

STUDY MATERIALS: Theology of the Old Testament

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Lesson 1: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus

The Bible contains the word of God. God is the primary author who used human beings like Moses and Matthew as his instruments. So we believe that the Bible is inspired which means that it has a divine origin. The purpose of this course on the OT is to learn what is in the OT, not just the stories and the history but also the theology. So our main

goal in this course is to discover the *meaning* of each book and the main ideas that run through the whole OT such as God's love for his creation, sin and covenant.

Accordingly, we will use the synchronic approach, rather than the diachronic, that is, we will study each book and try to find the meaning of it. We will leave source criticism to further study (see "Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," *Origins*, Vol. 23, No. 29, Jan. 6, 1994).

The same document offers us a useful definition of the Bible in one sentence. It says: "The Bible is a text inspired by God which has been entrusted to the Church for the nourishment of faith and for the guidance of Christian life" (*Ibid.*, III, D, 1). Thus, God's revelation is directed both to our minds and to our wills.

The first five books of the Bible are called the "Pentateuch," which is a Greek word meaning five books. It is also called the Torah or the Book of Moses. Here we find the historical and theological foundation of all the other books of the Bible. According to tradition, Moses was the author of the first five books. So the basic material comes from Moses, but subsequent editing added some new material.

The basic outline of the Pentateuch is as follows. God creates the world and everything in it from nothing; he gives special attention to Adam and Eve who are disobedient and fall into sin (Gen. 1:1-11); in order to remedy the fall, God chooses Abraham and his descendants (Israel) as a faithful people who will be a light to all other nations (Gen. 12-50); through suffering in Egypt and deliverance from bondage, under the inspired leadership of Moses (Exodus), they learn the lesson of God's goodness and eventually become God's holy people united to him by an everlasting covenant (Exod. 19-24; Leviticus; and Numbers 1-10); then God will lead them into the Promised land (Num. 10-36); but there is a condition--they will have peace and permanent possession of the land if they are obedient to the Torah and worship only the Lord God (Deuteronomy).

The events related really happened, but the story is told from theological perspective. We are not dealing here with modern scientific history. This is "salvation history" because it has to do with God himself in his inner nature and his relations to the world and to mankind.

Briefly, what we find in the Pentateuch is: creation, sin, choice of a people (Abraham), giving a covenant (Moses), a law to be obeyed (Torah), and divine guidance through the wilderness to the Promised Land (Israel).

As believing Christians of the New Covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ, we should realize that everything in the OT refers to Christ and his Church in one way or another. As Augustine said, the NT is hidden in the Old, and the Old is made manifest in the New.

Genesis (50 chapters)

Genesis means origin or beginning. The first book of the Bible tells us how the Lord God, who is wholly transcendent and not a part of the world, created the universe and everything in it from nothing. It describes how God out of sheer goodness and love

created the first man and woman, how they rebelled or sinned against him, and how they were punished by being expelled from Paradise. Their sin has immense consequences for themselves and their children, as we see when Cain murders his brother Abel. Most of their children are drowned in the great flood, but God saves Noah and his family. One of his descendants is Abraham whom God chooses to be the father of a great family or people; God makes a covenant with Abraham and promises to make him the father of many nations. This is realized in Isaac, Jacob and his twelve sons who go down to Egypt in order to find food and protection.

In chapters 12 to 50 we find the history of the three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob--and the 12 sons of Jacob. They are important in the Bible because from them the whole house of Israel is descended. God's solemn promise to Abraham is a theme that runs through the whole Bible and all of revelation. The final fulfillment will come at the Second Coming of Christ on the Last Day.

Abraham is distinguished for his obedience to God and for his absolute faith in the promises of God to him. He was even willing to sacrifice his only son because God asked it of him (ch. 22). Divine Providence is shown in a special way in the fascinating story of Joseph who is sold into slavery by his brothers and taken down to Egypt (chs. 37-50).

Here are the key points to look for in Genesis: the absolute transcendence of God, the destructive power of sin, God's promise to Abraham, the covenant, divine Providence in history. Also one should note that Noah's ark is a symbol of the Church; Christ is the new Adam (see Rom. 5), and Mary is the new Eve.

Exodus (40 chapters)

Exodus deals with the departure of Israel, about 1290 B.C. under Moses, from Egypt on their way to the Promised Land. The two major themes of the book are that Yahweh, the God of Israel, by a series of great miracles liberated them from the slavery of Egypt, and that he made a covenant with Israel at Mt. Sinai. A covenant is a contract or agreement between two parties to do certain things that are binding on both. In the background of all this is the self-revelation that God made of himself to Moses in the experience of the burning bush (ch. 3). The name of the God of Israel is Yahweh which means, "I am who am."

Exodus takes up where Genesis left off--in Egypt. About 400 years later they are numerous but slaves of the Egyptians; they long for liberation. God chooses Moses as the one to lead his people out of Egypt into the Promised Land--the present area of Palestine. After ten plagues Pharaoh lets them go; then he has a change of heart and pursues them with his army. By the power of God Moses parts the Red Sea so that the Israelites can pass over in safety; the Egyptians pursue them but Moses commands the waves to close in on the Egyptians and they all drown in the sea. The chosen people are now safe and make their way to Mt. Sinai where Moses seals a covenant with the Lord, who gives him the Ten Commandments. These are God's terms for the covenant;

if Israel obeys them she will be blessed and protected; if she violates them, especially the First Commandment, then she will be punished severely.

The giving of the Ten Commandments and the sealing of the covenant are found in Chs. 20:22 - 23:33; this section is called the "Book of the Covenant." Chapters 25-31 give instructions on how to build the sanctuary or "Tent of Meeting" and chapters 35-40 describe the actual building of it; the two sections are very similar. In chapters 32-34 there is the account of Moses on the mountain for 40 days, the idolatry of the people of the golden calf, and Moses' destruction of it.

The idea of election or choice of certain people in salvation history is very evident in Exodus. God chose Israel as his people; he chose Moses to lead them, and his brother Aaron to help him. The ideas of promise and fulfillment are also present. The promise made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in Genesis is now being brought to fulfillment.

Liberation, covenant, and the nature of God as "HE WHO IS" stand out as the main ideas in the second book of the Pentateuch. It should be noted, however, that the liberation of Exodus is not political; it is religious. Yahweh brings his people out of Egypt to get away from the false worship of the Egyptians; he leads them out into the wilderness where they can offer him the true worship that he deserves.

Leviticus (27 chapters)

Leviticus is the main liturgical book of the OT. It gives detailed directions for divine worship as well as regulations for priests and for national and personal holiness. The overall theme of the book is summarized in the admonition from the Lord: BE HOLY BECAUSE I AM HOLY (19:2).

The last verses of Exodus describe the descent of the Glory of the Lord on the Tabernacle (Exod. 40:34-38). Man must bow down in worship when he encounters the revelation of God's glory. So it makes sense that the directives on how to worship God correctly should follow right after Exodus. The book describes the different kinds of sacrifices: holocaust, sin offering, guilt offering, peace offering.

Here we find the rules for the consecration of levitical priests (chs. 8-10); the laws of purity--what is clean and unclean (chs. 11-15); rules for the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) (ch. 16).

The Holiness Code (chs. 17-26) spells out many rules for the people to observe so that they may remain in ritual purity. "Holiness" has the meaning of otherness, distinctiveness, and separation from all that is ordinary and profane. The last chapter deals with the laws governing release from vows.

The sacrifices of animals and cereals were intended to be external signs of the inner disposition of the heart. The purpose of all these rules is to produce and maintain a holy people who have a special relationship to the all-holy Lord God. The liturgical laws of Leviticus were provisional for the people of Israel until the final revelation that God

made of himself in Christ Jesus. The Ten Commandments, however, are universal and so binding then and always on all men; the liturgical laws of Leviticus were abolished by the sacrificial death of Jesus on Calvary--the true Lamb of God.

A knowledge of Leviticus is essential for a proper understanding of the book of Hebrews in the NT where the author describes the High Priesthood of Christ in terms of the tabernacle, Holy of Holies, and blood sacrifices.

Reading Assignment

Carefully read Genesis, Exodus and Leviticus. Use an edition that has abundant notes such as *The Jerusalem Bible* or *The Catholic Study Bible* (Oxford U. Press).

