on the person and the presence and action of YHWH: YHWH's sovereignty and his choice of Israel. The vision of the Isaiah School in exile, the vision of Ezekiel and the expectations of Haggai and Zechariah failed to materialise. In spite of this, Malachi continues to inspire trust in God's special covenant with Israel. To enjoy the blessings YHWH wants for Judah, there had to be a change of mind and heart. The prophet felt called to encourage this.

Malachi is critical of priests who do not remain faithful to their vocation (Malachi 2:4-9; see 3:3-5). He is critical, too, of those who are not faithful to their marriage vows (Malachi 2:13-16). Though the unjust appear to prosper (Malachi 3:15), divine justice will ultimately prevail (Malachi 4:1-6). God will not forget those who revere him. They are his 'special possession' (Malachi 3:16-18; see 1:2).

In the Tanak Malachi is positioned as the final scroll of the prophets. Its final words highlight the close connection between the Prophets and the Torah:

Remember the teaching of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of YHWH comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.

– Malachi 3:22-24 (according to the Hebrew numbering).

The prophet Jonah

The Book of Jonah is included among the books of prophecy in the 'Scroll of the Twelve Prophets'. Obviously, each of these twelve books has its own special features, but the book of Jonah is very different from any of the others. The reasons for its inclusion in the scroll are not at all obvious. Perhaps it is because the author has chosen as his main character the prophet Jonah (though he is never called a 'prophet' in the text), who lived during the reign of Jeroboam II in Israel in the second quarter of the eighth century (see 2Kings 14:25), but there is no evidence that what is in the scroll has any historical connection with this otherwise unknown prophet. Other reasons could be that the main character, Jonah, is given a prophetic mission from God which he carries out (eventually), and that, as with other prophets, God and Jonah are often engaged in direct communication.

It is a marvellous story, which may well have had a long oral history before finding the written form which appears in the scroll. There is a storm scene, which has all the elements of a folk tale. There is a psalm that would fit nicely in the Psalm Scroll. There is a big fish and an extraordinary bush, both of which would fit well in a fable.

The stories about Jonah are of a kind with the legends we have about Elijah and Elisha. An anonymous genius has gathered this material, and more, and weaved it into a narrative that holds together well, and that does have significant things to say about God and about what matters in our lives. We have an intervening God who controls everything, and a prophet who thinks (at first) he can get away with not obeying. We have a prophet who is never really taken into God's confidence, and we are left with a God who cannot be fitted into our tidy theological concepts.

We are following the lead of those scholars who locate the written text in the post-exilic period and possibly in the fifth century. If the work was published in the second half of the fifth century, then it could be seen as a protest against the policies of Nehemiah who sought to have foreign wives and their children banished from Judah as a means of helping to 'purify' the nation (see Ezra 9-10; Nehemiah 9:1-5). Nehemiah would not be pleased with a satirical presentation of a rather bumbling Jewish prophet and God showing compassion for the people of foreign Nineveh. However, this is all rather speculative, and the power of the story doesn't depend on it being composed to oppose Nehemiah's policies.

Nineveh was the capital of the great empire of the Assyrians that dominated the Ancient Near East for most of the eighth and seventh centuries. From Israel's point of view it was the capital of the 'Evil Empire'. It is significant that our author locates his story there, but he has no interest in offering information of the city or its inhabitants. His interest (and this he shares with the other prophets) is focused on God. Like a lot of stories, it is meant to interest, even captivate, the reader. It is written as a story, and it is to be read (and enjoyed) as a story. Therein lies its power.

The Book of Jonah is a good counter to a narrow view of God that thinks that our enemies are God's enemies (an attitude frequently found in other prophetic scrolls). We are reminded that there is no point in trying to run away from God's word. Jonah's prayer (2:2-9) can be prayed by anyone who feels lost and bewildered.

The prophet Joel

A number of factors suggest the closing years of the fifth century or the opening years of the fourth century as a likely context for Joel's proclaiming his message. The Babylonian Exile is spoken of as being in the past (see Joel 3:1-3); the Greeks are active in the region (Joel 3:6); the temple is functioning (see Joel 3:17); the community leaders are the priests and the old men (not a governor). Joel speaks of Jerusalem as having walls (Joel 2:7, 9). These were restored under Nehemiah in the middle of the fifth century. Joel is full of allusions to earlier prophets, among whom we should note Obadiah, whose prophecy fits best sometime in the first half of the fifth century.

Joel takes the occasion of a catastrophic locust plague and a drought to urge his contemporaries to genuine repentance. He sees these as presaging the day of God's final judgment, which he declares to be imminent. Though the locust plague and drought witness to God's anger against them, Joel holds out the prospect of their avoiding God's judgment, if they, even now, repent, and turn in sorrow to their God. He assures them that the nations that oppress Judah will be judged.

