

15. Judah in the fifth century



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 Greeks, led by Sparta, were unable to hold back the Persians at Thermopylae, but 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.

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: 75,000 down to 35,000. 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.

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.

Zechariah 9-14

Zechariah 9-14 fit best with a period some sixty or so years after Zechariah 1-8, 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.

Significantly, the authors of this section of the Zechariah scroll 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).

Matthew 21:5

Having described Jesus' entry into Jerusalem,
Matthew refers to the Zechariah scroll

“Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt,
the foal of a donkey”(Zechariah 9:9).

Matthew 26:31


On their way from the supper room to Gethsemane

‘Jesus said to them, “You will all become deserters because of me
this night; for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the
sheep of the flock will be scattered’(Zechariah 13:7).

John 19:37

Having described the piercing of Jesus' side, John states:

‘Another passage of scripture says, “They will look on the one
whom they have pierced”(Zechariah 12:10).



‘I then said to them,
“If it seems right to you, give me my wages; but if not, keep them.”
So they weighed out as my wages thirty shekels of silver.
Then the LORD said to me, “Throw it into the treasury”—
this lordly price at which I was valued by them.
So I took the thirty shekels of silver and threw them into the treasury
in the house of the LORD’(Zechariah 11:12-13).

‘Then was fulfilled what had been spoken
through the prophet Jeremiah,
“And they took the thirty pieces of silver,
the price of the one on whom a price had been set,
on whom some of the people of Israel had set a price,
and they gave them for the potter’s field,
as the Lord commanded me.”(Matthew 27:9-10)

‘I will pour out a spirit of compassion and supplication on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that, when they look on the one whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn’(Zechariah 12:10).

‘Another passage of scripture says,

“They will look on the one whom they have pierced.”(John 19:37).

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).

Ezra 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. 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 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'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. Behold, 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.’(MT 3:22-24)

(See Matthew 17:10-11 and Luke 1:17)

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.

From Israel's point of view Nineveh 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.

Matthew 12:40

In response to the request from the Jewish leaders for a sign, Jesus says:

‘Just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster (Jonah 1:17), so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth’.

The Prophet Joel

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 prophecy 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).

Acts 2:17-21

At Pentecost, Peter cites the following

‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved’ (Joel 2:28-32).

Romans 10:13 (see Acts 2:21).

Paul is making the point that everyone, Jew and non-Jew are being called:

“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved”(Joel 2:32).

The Song of Songs (of Solomon)

This is the second of the Writings (after Lamentations)

‘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’(Bernard Sermon 79).

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).

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.

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).

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.