Read articles on the main persons in these books: Abraham, Joseph, Moses; and articles on the key ideas: creation, sin, promise-fulfillment, covenant, Promised Land, holiness, tabernacle. A good source is John McKenzie's *Dictionary of the Bible*.

Writing Assignment

Write an essay of about 1000 words on one of these topics: creation, sin in the Bible, covenant, holiness.

Suggestion

Read a good commentary on one of the above books, such as *The International Bible Commentary* (The Liturgical Press, 1998).

Lesson 2: Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges

Numbers: (36 chapters)

Numbers works on two levels: 1) It tells the story of 38 years of wandering of the People of God from Sinai to the plains of Moab just before the invasion of Canaan under Joshua; 2) on a deeper level, it is a story of how God acted in history to guide and protect his chosen people from Sinai to the Jordan River. He was always in their midst to protect them, to teach them, to help them in their difficulties, and to punish them when they rebelled against him. The sacred author affirms that the promise of God to Abraham of a large progeny has been fulfilled. They are now on their way to the Promised Land.

Because the people refused to enter the land when the Lord told them to, he sends them out into the wilderness for 40 years. During that time the old generation dies off and a new generation arises. There is murmuring and rebellion because of the hardships in the wilderness and God wants to destroy them, but Moses prays and intercedes with the Lord for his people. Here we see the power of intercessory prayer.

The 38 years in the desert wilderness was a time of discipline and educating the people on what it means to be the People of God. After some battles and defeating the two kings, Sihon and Gog, they finally arrive at the area east of the Jordan River. They are now ready to be led by Joshua into the Promised Land of Canaan. Everything that happens to them should be understood in terms of the Sinai Covenant made between the Lord and his people.

In the NT both Jesus and the Apostles make reference to events in the book of Numbers and derive useful lessons from them, e.g. the bronze serpent (John 3:14), the rebellion of Korah and its consequences (1 Cor. 10:10), the prophecies of Balaam (2 Pet. 2:15f), and the water rushing forth from the rock at the touch of Moses (1 Cor. 10:4).

Deuteronomy: (34 chapters)

The book contains traditions that go back to Moses. The book was probably completed in the Northern Kingdom in the 8th century and brought to Jerusalem after the fall of Samaria in 721 B.C.

The theme is that Israel was chosen by the Lord God to be his people and he made a covenant with them. They must reject all foreign gods and worship the Lord at one place, namely, Jerusalem. The distinctive style of the book is oratorical, and the author uses many set phrases again and again to get his point across.

Deuteronomy is basically a series of 3 sermons given by Moses on the law and the covenant. It is a moving exhortation to keep the law. According to God's word, obedience will be rewarded and disobedience will be severely punished. A special characteristic of Deut. is the command to centralize the worship of the Lord Yahweh in Jerusalem.

Moses' first sermon gives a brief history of God's dealings with Israel (1:1 - 4:43). Then he urges the people to keep the Ten Commandments, especially the First Commandment. If they do that, they will prosper; if they do not, they will suffer disaster.

Moses' second sermon is the heart of Deut. (4:44 - 28:69). Here he proclaims the Great Commandment to love God with all one's heart (6:5), and repeats the Ten Commandments of Exod. 19. He concludes with the blessings for obedience and the curses for disobedience. Moses' third sermon repeats the main points of the first two, with special emphasis on the blessings and curses (29:1 - 30:20).

Deut. concludes with four appendices. They say that Joshua succeeded Moses as leader of the people, having been chosen by God. It also recounts the death of Moses who saw the Promised Land but was not allowed to enter it because of his previous fault.

The idea of temporal reward for keeping the Law and punishment for violating it appears often in Deut. This theme runs through the following books: Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings.

Deut. is cited explicitly in the NT. Jesus quotes the book three times in Matt. 4 in rejecting the three temptations of Satan. He also quotes Deut. 6:4 when he answers the lawyers' question about the first and greatest commandment (see Matt. 22:35-39).

Joshua: (24 chapters)

The occupation of the Promised Land probably took place between 1250 and 1200 B.C. The book seems to be a compilation of stories from the different tribes about how they occupied the land. It is part of the "Deuteronomistic History" because it illustrates the principle of reward for keeping the covenant and punishment for abandoning it. The story is about the conquest of the land in the first part (chs. 1-12) and then the distribution of the land to the twelve tribes (chs. 13-21).

After crossing the Jordan River on dry land as the result of a miracle, Joshua sends spies to reconnoiter Jericho. With the help of Rahab, the prostitute, he takes the city after the walls come tumbling down. Then he captures Ai and other cities. But he does not capture all of the cities of the Philistines because they are too well defended, so he just bypasses them. The story is presented as a series of rapid raids, but it took about 50 years to eliminate the Canaanites and to occupy the land.

Each tribe is given land. Three tribes elect to remain east of the Jordan--Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh. No land was assigned to the tribe of Levi because they were to serve the Lord and take care of the worship; the other tribes had to support them.

The conquest is viewed not as a human work but as the work of God--for the Lord said to Joshua as he had said to Moses, "I will be with you" (1:5). Joshua is not quoted in the NT, but it does provide some types of NT personalities, esp. Jesus himself and St. John the Baptist. The name "Joshua" is a variant form of "Jesus" and it means "Yahweh saves." In the broad sense of typology, Joshua's conquest of the Promised Land is a prophecy of the spiritual conquest of the world by Jesus and his Church, which is his Mystical Body.

Judges: (21 chapters)

The general theme is that fidelity to God brings blessing, while infidelity to him brings punishment and misery. A fourfold cycle is clearly spelled out in the book: sin, punishment, repentance and then deliverance.

Judges tells the story of what happened to the twelve tribes from the time of the conquest (1250 B.C.) until the advent of Saul, the first king (ca. 1040 B.C.) Samson is the most famous of the judges; other main judges are Deborah, Gideon and Jephthah. The judges were primarily warriors and military leaders.

Since there was no king during this time, there was no centralized government to hold the twelve tribes together; it was more a theocracy than a kingdom. The book leads naturally into 1 Samuel where the story of the selection of the first king, Saul, is told.

At this time, responsibility and punishment are more collective and community oriented than they are personal and individual. A basic faith in Yahweh is present, but it is imperfect. The purpose of the book is to show that the good or bad fortune of Israel depended on the obedience or disobedience of the people to God's law, especially the First Commandment. One explicit reference to Judges in the NT is found in Hebrews 11:32-34 where the author praises the faith of the judges.

Reading Assignment

Read Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua and Judges. Also, read a few dictionary articles on "Covenant"; a good source is John McKenzie's *Dictionary of the Bible*.

Writing Assignment

Write an essay of about 1000 words on Joshua, or Moses' sermons in Deuteronomy, or the Deuteronomic History (sin, punishment, repentance, deliverance).

Suggestion

Read a commentary on one of the books treated above.

Lesson 3: Ruth, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings

Ruth: (4 chapters; Ca. 10th to 8th centuries B.C.)

The book of Ruth is a story about an Israelite woman named Naomi who, with her husband and two sons, because of famine, migrated from Bethlehem to the land of Moab on the eastern side of the Jordan River. There her husband died and left her a widow with two sons; then the sons took Moabite wives, Orpah and Ruth. After ten years the two sons also die. So Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem and tells the two daughters-in-law to return to their families. Orpah does but Ruth wants to stay with Naomi, to go with her to Bethlehem and worship her God.

When they arrive, they have no way to support themselves, so Naomi sends Ruth out to glean the barley from the fields of Boaz, a relative. Boaz is attracted to Ruth and is kind to her; Naomi advises Ruth to make known to Boaz that she is available as a wife. Eventually the two are married. She gives birth to a son named Obed who becomes the father of Jesse who is the father of David. So Ruth the gentile Moabitess becomes the great-grandmother of King David.

The book makes clear that God's love and grace extend to those outside of Israel, even to the hated Moabites. Therefore a key theological notion of the book is the universal love of the Lord God for all peoples. Another idea is fidelity, since Ruth remains faithful to her mother-in-law in good times and in bad.

The book is also concerned with genealogy, since it deals with an ancestor of King David. St. Matthew mentions Ruth in the genealogy of Christ.

1 & 2 Samuel: (1 = 31 and 2 = 24 chapters; 10th century B.C.)