If the people repent, God's judgment on Judah will inaugurate a period of prosperity like the paradise that God always intended this world to be. Since God dwells in his temple in Jerusalem, they should know that all will be well.

The key focus of Joel's prophesy is on God's judgment. We cannot escape from the fact that we are accountable for the decisions we make. What we do matters. Joel holds out the possibility of repentance (Joel 2:12-14). A change of mind, heart and behaviour will affect the judgment of God. There is also the encouraging reassurance that God is in our midst (Joel 2:17).

The Song of Songs

Roland E. Murphy O.Carm. begins his commentary on the Song of Songs (Hermeneia Series, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1990) with a quotation from Bernard of Clairvaux (Sermon 79). I would like to do the same. In reference to the Song of Songs, Bernard writes:

Who is it whom your soul loves, for whom you inquire? Has he no name?
Who are you and who is he? ...
In this marriage song it is affections, not words, that are to be considered.
Why is this, except that the holy love which is the subject of the entire song cannot be expressed by words, but only 'in deed and in truth'.
Here love speaks everywhere. If you desire to grasp these writings, you must love.
For anyone who does not love, it is useless to listen to this song of love,
for a cold heart cannot catch fire from its eloquence.

The Song of Songs makes a unique contribution to the Hebrew Bible in that it is a celebration of sexual love. The reader is left in no doubt that the yearning, the joy of discovery, the delight of consummation, are part, and a significant part, of the creation which God looks upon and sees to be 'very good' (Genesis 1:31). We are reminded of the statement in the Book of Genesis that it is as male and female that human beings are created 'in the image of God' (Genesis 27), and we hear the delight in Adam's voice when, at last, God gives him Eve as his companion (see Genesis 2:23). The Song of Songs is unique in giving the woman's perspective.

Though this delight in the erotic dimension of human sexual love is apparent in the text, commentators over the centuries, both Jewish and Christian, have passed quickly (perhaps too quickly) to see in the Song a mystical account of the love between God and his chosen People. It was read in this way by Philo (died 45AD), by Rabbi 'Aqiba (died 135AD), and by Maimonides (died 1215AD).

There are instances in the Hebrew Scriptures of God being compared to a bridegroom and Israel to a bride:

I will now allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her ...
There she shall respond as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. On that day, says YHWH, you will call me, "My husband" ...
And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy.
I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know YHWH.

– Hosea 2:14-16, 19-20

You shall be called My Delight is in Her, and your land Married; for YHWH delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

– Isaiah 62:4-5

I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to You.

– Jeremiah 31:3

‘I looked on you; you were at the age for love. I spread the edge of my cloak over you, and covered your nakedness: I pledged myself to you and entered into a covenant with you, says the Lord YHWH, and you became mine.

– Ezekiel 16:8

In Deuteronomy we hear Moses saying:

YHWH set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples.

– Deuteronomy 10:15

It was Rabbi ‘Aqiba’s interpretation of the text of the Song of Songs in this light that was persuasive in the Song of Songs being accepted as part of the Jewish Canon of inspired books. This is related also to the later practice of reading the Song during the celebration of the Passover.

Christians, too, read it as reflecting the love of Christ for his spouse, the Church. The Newer Testament is full of statements of God’s love. In relation to the theme of the Song of Songs, we think of Jesus speaking of himself as the ‘bridegroom’ (see Mark 2:19-20; also John 3:29). We think, too, of Paul’s reflection in Ephesians 5:21-32, and the nuptial banquet described in the concluding chapters of the Book of Revelation.

It was Origen’s masterly ten volume commentary on the Song of Songs (only parts of which are extant), composed between 240 and 245AD, that set the pattern for subsequent Christian reflection which focused on Christ’s love for the Church, but also on the mystical love-encounter between God and the soul. It is this that accounts for the fact that Christian interpreters over the centuries wrote more reflections on the Song of Songs than on any other text of the Older Testament. The list includes Gregory of Nyssa, Jerome, Ambrose, Theodoret of Cyr, Cyril of Alexandria, Pope Gregory I, William of St Thierry, the venerable Bede, Bernard, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross.

The long tradition of interpretation calls us to see in human love a sacrament of God’s love for us personally and for us as a community. The Song of Songs helps us avoid the danger of treating God’s love for us and our response of love in too abstract a way. We are helped to reflect on God’s yearning to love, and our profound need for divine communion. We recall the famous words of Saint Augustine: ‘You have made us for yourself, O God, and our heart is restless till we rest in you’(Confession 1.1).

