

Excerpt 2: Unit 1, chapter 4, section 5

Prophets of the Exile in Babylon and Afterwards

Ezekiel was among those deported in the first wave of exiles in 597 BC. From then till the destruction of Jerusalem ten years later, his message was very like Jeremiah's: the people were criticised for their failure to be the people of God, and the nations were attacked for their wickedness. This dominates the first 32 chapters of Ezekiel. Once Jerusalem had fallen in 587 BC, the tone of Ezekiel's message changed. Ezekiel now assured the people that God would restore them. This is the theme of chapters 33 to 39. Ezekiel was so convinced of this that he concluded his work (chapters 40 to 48) with a vision of the new Jerusalem, a city transformed by God. The temple and its cult were restored as the centre from which God's life flows out to the people. Ezekiel's vision of the temple was to have considerable importance for those who returned from exile to rebuild Jerusalem.

Ezekiel used a rich and symbolic language to convey his message. Sometimes it seems strange to us (e.g. the vision of God's throne as a chariot in chapter 1); at other times it verges on offensive, (e.g. his elaborate metaphors of Israel and Judah as prostitutes in chapters 16 and 23). His use of acted parables was also more extravagant than his predecessors (e.g. his "parabolic actions" with his hair in chapter 5). On the other hand, he could also be marvellously poetic.

More important was the message Ezekiel tried to convey. The Israelites were very aware of the temple as the focus of God's presence. Exile raised the prospect of absence not only from the city, but from God. Not at all, says Ezekiel. Among the prophetic criticisms of the nation is a clear message in the first eleven chapters that the glory of God had not been destroyed, but had gone with the people to Babylon, and continued in the form of vision and spirit. The same theme recurs in one of Ezekiel's most spectacular images, the valley of the dry bones (chapter 37:1-14).

Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. . . . I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act," says the Lord. (Ezekiel 37:11-14)

Ezekiel brought a message of hope to the people in exile: their homeland would be restored and their temple rebuilt as a place for worship of their just and holy God. In this way Ezekiel was a significant person in the formation of Judaism in the period after the exile.

We now return to the second part of the book of Isaiah. Sometimes you will see the author of this part of Isaiah referred to as Second Isaiah. Chapters 40 to the end clearly address the situation at the time of the exile and afterwards. And what a message to those in the despair of exile! Just when life seemed to be at its lowest, this poetic and prophetic voice offered one of the richest pictures of God's work and a message not only of hope, but of meaning for the people's suffering. The prophet's faith in God is absolutely fundamental to the vision of these chapters. God is frequently described as the one who delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt. What God had done once, God could do again. God would once again set the people free, because the God of Israel was the creator of the world, and out of sheer faithfulness would do for them again what had been done before. So it was good news.

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep. (Isaiah 40:9-11)

There are few more tender expressions of God's love for the people than this, and these sentiments are repeated in a number of other equally moving passages. In effect, God will bring about a new exodus that is even more marvellous than the first.

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honour me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise. (Isaiah 43:18-21)

All this culminates in four deeply moving passages in which Isaiah reflects on all that Israel has been through. These four passages are often referred to as the "Servant Songs" (Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12). Here the author goes far beyond the idea of suffering as punishment or even simply as misfortune. The suffering is itself rich in meaning for the purposes of God and is in some mysterious way redemptive and healing.

The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me. . . . And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." But I said, "I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God." And now the Lord says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, . . . "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the

earth.” (Isaiah 49:1-6)

In the fourth Servant Song Isaiah explores the redemptive possibilities of suffering.

Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. . . . For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. . . . When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the Lord shall prosper. (Isaiah 53:4-10)

Although this servant is Israel at the time of the exile, the prophet, at least in this fourth song, seems to glimpse a uniquely gifted individual able to suffer in a way that Israel never could. The first Christians (and millions after them) found here not only a profound insight into all suffering, but above all a way to understand the death of Jesus.

As if that were not enough richness from this book, there is more in chapters 56 to 66, which some scholars refer to as Third Isaiah. These chapters seem to address the period after the exiles returned home and sought to rebuild the nation. Things were clearly not going well at this point, the task being made more difficult by the profusion of voices and growing mistrust of each other. Being part of the people of God was not something that was automatic. Rather, true religious practice, true “fasting” is a total way of life. The external practices of religion are not enough.

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. (Isaiah 58:6-9)

In a glorious passage of poetry (chapters 60 to 62), Isaiah sums up the vision of what Israel and Jerusalem will become.

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. (Isaiah 60:1-3)

Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, foreigners shall till your land and dress your vines; but you shall be called priests of the Lord, you shall be named ministers of our God; you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations, and in their riches you shall glory. Because their shame was double, and dishonour was proclaimed as their lot, therefore they shall possess a double portion; everlasting joy shall be theirs. For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed. (Isaiah 61:5-9)

The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. (Isaiah 62:2-3)

We can be fairly brief about some of the other prophets from the period after the exile to Babylon. In 520 BC Haggai complained to the people that although they had been back twenty years, they had still not rebuilt the temple. The first part of Zechariah has a similar message, though couched in visionary images, a style that became important in later Jewish writings. The later chapters of Zechariah may come from a much later period, when the Greeks were a dominant nation. Here we find expressions of hope for the day of the Lord, when Israel will be gathered in and will have peace under a king like David. Malachi is also concerned with the temple. The temple had been rebuilt. Faithfulness to the covenant and its teachings is a central theme of Malachi. This is accompanied by some scathing attacks on the priests for corrupt worship practices and for misleading the people. As we shall see, Israel’s restoration after the exile could have a hard edge to it. This provides the background to the lovely story of Jonah, with its message that God can be gracious to the foreign city of Nineveh, even if that offends Jonah.

You may perhaps note that we have said nothing about the book of Daniel. The Jews do not count it among the prophetic books, and we will consider it among other writings from the period after the exile in the next session.

SIDE TRACK

In his War Requiem Benjamin Britten incorporated poems by Wilfred Owen into the Requiem Mass. Despite its sombre theme, the work ends on a note of hope as a soldier from each side in the war meet in death. “I am the enemy you killed, my friend Let us sleep now,” and the choir sings “May they rest in peace.” What art, music or poetry best interprets your desires and hopes?