The theme of the two books of Samuel is the origin of the Davidic monarchy. It begins with Samuel who is both a judge and a prophet. At the direction of the Lord, Samuel anoints Saul as the first king; Saul is not faithful so he is rejected by the Lord who directs Samuel to anoint David to replace him. Saul is jealous of David and persecutes him. Saul dies in battle and then David is named king of Hebron. Most of the second book deals with the reign of David and the problems he had in government and in his family. With the death of his son Absalom, the way is open for the appointment of Solomon as David's successor; this is narrated in the next book, 1 Kings.

Yahweh is the Lord of history and is the main agent in the two books of Samuel. The basic idea is that God gave the Israelites what they wanted--a king like the kings in the tribes around them. In the time of the Judges, Yahweh was king--it was a type of theocracy. But the people were not satisfied--they wanted a king. There is a train of thought in the first book which is definitely opposed to the kingship; there is also another train of thought which is favorable to the Davidic kings.

David is the main character in both books. Theologically, the most important passage is found in 2 Sam. 7 in which God promises David that his descendants will rule forever. This prophecy is the basis of the Messianism which runs through the rest of the Bible and finds its fulfillment in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The two books contain a clear theological statement about the effects of sin on a family. For, David's sin of adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah bring upon him and his family a punishment of disorder and violence.

In the NT the narrative about the conception of Samuel (1 Sam. 1:1 - 2:11) is reflected in St. Luke's account of the annunciation to Mary. And Hannah's song of praise and thanksgiving in the sanctuary at Shiloh foreshadows Mary's Magnificat in Luke 1:46-55.

1 & 2 Kings: (1 = 22 and 2 = 25 chapters; 7th & 6th centuries B.C.)

The theme of the two books of Kings is the history of the monarchy from Solomon in 970 B.C. to the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. After the death of Solomon, the united kingdom is divided into the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Each king, both in the north and the south, is judged by the author according to whether or not he abided by the covenant of the Lord with Israel, esp. as this relates to the centralization of worship in the Temple in Jerusalem.

The two books are divided into three parts. The first eleven chapters report the death of David and Solomon's succession to the throne. The second part narrates the story of the two kingdoms from the death of Solomon in about 930 B.C. to the destruction of the Northern Kingdom by the Assyrians in 722 B. C. In this account we find two cycles of miracle stories surrounding the early great prophets, Elijah and Elisha.

The third part recounts what happened in Judah from 722 to 587 B.C. when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple. Only two kings are praised for their promotion of the worship of the true God, Hezekiah and Josiah.

The student should note that the author is writing theology primarily, though it is based on real history. His primary concern is God's activity in history and the revelation of his holy will. His main point is that the fall of Israel and the destruction of Jerusalem was the result of the chosen people's infidelity to the covenant with Yahweh.

The theological message of the two books is: 1) the catastrophe is to be explained because of the continual infidelity of the kings of Israel and Judah to both covenant and temple; 2) the word of God is infallible and always attains its end; 3) the promise made by God to David in 2 Sam. 7 that his dynasty will be eternal is a promise which must be fulfilled because God is faithful.

The prophets Elijah and Elisha combine their preaching with many miracles and in this they foreshadow Jesus who announces the Kingdom of God in power and miracles.

Reading Assignment

Read the five books covered in this lesson. Read dictionary articles on Elijah, Elisha, the Temple, and the two good kings, Hezekiah and Josiah.

Writing Assignment

Write an essay of about 1000 words on the prophet Samuel, or King David, or the Temple in Jerusalem, or the prophets Elijah and Elisha, or the good and bad aspects of the Davidic Monarchy.

Suggestion

Read some dictionary articles on Messianism in the OT.

Lesson 4: 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, Tobit

1 & 2 Chronicles: (1 = 29 and 2 = 36 chapters; 400 to 350 B.C.)

The theme of the two books of Chronicles is the Messianic promise made to David by the prophet Nathan in 2 Sam. 7. In the view of the Chronicler, God's promise to David is infallibly valid. Over a 400 year period he judges each king of Judah in the light of David and finds most of them failures because they did not promote the worship of the Lord as David did. The two that he praises are Hezekiah and Josiah in the 7th century B.C.

The author is especially interested in the centralization of the worship at the Temple in Jerusalem. The two books offer a rereading of the books of Sam. and Kings from his special theological point of view. He goes into much detail about the reigns of David and Solomon, but he idealizes them and does not mention their sins.

The first things to note is that for the Chronicler history begins with David and his covenant with the Lord Yahweh. The Lord ordered him to gather materials for the building of the Temple in Jerusalem. David did that but left the construction of the Temple to his son Solomon. So the relation between David and the Temple and the proper worship in the Temple is a key point in the theology of Chronicles.

There is a strong note of divine retribution in this theology of history. It comes to this: the few kings who promoted the true worship of Yahweh in Jerusalem were rewarded by God; those kings who failed to do that (most of them) were punished by God sooner or later. Also, the author gives prominence to the Levites as musicians and servers in the Temple. Many scholars conclude from this that the Chronicler was a member of that group.

The final two verses end on a note of hope--the restoration of the Temple at the order of the Persian Emperor, Cyrus. The books of Chronicles are not quoted in the NT, but the author's emphasis on the importance of the Temple prepare our minds for the relation between Jesus and the Temple. St. Paul speaks about the community and the body of each Christian as being a "temple of the Holy Spirit."

Ezra and Nehemiah: (Ez. = 10 and Neh. = 13 chapters; ca. 400 B.C.)

The theme of these two books is the restoration of the Jewish religion, based on the Law of Moses and the worship of Yahweh in the Temple in Jerusalem. Key elements of the restoration are the rebuilding of the Temple which was completed in 515 B.C., the

rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem under Nehemiah during the years 445 to 433 B.C., and the establishment by Ezra and Nehemiah of the Torah or the Law of Moses as the law of the land. A unifying theme which runs through the books is that Israel has been chosen by God to be a theocratic people whose hope of survival does not lie in military strength, but in fidelity to her God and to the Torah.

Ezra and Nehemiah worked together to restore Israel both religiously and politically. Ezra proclaimed the Law of Moses and Nehemiah saw to it that it was observed. The two books continue the story told in the previous historical books and, like them, the focus is primarily on God's dealings with Israel or how God acts in history.

The author is telling his contemporaries (and us) that Israel's future depends on faithful worship in the Temple in Jerusalem, the only place of legitimate sacrifice. Both Ezra and Nehemiah contributed to the establishment of Judaism. Ezra was the religious reformer and Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem and so made the city safe from hostile attacks.

There are no direct quotes in the NT of Ezra - Nehemiah, but the two men are important because they were the real creators of the Judaism of the Scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees which was the cultural milieu into which Jesus Christ was born and lived, the religious zeal of Ezra - Nehemiah persists to the present day in Orthodox Judaism.

Tobit: (14 chapters; ca. 200 B.C.)

Tobit is a pious Jew who is deported from Israel to Nineveh in Assyria after the fall of Samaria in 722 B.C. There he is persecuted for practicing the good works of a pious Jew, such as burying the dead. Blinded by accident, he accepts it with patience. At the same time, far away in Persia, Sarah a young relative is afflicted by the demon Asmodeus who causes the death of seven husbands in a row. Like Tobit, she prays that God will take her life from her. Thinking he will die soon, Tobit sends his son Tobiah to collect a debt from his kinsman, Gabael, which he intends to give to his son as his inheritance. Tobiah meets the angel Raphael, whom he thinks is his cousin Azarias, and Raphael agrees to accompany him on the journey to Rages. Tobiah catches a big fish and Raphael tells him how to use it to cure both Sarah and Tobit, his father. Tobiah falls in love with Sarah, marries her and drives out the demon; then he returns home and cures his father's blindness with the gall of the fish. Tobit sings a song of praise and thanksgiving to God and prophesies a glorious future for Jerusalem.

The book of Tobit is like one of Jesus' parables; there may be some historical basis for it but we do not know what it is. The book of Tobit is a wisdom book because it offers instruction on how to live in relation to God and to one's fellow men.

Theological points to look for in the book are: 1) God is nearer to us than we think and he is ready to assist us if we remain faithful to him; 2) love for God must be shown in virtuous deeds and not just in words; 3) God rewards filial piety; 4) we should think highly of burying the dead properly, remaining chaste before marriage, being faithful to one's wife or husband, prayer, fasting and almsgiving; 5) finally, the book offers an

advanced angelology--more developed than anything previously found in the OT. So the man Tobit exemplifies the manner of life typical of the "just" who depend on the Lord to meet all their needs.