There is, however, a danger that we may penetrate too quickly to the ‘spiritual’ meaning of the text, and miss what it has to say about the sacredness of sexual love. Granted the perhaps inevitable anxieties that surround human sexuality, we need the Song of Songs to remind us that our sexual yearning is a profound expression of our yearning for divine communion, and our experience of sexual intimacy is a sacrament of this communion. Of course our sexual drive when it is not motivated by love, and when it lacks respect for ourselves or for others, can, like every other dimension of human experience, be destructive. The power of the Song of Songs is that it reminds us that while we should fear our ability to distort our erotic energy, we should embrace our sexuality and that of others, for it is, indeed, a sacrament of divine encounter. As John Donne writes in his poem *The Ecstasy*: ‘love’s mysteries in souls do grow, but yet the body is his book’. The body, indeed sexual love, is, indeed, ‘very good’.

Along with the Book of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes (and, in the Greek Septuagint, the Book of Wisdom), the Song of Songs is linked with the name of Solomon (see 1:1, 5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11, 12). While the Song does not explicitly offer moral teaching, the fact that it is linked with Solomon indicates a link with authoritative Wisdom literature. We should expect, therefore, to find insights into a wise way of giving expression to our sexual energies.

Scholars draw comparisons with an ancient Canaanite story of Ishtar, who makes love to the sun-god Tammuz, and so awakens nature to the renewal of Spring.

The Aramaisms in the Hebrew text and the presence of Persian loan words (e.g., ‘*ap-piryôn*’ (‘palanquin’, 3:9) and ‘*pardēs*’ (‘orchard/paradise’, 4:13) point to the Song being a post-exilic composition, though the understanding of the content is not dependent on establishing a precise date.

The Book of Job

The author of this literary masterpiece of the ancient world was not the first to struggle to find some meaning in human suffering. There are texts from Egypt, Mesopotamia (both Sumerian and Akkadian) and Syria (Ugarit) going back to the second millennium BC that witness to the desire to explore this basic human question. The standard ‘wisdom’ was that suffering was caused by the gods, and there was little hope of us poor human beings finding out why the gods would will things this way. Since the gods have the power, the best we can do is to pray that a god might look favourably upon us and put an end to our suffering.

Israel was committed to the belief that there was only one God who decided what would happen in their lives, and that is YHWH, the God who had entered into a special covenant with them. This simplified things considerably, for they did not (in theory) have to worry about pleading for the help of all the other gods that their neighbours were concerned to placate. The people of Israel shared the assumption, prevalent in the Ancient Near East, that prosperity was a proof of divine favour, and misfortune was a proof of divine disfavour. If they suffered as a people, or if one of the community endured suffering, they, like their neighbours, concluded that it must be God’s will. Because they worked on the basic premise that YHWH is just, the only way they could make sense of suffering was to see it as a punishment for sin.

The only meaningful response to suffering was to repent of sin and cry out to God for relief. Psalm 1 assures us that those who obey God's will 'prosper in all they do' (compare Jeremiah 17:5-8). The obvious conclusion is that those who were seen to be prospering must be good people, while those not prospering must be bad. Psalm 37 declares:

YHWH knows the days of the blameless, and their heritage will abide forever;
they are not put to shame in evil times, in the days of famine they have abundance.
But the wicked perish, and the enemies of YHWH are like the glory of the pastures;
they vanish – like smoke they vanish away ...
I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken
or their children begging bread.

– Psalm 37:18-20, 25

That people who witnessed the suffering of the innocent and the prosperity of those who acted contrary to the covenant would question this standard 'wisdom' should not surprise us. Psalm 73 explores the issue, as does Qohelet in Ecclesiastes, but nowhere is the question explored more passionately and more thoroughly than in the Book of Job.

If we wish to benefit from Job's insights we must be aware of two basic assumptions that he shared with his contemporaries. He questioned the suffering of the innocent, but he did not question that it is God who determines everything that happens in our lives. Nor did he question the idea that physical death is the end of life.

The Book opens (chapters 1-2) and closes (42:7-17) with a prose narrative. The author of the poetry (3:1 - 42:6) seems to have fitted his reflections into a traditional story of a man who, having come on hard times, places his trust in God, who intervenes to bring him relief and reward him for his trust. According to Marvin H. Pope in his commentary on Job in the Anchor Bible Series (Doubleday, 1965, 1973, page xxiv) this is the opinion of most critics. There are differences between the prose narrative and the poetic drama in the way God is named and portrayed as well as in the way Job is portrayed. Chapters 32-37 are a later insertion. Other sections, notably chapters 21-27 show signs of being unfinished. The Book of Job is a work in progress, and part of its attraction is that it does not come up with tidy, pat answers to what is clearly a profound dilemma.