Reading Assignment

Read the five books covered in this lesson. Also, read a biographical sketch in a dictionary of the Bible on Ezra and Nehemiah.

Writing Assignment

Write an essay of about 1000 words on the theology of the two books of Chronicles, or on Ezra, or Nehemiah, or on God's providence as manifested in the book of Tobit.

Suggestion

Read up on the role of angels in the Bible.

Lesson 5: Judith, Esther, 1 and 2 Maccabees

Judith: (16 chapters; ca. 100 B.C.)

The historical setting of the book of Judith does not square with recorded history; this is an indication of the literary form. The author is not writing history as we understand it. The book has been called a "historical romance." The situation is the following: Nebuchadnezzar, king of Assyria, decides to invade Israel. He sends his general Holofernes with an army of 120,000 soldiers and 12,000 cavalry to the West. They camp near Bethulia in Israel (there is no record of a city by that name).

The Israelites refuse to surrender so he begins the siege. When things go badly for the town, the elders want to surrender, but a young widow by the name of Judith comes forward to argue against surrender; she urges trust in God and promises to deliver the city. Judith prays before entering the camp of Holofernes; she flatters him and wins his affection because of her outstanding beauty and charm. The general invites Judith to a sumptuous banquet with him alone in his tent; he drinks too much and passes out and then she cuts off his head with his own sword. Judith and her maid take the head in a sack to Bethulia and show it to the elders. Taking courage at this, the Israelites attack the leaderless Assyrians and defeat them utterly. The story ends with a canticle of Judith; she lives in honor and dies still a widow at the age of 105.

We do not know what the historical basis of this story is, but it has great appeal because it dramatizes the confrontation between faith in the true God and the powers of this world in every age. For Holofernes intends to destroy the Temple in Jerusalem and to force the Israelites to abandon the worship of Yahweh, the true God, and to worship a mere man, Nebuchadnezzar, and the gods of the gentiles. The point in the book of Judith is that the God of Israel is the true God and he protects those who recognize and worship him.

What saves Bethulia and all Israel is the faith, prayer and obedience to the law of a young, beautiful widow, Judith (which means, in Hebrew, "Jewess"). Judith is a type of the Blessed Virgin Mary. She is a model of true Judaism, just as Mary is a model of the Church.

Esther: (16 chapters; ca. 125 B.C.)

The main theme of the book is the providence of God who watches over his chosen people and saves them from annihilation through two human agents, Queen Esther and her cousin / foster father, Mordecai. The purpose of the book seems to be to give an explanation for the Jewish feast of Purim. Secondary themes are the superiority of the wisdom of Israel over the gentiles, and also a lesson on how Jewish believers should conduct themselves when they live in a pagan, often hostile culture.

The book is named for a beautiful Jewish woman named Esther who rose from obscurity to become the Queen of Persia some time after the fall of Babylon in 538 B.C. The story begins when the king of Persia, Ahasuerus, decides to put away his queen Vashti because of her insubordination. Another queen is sought among all the beautiful maidens of the empire and the Hebrew maiden, Hadasseh, niece of Mordecai, is chosen. They give her the Persian name of Esther. Her uncle learns of a conspiracy against the life of the king and reveals it to him through Esther. But Mordecai is hated by the grand vizier or chief of state, Haman, because he will not bow down to him. So Haman, out of hatred of the Jews, gets the king to sign a decree that all Jews will be executed on a certain day. Mordecai asked Esther to appeal to the king on behalf of her people; in order to do this she had to take her life into her hands. But through prayer and fasting she wins the favor of the king, obviously helped in this by the power of God, who is not mentioned in the Hebrew account of the story. Esther made her appeal at a banquet which she prepared for the king and Haman.

When the king granted Esther's request at the banquet, she revealed to him that Haman was the enemy of the Jews. The king ordered Haman to be hanged on the scaffold he had prepared for Mordecai. The king then issues another decree giving the Jews permission to kill all their enemies. This great victory was celebrated on the feast of Purim.

There are some differences between the Hebrew short version and the Greek longer version. The name of God is not mentioned in the Hebrew text, but the underlying idea is that God's providence is working in history to preserve his chosen people. In addition

to the idea of divine providence, the book also instills the idea that prayer and fidelity to the Lord are efficacious. God will never abandon those who trust in him.

There are no direct quotes of this book in the NT.

Maccabees: (16 chapters; ca. 100 B.C.)

The theme of the book is that God was with Mattathias and his sons in their struggles to liberate Israel from foreign, Greek occupation. The purpose of 1 Maccabees is clearly to defend the legitimacy of the Hasmonean dynasty, that is, the Maccabees and their descendants who rule Israel and Jerusalem in the 2nd and 1st centuries B.C.

To understand the books of Maccabees it is necessary to know something of the political situation of the time. The action takes place between 175 and 134 B.C. in Palestine. A new Seleucid, i.e., Greek king came on the scene in 175. He was Antiochus IV Epiphanes. He began a campaign to outlaw Judaism and to persecute all practicing Jews. He even set up a pagan God on the altar of sacrifice in the Temple in Jerusalem.

A family of devout Jews, led by Mattathias and his three sons, resolved to fight a guerrilla war against the occupying Greek force. They are called the Maccabees which means "hammer." They were successful in defeating the Greeks and eventually captured Jerusalem and the Temple which they purified and rededicated to the Lord God of Israel.

The literary genre is history, but it is religious history. The dominant idea running through the story is that God is the master of history, as we have seen before in the OT. They are successful because they are faithful to the covenant and the Law of Moses. The theology is similar to that of the Deuteronomist, that is, God rewards in this life those who obey the covenant and he punishes those who violate it.

The Maccabees fought for the purity of the Temple worship and for a strict observance of the Law. In this they were the forerunners of the Scribes and Pharisees we are familiar with in the Gospels. 1 Maccabees is not quoted directly in the NT, but some of the ideas contained in the book had an influence on the Jewish culture into which Jesus was born over a century later. For, the success of the Hasmoneans in achieving liberation by the sword and violence contributed to the thinking during the time of Jesus that the promised Messiah would be a great military leader like Judas Maccabaeus. They also highlight the importance of Jerusalem and the Temple--an attitude reflected in the Gospels, especially in St. Luke.

2 Maccabees: (15 chapters; ca. 120 B.C.)

The author set out to show how the events of Jewish history from the time of Onias the high priest to the time of Judas Maccabaeus (from 180 to 160 B.C.) reveal a God who cares for the Jewish people by rewarding those who are faithful to the covenant and by punishing evildoers. He has great regard for the Temple and for fidelity to the Torah

The story begins with two letters from Jerusalem to the Jews in Alexandria, Egypt, urging them to celebrate the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem; this is the feast of Hanukkah or feast of lights. The author then says he will summarize the five volume work of Jason of Cyrene about the exploits of Judas Maccabaeus and his family.

The book has three parts: 1) the story about the miraculous conversion of Heliodorus in the Temple (ch. 3); 2) the desecration of the Temple and its rededication by Judas during the reign of Antiochus IV (chs. 4-10); 3) the final military campaigns and victories of Judas. The Temple predominates and the book emphasizes the high value of suffering and martyrdom for the faith; the motivation for this is the belief in the resurrection of the body and that God will reward his faithful people in the next life.

In the suffering of the Jewish mother and her seven sons (ch. 7) and in the suicide of the elderly Razis (ch. 14), the author says that suffering can have a positive value as a kind of divine education. Further, the suffering of the innocent leads the author to affirm his belief in the resurrection of the dead (7:9. 11. 14. 23; 14:46).

Important theological points in the book that are part of the theology of the Catholic Church are: 1) the resurrection of the body (chs. 7 & 14); 2) belief that the living can help the dead by their prayers and sacrifices (12:38-45); 3) God alone created the world by producing it from nothing (7:28); 4) the belief in intercessory prayer on the part of the saints in heaven, like the prophet Jeremiah (15:13-16).

Reading Assignment

Read the four books considered in this lesson. Look up in a dictionary of the Bible Judith, Esther, and the Maccabees.

Writing Assignment

Write an essay of about 1000 words on divine providence in Judith and Esther, or on martyrdom as found in the two books of Maccabees, or on intercessory prayer in all four books.

Suggestion

Learn by heart the names of the seven deuterocanonical books in the Catholic Bible and be able to explain to a Protestant why they are included in the Catholic Bible.

Lesson 6: Job, Psalms, Proverbs

Job: (42 chapters; 500 to 400 B.C.)

The book of Job offers the most profound treatment of the problem of evil that is to be found in world literature. The author questions the traditional view found in some Psalms and in the Deuteronomic History that the good prosper in this life and the wicked are punished. He sees that life does not always work out that way, for often the wicked prosper and the good suffer. If God is good, which he is, then how is this possible?

In the first two chapters we learn that Job, a wealthy and pious man, was deprived of his children and all his possessions, and afflicted with a serious disease, in order that a dispute between Yahweh and Satan about the sincerity of Job's virtue might be settled. There follows a long dialogue between Job and his four wise friends about whether or not Job's sufferings are the result of his sins. Job protests his innocence from beginning to end. His friends argue that he must have sinned because he is now being punished.

The climax is reached in ch. 38 when Yahweh speaks twice, Job answers and submits to God totally. The story ends happily when God blessed Job, restores him to his former state of prosperity, and increases his wealth twofold.

Job comes to the realization that human reason alone and wisdom cannot solve the riddle of evil. In his words to Job, God stresses the point that, if he cannot fathom the mysteries of the visible creation, then it should be clear that he cannot understand God's mysterious ways with man. So the book does not offer a theoretical solution to the problem of evil. Job's experience is presented not as a way to understand evil, but as a way to live with it.

As a result of his experience of God, Job is able to live with evil. The conclusion of the book of Job is that only faith in God and his goodness makes evil tolerable. From nature and revelation man can know something about God, but ultimately God and his ways with man are and remain mysterious. Faith with complete trust in God is the only way to bridge the gap between the temporal world of man and the eternal life of God.

Psalms: (150 Psalms; 1000 to 250 B.C.)

The main theme of the psalms is that the Lord God of Israel reigns supreme over the heavens and the earth and he is the Lord of history. There are two ways to live or two types of human beings: the good and the wicked, the just and the unjust.

The 150 Psalms were the hymnbook of the Jewish people. They give expression to every sentiment of the human heart from joy and adoration, to fear and despair. They fall into certain identifiable categories. The main four are: hymns of praise of the God of Israel, lamentations and pleas for deliverance, hymns of thanksgiving, and royal psalms.

The basic structure of most of the psalms is quite simple: 1) state the theme of praise or thanks or lament; 2) give the reason(s) for the invocation; 3) state what God has or has not done for the one invoking him; 4) repeat the theme with the assurance that God will respond favorably. They are poetry rather than prose and are all prayers.

The most important theological concept in the psalms is that of God's "steadfast love" which is expressed by the Hebrew word *hesed*. This idea is found in all five books of the Psalter and is often paired with "faithfulness" (Hebrew: *emet*).

The psalms are quoted in the NT more frequently than any other book of the OT. Jesus quotes them as referring to Himself (e.g., Ps. 8:2 in Matt. 21:16); the evangelists apply many psalms to Jesus, especially in reference to His royal dignity and His passion (see Pss. 2, 8, 16, 22, 69, 110, 118). The early Christian Church adopted the psalms for its own use. Some are interpreted in the NT in a Messianic sense (Pss. 2, 22, 89, 110) others were understood in an eschatological way because they sing of the Lord's reign as King over the whole world on the last day (Pss. 47; 93, 96-99).

The psalms are used in the liturgy of the Church every day--at Mass and in the Breviary. Here is a short list of psalms which are in different categories: 1) Hymns of praise: 8, 67-68, 113-114, 145-150; 2) Lamentation: 3, 5, 6-7, 42-44, 51, 79-80, 102, 109, 130, 140-143; 3) Thanksgiving: 23, 34, 67, 107, 116, 136; 4) Wisdom: 1, 14, 19:8-14, 49, 53, 73, 112, 119, 127-128; 5) Liturgical: 15, 24, 134; 6) Prophetic 50, 75, 82; 7) Historical Meditations: 78, 105-106.

There are five books of psalms, with words of praise at the conclusion of each book: Book I = 1-41; Book II = 42-72; Book III = 73-89; Book IV = 90-106; Book V = 107-150.

Proverbs: (31 chapters; completed in 5th century B.C.)

The main theme of the book of Proverbs is that the "fear of the Lord" is the beginning of wisdom. "Fear" in this context means reverence, awe and respect for the almighty God who is the creator of heaven and earth. It consists primarily in keeping God's law as revealed through Moses and in observing the law of nature.

The book begins with a nine chapter poem on the value of wisdom. It is written as instruction of a father to his son or a teacher to his pupil. The heart of the book is contained in the two collections of sayings or proverbs of Solomon (375 sayings in 10:1 to 22:16, and 128 sayings in 25:1 to 29:27). The book closes with a beautiful portrait of the ideal wife and what a treasure she is to her husband. The book of Proverbs is the Bible's compendium or summary of practical wisdom.

Proverbs are wise sayings, usually brief, which communicate knowledge about right living. Hebrew proverbs often consist of two lines of equal length. The synonymous proverb expresses the same thought in both lines; the antithetical proverb offers a contrast, such as good and evil (Ps. 1), the wise and the foolish, the virtuous and the corrupt.

All true wisdom comes ultimately from God, but it is found in the laws of nature and in the Torah or Law of Moses. Certain themes keep recurring: one should respect one's parents and teachers; keep the tongue under control and be sparing of words; do not easily trust others and be careful about your friends; avoid women of loose morals, excessive drinking of wine, and the company of fools; practice all the virtues, especially

humility, prudence, justice, temperance and obedience. Family values are stressed; both father and mother should be involved in the instruction of their children (1:8).

One of the high points of the book is the personification of wisdom found in the poems in the first nine chapters. There wisdom is described as a companion of God from the beginning--this is a personification of wisdom of God and prepares the people of God for the revelation of Jesus that he is indeed the wisdom of God in Person, the Second Person of the blessed Trinity. The book of Proverbs is quoted 14 times in the NT. It influenced the construction of the Eight Beatitudes in Matt. 5; we also find traces of it in the letter of James, 1 & 2 Peter and in the letters of St. Paul.

Reading Assignment

Read Job, Proverbs and the Psalms mentioned in this essay. Consult a commentary on the Psalms and read what it says about your favorite Psalms.

Writing Assignment

Write an essay of about 1000 words on the problem of evil in Job, or the notion of wisdom in Proverbs, or an explanation of your favorite Psalm, such as 23, "The Lord Is My Shepherd."

Suggestion

Read two or three articles on wisdom in the OT in a good dictionary of the Bible, such as *Dictionary of the Bible* by John McKenzie.

Lesson 7: Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wisdom, Sirach

Ecclesiastes: (12 chapters; Ca. 300 B.C.)

In verse 1 the author identifies himself as "Qoheleth" or "the Preacher" and says he is a "son of David" and "king in Jerusalem," that is, Solomon. This is generally understood as a literary device to attribute a new work to a well-known author such as David or Solomon.

The theme of the book is the purpose and value of human life. It is stated briefly in the opening three verses, "Vanity of vanities and all is vanity." The author stresses the emptiness of human life because death may come at any time and deprive a man of everything he has. The same fate awaits both the good man and the wicked man--death. His advice is to work hard, enjoy life in moderation by eating and drinking. The

present moment is all man has so he should enjoy it the best way he can, but never forget that it will all end in death. Man should honor God, and accept life as a gift.

Ecclesiastes presents the author's reflections on life. The structure is not clear, but he offers reflections on things that affect all men: the world, the sun, the ocean, the seasons of the year, human speech, wisdom, enjoyment of food, drink and sex; hard work, wealth, suffering, death, women.

The author tends towards pessimism, but not without a certain sense of humor. In all things he is respectful of God, but God's purpose in human life is mysterious to him. The key to understanding this practical book of the Bible is to be found in the theme that human life is empty (= vain). Why? For Qoheleth, it is empty because nothing is permanent.

The author sees earthly advantage in wisdom, but he is also troubled that, in the long run, the wise man is no better off than the fool. Why? Because they both end up in the grave and no one knows what will happen after death. Qoheleth is mildly pessimistic but at the same time he places his trust in God. His view is incomplete because he does not know about eternal life which will be clearly taught and given by Jesus Christ.