What is clear is that the poet is not satisfied with the traditional, simplistic, doctrine of retribution. He faces the terrible, and to him, senseless, suffering that inflicts the human race, and he argues successfully against those who try to defend it by repeating the traditional 'wisdom'. In the process of his exploration, undertaken with considerable passion, he unveils a God who is mysterious, who arouses strong feelings of rebellion, but finally submission. One thing that emerges clearly from his struggle is that man is not the measure of everything. We must not close in on ourselves. Perhaps his greatest contribution to the human search is to get us to look honestly at our experience and not be satisfied with unyielding dogma. He also encourages us to look outside ourselves at the world, and to see nature, not as a proof of order and predictability, but as filled with the wonder of its Creator. This does not answer our quest for meaning when we suffer, but it might stop us being self-absorbed and imploding into despair.

There is no consensus on a date for the composition. Some argue from the Aramaisms in the language, and the connections with other Biblical texts, including, perhaps, the exilic writings of the Isaiah School (Isaiah 40-55) to a date some time in the fifth century BC. The arguments are not conclusive. In any case the timing of the composition is not of prime importance, since the poetry explores a question that belongs to every age and is as relevant today as it was whenever it was composed.

Job comes to realise, like the temple singers responsible for that part of the Isaiah scroll that was composed on the return to Judah from exile in Babylon, that God never left him in his suffering: 'In all their afflictions, he too was afflicted' (Isaiah 63:9). The psalmist, too, has YHWH declare: 'I will be with them in their trouble' (Psalm 91:15).

If Job was composed after the return from exile, its author may be reflecting on the struggle of his people who were plunged into the terrible suffering of the devastation of their country and exile. This left them scarred, but, against all the odds, and in a way that they could think of only as miraculous, they were back in the Promised Land – 'the land that I swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give to them and to their descendants after them' (Deuteronomy 1:8). The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – the God of Israel – had proved faithful to them. The faith that the author of Job has in God is not a simple one, nor is it a faith that avoids the difficult questions. It is all the more profound for that.

The Book of Ruth

The Book of Ruth is acknowledged as one of the finest stories in the Hebrew Scriptures. Like the books of the Torah and the early prophetic writings of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings (books which we sometimes speak of as 'history', but which are included in the Hebrew Bible among the prophetic scrolls), the Book of Ruth uses story to communicate what its author wanted to say about God and about how we should live so as to be open to God's blessing (On story see Chapter Seven).

The author of this lovely story has succeeded in offering a realistic portrait of life in Judah in the period just before the emergence of the monarchy. The economy is a simple agricultural one which involved the need to emigrate when the seasonal rains failed. The reader is invited to picture the threshing floor, the obligations to care for a widowed relative, and the simple government exercised by the elders gathered in the square at the city gate.

Ruth is a story of divine providence. Though we witness blessings, invocations and lamentation – all addressed to God – God's presence and intervention is witnessed in and through the presence and intervention of human beings (notably Boaz) who are living the covenant that is at the core of the life of Israel. This is something fundamental also to Christianity, for we hear Jesus saying: 'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another' (John 13:34). Our covenant of love with God is expressed in our covenant of love with each other.

A feature of this story is the fact that the initiative comes from a widow from Judah, Naomi, and her widowed Moabite daughter-in-law, Ruth. The story concludes with the birth of Obed who is declared to be the grandfather of King David (Ruth 4:17).

This may be based on an old tradition. The First Book of Samuel recounts that at the time when King Saul was pursuing David, David placed his parents in the protective care of the king of Moab (see 1Samuel 22:3). This is more plausible if David's grandfather's mother was from Moab.

There is no consensus about the dating of the written scroll. The story itself, in one form or another, could well be quite ancient, but we have no way of ascertaining which, if any, of the elements of the story had a pre-history in the oral tradition, or how long any such elements had been circulating. What is clear is that the story as we have it in the written text is beautifully crafted as a story. As we examine the text, we see elements that make it work so well. The story-teller can be heard weaving his magic.

One suggested context for the committing of the story to writing is the middle of the fifth century BC, the period of the governor, Nehemiah, and the priest-scribe, Ezra. It is likely that this was the period when the Book of Jonah was also published. It was a period of special pressure to rid Judah of elements of foreign culture that were considered to be corrupting the purity of the people as God's covenant people (see Ezra 9-10; Nehemiah 13:23-29). Jonah tells the story of a repentant Nineveh and of God's care for the city that, traditionally, was seen as the capital of the evil empire. At a time when Jewish men were pressured to get rid of their foreign wives, Ruth tells the story of a Moabite woman who was the great-grandmother of no one less than King David.

Many English Bibles place the Book of Ruth after the Book of Judges and before the Books of Samuel. In this they are following the tradition of the Greek Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate, which place it there among the early prophetic writings. The New Jewish Publication Society's English translation (1985), in keeping with ancient Jewish tradition, places Ruth among the Writings along with the other Festival Scrolls. It is read during the festival of 'Weeks' ('Pentecost') which traditionally celebrates the cereal harvest (May-June in the modern calendar).