The Preacher sees that nothing in this life fully satisfies the craving of the human heart. This profound insight prepared for the revelation of Jesus Christ about the resurrection of the body and life everlasting.

The Song of Songs: (8 chapters; 5th or 4th century B.C.)

The author is unknown. In the first verse the Song is attributed to Solomon as a literary device, like Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Wisdom. But the author may have incorporated some ancient lyrics going back to the time of Solomon.

The Song of Songs is a celebration of the loyal and mutual love that leads to marriage. Human sexual love is prized in the Song as a great good, and is implicitly looked upon as a gift of God who is never mentioned explicitly in the Song. In a fuller sense, the Song is about the love of God for his people and their love for him. It is for this reason that it is included in the Bible. The Song does not follow any definite or logical plan of development. It is rather a collection of songs or poems united by a common theme of love.

The two basic and traditional ways of interpreting the Song of Songs are the literal and the allegorical. Literally, it is a love poem, full of powerful imagery and symbolism, singing the praises of sexual love between a man and a woman.

In the Christian era the Song has frequently been given an allegorical interpretation by mystics and masters of the spiritual life, such as St. Bernard of Clairvaux and St. John of the Cross, whose *Spiritual Canticle* is based on it. From this point of view, the lover and his beloved stand for God and his people, or Christ and the Church, or Christ and the individual soul.

Describing the relation between God and his people in terms of married love has a valid pedigree in the OT, for example, in Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The use of marriage as a symbol is found also the NT (Matt. 9:15; 25:1-13; John 3:29; Eph. 5:23-32; Rev. 19:7ff). In the liturgy of the Church, the Song of Songs is frequently applied to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Wisdom: (19 chapters; ca. 50 B.C.)

In this book, wisdom means fidelity to the Law of God as revealed to Israel through Moses and the other prophets. Wisdom is a gift of God. The wise man leads a righteous life in this world and for this he will be rewarded by God in the next life with immortality. The book of Wisdom is an apology for the superiority of the revealed religion of Israel over all other religions and philosophies.

The book contains three parts: 1) the first five chapters offer a meditation on immortality; 2) chs. 5-9 are an attempt to define the true wisdom of Israel which leads to immortality; 3) chs. 10-19 offer a theology of history from Adam to Moses, showing how God protected and saved those who were faithful to the Law. In the middle there is a lengthy attack on the idolatry of the pagans (chs. 13-15); the purpose here is to warn the Jews against getting involved in pagan idol worship.

The book of Wisdom is the last book written in the OT. The revelation of the immortality of the human soul is the most important point; but the book does not say anything about the resurrection of the body, an idea expressed in the books of Daniel and 2 Maccabees.

In the second part of the book, wisdom is personified and made an associate of God in the creation of the world; the same idea occurs in Proverbs and Sirach. The third part presents a meditation on the activity of God in history in the form of a theology of history.

The book of Wisdom offers a strong polemic for the faithful Jew (and Christian) against paganism and secularism. The main ideas are: 1) Immortality is the fruit of fidelity; 2) wisdom is a gift of God and he bestows it on those who pray for it; 3) the Lord alone is God and so the worship of idols is utter foolishness and stupidity; 4) the Lord God of Israel is the Master of history and protects those who are faithful to him.

Sirach (Ecclesiasticus): (51 chapters; ca. 180 B.C.)

Like the book of Proverbs, the theme of this book is the great value of "wisdom" which consists primarily in the fear of the Lord. Wisdom for Sirach is found primarily in the Law of Moses and in keeping the Ten Commandments of the Covenant.

The Prologue in ch. 1 shows that wisdom comes ultimately from God and consists in "fear of the Lord," which means awe, reverence and respect for the God of creation. Chapters 2-23 and 25-42 offer much practical advice for wise living; much of it is based on and borrowed from the book of Proverbs. But Sirach develops his ideas more at

length than does the book of Proverbs, for he offers short little essays on various practical subjects, such as how to train children, how to choose friends, how to guard one's speech and tongue, etc. Chapter 24 offer a beautiful hymn to wisdom in which wisdom is personified and made a companion of God from the beginning.

Chapters 44-50 are based on the history of the great men of Israel, from Enoch to Nehemiah. They are praised and presented as models to be imitated in the pursuit of wisdom.

The key to understanding Sirach is that the author identifies wisdom with the fear of the Lord. He further states that wisdom is to be found in the observance of the Law of Moses. As in Proverbs, personified wisdom holds an important place.

The doctrine of Sirach is traditional: there are two classes of men--the wise and the foolish, the good and the wicked. With regard to the retribution for good and evil, he is quite traditional and seems to hold that it takes place in this life. He is not clear about reward and punishment in the next life.

The book of Sirach is not quoted in the NT but many influences can be detected in the Gospels and in the letter of James, especially on such ideas as wisdom, correct living, and prayer. The author is unique in the OT by calling upon God as "my Father" (23:1; 51:10), an invocation which was used frequently by Jesus and bequeathed to us by him in the "Our Father."

For many centuries this book was called "Ecclesiasticus," that is, the book used in the Church. It was given this name because of its frequent use in the early Church in the instruction of the people.

Reading Assignment

Read the four books covered in this section. Also, read a commentary on the Song of Songs.

Writing Assignment

Write an essay of about 1000 words on wisdom in the Old Testament; or on the literal and allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs; or on the personification of wisdom in Proverbs, Wisdom and Sirach and its influence on the New Testament; or on the meaning of human life in the book of Ecclesiastes.

Lesson 8: Isaiah, Jeremiah

Isaiah: (66 chapters; between 740 and 701 B.C.)

Several themes in Isaiah stand out and should be noted: 1) There is only one God--Yahweh--the God of Israel. The idols worshiped by their surrounding neighbors are not gods at all. The special characteristic revealed to Isaiah is the holiness or transcendence of God. He often refers to God as "the Holy One of Israel." 2) God's perfections are reflected in his creation, so that the whole earth is filled with his glory. Yahweh is the sole master of history and may intervene when and as he wishes.

3) The relations between Yahweh and Israel are regulated by the Sinai Covenant made with Moses and Israel. 4) The remnant: God's holiness and justice led him to punish the sins of his people, but he would not wipe them out completely. His goal was not to destroy but to purify them. So he left a holy remnant, faithful to the Covenant, after the sinners had been destroyed. This idea of the remnant is a central teaching of Isaiah. 5) Isaiah predicts a new and glorious age which will come for Israel in the future. 6) Isaiah taught that Jerusalem enjoyed special privileges from God, because Yahweh ruled from the Temple.

The well-known four servant songs are found in 42:1-4; 49:1-7; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12. The last one is called the Song of the Suffering Servant. Many scholars think that the servant stands in a collective sense for the people of Israel, and in an individual sense for the Messiah. Some of the main themes in chs. 40-66 are the universalism of God's salvation; he is the creator of the world and directs world history, with special concern for Israel and Jerusalem. He will send a Messiah and has prepared a glorious future for those who remain faithful to him and keep his Covenant.

The prophetic ministry of Isaiah over forty years can be divided into three main periods: 1) the reign of Jotham (742-735); 2) the reign of Ahaz (735-715); and 3) the reign of Hezekiah (715-687).

Most OT scholars today hold that chapters 40-66, usually called "Second Isaiah," were written by another prophet or prophets almost 200 years after Isaiah--during the captivity in Babylon. All of the arguments for this position are taken from internal criticism. Jewish and Christian tradition up to the 19th century held for one author, Isaiah. Many books and articles are available on this question.

According to Isaiah, the proper response of man to God's holiness and his divine plan is FAITH, by which he means the acceptance of God's plan and his will and power to accomplish it. The fundamental sin for Isaiah is the refusal to put one's faith in Yahweh. And this unbelief is the source of all the vices which Isaiah saw in his society, both individual and social.

The influence of Isaiah on the New Testament is profound. After the Psalms, he is the most frequently quoted book of the OT in the NT. This is evident from the fact that 41 different passages are quoted either explicitly or implicitly in 66 different places in the NT.

The tone of Second Isaiah is not one of threat and condemnation, as we find in the first 39 chapters, but one of consolation and hope. Isaiah sees the return from Babylon as a New Creation and projects the same idea on the end time for the Day of the Lord.

Jeremiah: (52 chapters; 627 to 587 B.C.)

Jeremiah lived in a time of war, intrigue and great social turmoil. He lived to see the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, his people being carried off to exile in Babylon. The dominant theme in Jeremiah is the devastating consequences of sin. Even if God pardons sin, the sinner must still suffer the consequences of it. But God punishes the sinner in order to heal him--to bring him to repentance and a change of heart.

Jeremiah is also the prophet of the interior life. For him the true religion of the future must be primarily interior. He speaks of circumcision of the heart and of a new covenant (31:31-34) which God will write on the fleshy tablets of the heart.

The oracles or prophecies of Jeremiah concern two major points: 1) oracles about political and social situations of his time, and 2) oracles about himself and his relationship with Yahweh.

Jeremiah declares forcefully that sin brings on its own sorrow. Like other prophets, he condemns idol worship and injustice in dealings with others, especially the poor and defenseless. There is a close connection between Jeremiah's grasp of the connections: sin, suffering, repentance, forgiveness and new life, and the Deuteronomic theology we saw in the books of Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, and 1 & 2 Kings.

There is a strong emphasis on prayer and discussion with God in his prophecies. He has the boldness to question God on his dealings with man in what is called his "confessions"; they are found in 12:1-5; 15:10-21; 17:12-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-18. He never wavers in faith but he is bold in questioning God.

Jeremiah detests false prophets and offers some criteria for knowing the difference between a true and a false prophet: 1) fulfillment of prophecy, for if prophecies do not come true that is a sign they are not from God; 2) avoidance of man-made attempts to contact the spirit world, such as mediums and fortune tellers; 3) living a personal moral life; 4) acceptance by the community of the prophet.

In the NT Jeremiah is quoted seven times. In a broader sense, he prefigures Jesus in certain aspects of his life: 1) his call to prophetic celibacy (16:1-4); 2) his rejection in his native village; 3) his prophecy of the destruction of the Temple; 4) his prophecy about the destruction of Jerusalem; 5) his trial because of his preaching about the Temple. He

suffers at the hands of his own people, like the "suffering Servant" of Isaiah 53, and in this foreshadows Jesus who is the true Servant of the Lord.

Reading Assignment

Read the two prophets and pay attention to the notes. *The Jerusalem Bible* or *The Catholic Study Bible* will be helpful in this.

Writing Assignment

Write an essay of about 1000 words on one of the following themes in Isaiah: the holiness of God; the remnant; Messianism; the Servant of Yahweh; the question of Second Isaiah in chapters 40-66. If you prefer to write on Jeremiah, then write an essay on his concept of sin or the New Covenant proclaimed in chapter 31.

Suggestion

For your own information, look up all the references to these two prophets in the New Testament.

Lesson 9: Lamentation, Baruch, Ezekiel

Lamentation: (5 chapters; Ca. 587 B.C.)

The book of Lamentation offers a sustained lament over the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Babylonians in 587 B.C. It was the Lord who brought this disaster on his people because of their sins. But because of the Lord's promises to Moses and David, the psalmist is certain that, if Israel repents, confesses her guilt, and trusts in the Lord, she can count on his mercy and forgiveness. There will come a time of restoration.

Each of the five chapters is an individual psalm which is complete in itself. The first four are "acrostic," that is, each of the 22 sets of verses begins with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet, one after the other--AA, BB, CC, etc. The purpose of this acrostic device seems to be to establish some sense of divine order in the midst of suffering and social chaos.

Here is the basic movement of each psalm: 1) two speakers, the psalmist and Zion herself, lament the destruction of Jerusalem; 2) the psalmist and Zion describe the Day of the Lord that has happened; 3) an individual laments and expresses his hope for deliverance; 4) the people express a communal lament in which they survey the

desolate city; 5) the community humbly appeals to the Lord from its present pitiable state.

The five psalms express the viewpoint of someone standing in the desolate city, in the midst of the ruins of the Temple, who raises his sorrowing heart to the Lord. They recognize the prophetic truth that there is a direct connection between sin and suffering. Because Judah was not faithful to the Covenant with the Lord, she is punished with destruction. The prophets, like Jeremiah and Isaiah, had warned her again and again, but to no avail.

The Lord, however, is faithful; he is merciful and compassionate and will restore his favor to his people when they have a change of heart. So the poem is not all despair; it contains an undercurrent of hope and trust in God, which becomes explicit in the fifth chapter or psalm.

In the NT there are no direct references to Lamentations. But for centuries Christians have been in the habit of praying the psalms of Lamentation during Holy Week as a part of Matins in a solemn liturgy called "Tenebrae" (Latin = "darkness") because they were celebrated in the evening before holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday.

Baruch: (6 chapters; ca. 125 B.C.)

Most scholars today hold that Baruch is a composite of writings by three or four different authors, but it is attributed to Baruch, the secretary and companion of Jeremiah. The characteristics of the book point to a composition in the latter part of the 2nd century B.C., sometime after the Maccabean revolt.

This book helps us to understand the inner spiritual life of the Jews in the diaspora, especially in Babylon and Egypt. The book gives expression to the following beliefs: loyalty to and love for Jerusalem and the Temple; obedience to the Law of Moses and to the distant authority of Jerusalem; emphasis on prayer; hope for the future and resistance to pagan influences of idolatry.

After a brief introduction which names Baruch and locates him in Babylon, there is a lengthy prayer which contains a confession of national guilt, a plea for forgiveness, and a hope for the restoration of Israel in accordance with God's promises in the past.

The heart of the prophecy is found in the poem which praises wisdom as a unique gift which the Lord has bestowed on the people Israel (3:9 - 4:4). This is followed by a psalm (4:5 - 5:9) in which a personified Jerusalem addresses her children. She reminds them of their sins and encourages them with the hope of the messianic blessing of the future. The final section contains "Jeremiah's Letter" addressed to the exiles in Babylon. It is a fierce polemic against idol worship (6:1-72).

The purpose of Baruch is to call his people to repentance, conversion and faith. The Deuteronomic Theology appears here again.

The poem in praise of wisdom is the center of the book. This wisdom is unfathomable for man; it is not the intellectual speculation of philosophers but is actually identified with the Law of Moses as found in the Pentateuch. Israel lives on by conforming herself to the wisdom of the Law of Moses, basically the Ten Commandments.

In the final psalm (4:5 - 5:9), Jerusalem is personified and pleads with her children to put their trust in the goodness of the Lord. God is using present suffering to chasten his people, to teach them humility, so that he may bless them in his own good time. God will eventually reveal his glory and gather his people together from all corners of the world.

Ezekiel: (48 chapters; ca. 550 B.C.)

Ezekiel is profoundly aware of the majesty and transcendence of God. He emphasizes the glory of the Lord, His holiness and His utter otherness. He is preoccupied with the Temple and its liturgy. The main theme of the book is the need for inner conversion on the part of each person. Men must attain a new heart and a new spirit (18:31) in order to be acceptable to God. He goes so far as to say that God himself will bestow a new heart and a new spirit on his people (11:19; 36:26).

In the first three chapters Ezekiel describes his calling to be a prophet; in the process he offers a powerful and graphic description of God Almighty. The body of the book is divided into four parts: 1) chapters 4-24 contain prophecies of threats and reproaches directed against Jerusalem and Judah for their sins; 2) chapters 25-32 contain the oracles against the surrounding pagan nations, a feature common to the other major prophets; 3) chapters 33-39 offer comfort and a promise of a better future to the Israelites during the siege of Jerusalem; 4) chapters 40-48 describe the new community and the new Temple which will be established in the future.

Since Ezekiel was a priest, he was deeply concerned about the Temple and its worship. He is very conscious of the guilt of Israel--it is a point he keeps repeating. When he reviews the past history of Israel, he sees it as an unbroken series of infidelities (see chs. 16, 20, 23).

Ezekiel was a prophet of action, and more than the other prophets he uses symbolic gestures to get across his message, such as building a model of Jerusalem under siege, lying on his side for long periods of time, cutting off his hair and shaving his beard, joining two sticks together to make one, symbolizing the future union of Israel and Judah.

To a great extent Ezekiel was a visionary. His visions bring the reader into a new and fantastic world, such as the four living creatures of Yahweh's chariot, the dry bones in the desert that come to life, and the mighty river that flows from the new Temple to produce a fertile land like unto the Garden of Eden in Genesis 1-3.

Ezekiel repeats and develops the idea of Jeremiah (31:29-30) when he stresses the principle of individual retribution over collective: each person is responsible for his own good and evil deeds and will be rewarded by God accordingly (see chs. 18 and 33). In

the subsequent prophets this insight leads gradually to the realization that full justice and retribution will take place in the next life.

Ezekiel influenced Jesus' frequent use of the term "Son of Man" which is the most common title He uses to refer to Himself in the Gospels. Ezekiel also influenced the book of Revelation since St. John took over some of his powerful images: the four living creatures, a voice like the sound of many waters, Gog from the land of Magog, and the prophet's being carried to a high mountain.

Finally, it should be noted that what is called "apocalyptic" literature, such as it is found in prophets like Haggai, Zechariah, Joel and Malachi in the OT, and in the book of Revelation in the NT, found its beginnings in the prophecies of Ezekiel.

Reading Assignment

Read the three books covered in this lesson. Read the commentary on the first three chapters of Ezekiel in *The International Bible Commentary* (1998), pp. 1050-1058.

Writing Assignment

Write an essay of about 1000 words on one of the following topics: Hebrew acrostic poetry as found in Lamentations and Psalm 119; Ezekiel's vision of the majesty of God; apocalyptic literature in Ezekiel and in the Bible; the importance of the Temple in Ezekiel.

Lesson 10: Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos

Daniel: (48 chapters; Ca. 550 B.C.)

The book of Daniel is written as taking place during the time of the exile in Babylon, 587-537 B.C. But detailed information concerning the reign of the Greek King Antiochus IV Epiphanes (173-164) about the time of the Maccabees, indicates that the book was written about 165 B.C. The author is unknown.

Through six stories about the wisdom of Daniel and his five visions the author says that God is the master of history. He further affirms that those who trust in God and avoid all forms of idol-worship will be blessed by God; and if this blessing does not happen in this life, the faithful one will be blessed in the next life.

The first part of six chapters consists of six stories about Daniel and his, three companions, Hananiah, Meshach and Azariah who are chosen for service in the

household of the king of Babylon. Daniel interprets dreams for the king and so is given special favor. Daniel's friends refuse to worship a golden statue and are cast into a fiery furnace but are saved by a miracle (ch. 3). Daniel violates a law of praying to the God of Israel so he is cast into the lions' den but, by the power of God, he remains unharmed (ch. 6).

The second part (chs. 7-12) deals with the five visions of Daniel. This is a type of apocalyptic literature because it relates contemporary events of his time in the form of a revelation made to a great man long ago. In ch. 12 Daniel sees that after a period of trials the dead will rise, some to life and some to everlasting suffering. This is the first expression in the OT of belief in the resurrection of both the good and the wicked. Chapters 13 and 14 contain three stories about the innocent Susanna, Bel and the Dragon. Because of his wisdom, Daniel defeats evil in each case and is saved again from the lions' den; this leads Cyrus the king to admit that the God of Israel is the true God.

The book of Daniel is a book of resistance and of martyrdom. It is addressed to the youth in the time of the persecution under Antiochus IV Epiphanes in the 2nd century B.C.

The phrase "son of Man" in 7:13-14 is important for future development in the Bible. In the context it probably does not mean the Messiah; rather it seems to refer to the whole people of Israel who, by the power of God, will triumph over all their enemies. In the fuller sense of the Bible this is a prediction of the triumph of the Church which is the mystical Body of Christ.

The first clear assertion of the resurrection of the body in the OT is found in chapter 12. In the NT Daniel is quoted once by our Lord in reference to the "abomination of desolation" set up in the temple by the pagan conquerors (Matt. 24:15; Mark 13:14); this probably refers to setting up the image of the Roman god or emperor in the temple. The resurrection of the dead is described in Matt. 25:46 in terms influenced by Dan. 12:2. But the most important borrowing from Daniel is the expression "Son of Man" used frequently by Jesus to describe himself.

Hosea: (14 chapters; ca. 740 B.C.)

Hosea was a contemporary of Amos and lived in the Northern Kingdom of Israel under Jeroboam II (786-746 B.C.). He began to prophesy in the last years of Jeroboam, about 745. The theme of the book is the love and fidelity of the Lord Yahweh to his people. This love is typified in the marital situation of Hosea and his wife, Gomer. Gomer is unfaithful to her husband, so Hosea divorces her. Later he relents and takes her back, but not before disciplining her. The marital trials of Hosea are used by him as a symbol of the relationship between God and Israel. For the people in the North worshiped false gods and so violated the covenant with the Lord. They reject his love but he does not give up on them. He is about to punish them by the hands of the Assyrians and carry them off to exile, but a remnant will remain faithful and will eventually be brought back to their own land. The prophecy is also a metaphor of God's dealings with each one of us.

The second part of the prophecy, chs. 4-14, deals with Israel's crimes in detail, her infidelity, and the punishment she will receive because of it.

Gomer bears three children for Hosea and he gives them names which symbolize God's rejection of Israel because of her infidelity. The prophecy is most likely based on a true life experience of the prophet. The book ends on a note of hope and reconciliation with God after Israel has been punished for her sins and has repented. God's love is everlasting and he will never abandon his people.

Like Amos, Hosea was a prophet of doom, but he balanced his condemnation of Israel with the promise of restoration and renewal. But the key to understanding Hosea is the story of his marriage to Gomer, the separation, and finally reconciliation. Gomer's adultery and desertion of Hosea symbolize the violation of the Covenant with the Lord on the part of the people of Israel.

What God expects of Israel is "steadfast love" which involves loyalty and fidelity; he also wants them to know him in a way that includes commitment of mind and will. This is summed up in the famous quote in 6:6, "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings."

In ch. 2 the theme of discipline through suffering is developed at some length. Israel is to be brought out into the desert again, as she was after the Exodus from Egypt; this will take place in the coming exile in 721 B.C.

The marriage symbol introduced by Hosea to describe the relationship between the Lord and his people was developed by the later prophets and was used in the NT. Thus, Jesus referred to Himself as the Bridegroom (Mark 2:19-20) and performed his first miracle at a wedding feast in Cana (John 2:1-11). St. Paul describes Christian marriage as a symbol of Christ's eternal love for the Church in Eph. 5:21-33.

Joel: (4 chapters; ca. 400 B.C.)

Joel seems to have been written after Ezra-Nehemiah and before the world conquest of the Greeks in the 4th century B.C. So a probable date is about 400 B.C. Nothing is known about the author.

The dominant theme of the book is the coming of the Day of the Lord. The phrase, "The Day of the Lord" first occurs in Amos 5:18-20 and it has meaning on two levels. Its fundamental meaning is that God is the Lord of history and that he can, and will intervene in history in favor of his people Israel. In the second sense it means the end of the world when God will destroy all human pride and will punish the wicked and reward the just.

The book of Joel is divided into two parts. The first two chapters deal with a severe plague of locusts. Chapters 3 and 4 describe the messianic Day of the Lord which is understood by the prophet as the end of history, the triumph of Judah and the punishment of her enemies. Joel sees the plague of locusts as a type or figure or

foreshadowing of the eschatological or final intervention of God into human history at the end of the world.

What makes the prophecy of Joel stand out in the Bible is the graphic description of the Day of the Lord. And an outstanding aspect of the prophet's description of the new era is the pouring out of the Spirit (2:28-29). The Spirit will be given to all the members of the community, but Joel understands this only with regard to Israel. His vision is not yet broad enough to include all the nations of the world.

Like Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, Joel tends to stress the importance of the liturgy of the Temple in Jerusalem. Joel is quoted in two places in the NT. In the first Christian sermon ever given, by St. Peter in Acts 2, he quotes Joel 3:1-5 about the gift of the Spirit. A second quote occurs in Romans 10:13 where St. Paul quotes Joel 3:5 to the effect that "all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Amos: (9 chapters, 760-750 B.C.)

The prophecies of Amos were delivered during the reign of Jeroboam II (786-746 B.C.) at Bethel in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Amos was a shepherd from Tekoa in the Southern Kingdom of Judah who cared for sheep and sycamore trees. He was not a professional prophet (7:14), but received a call from God to go to the North and proclaim the word of the Lord.

In very strong and poetic language, Amos condemns external religious ceremony and practice that camouflages social corruption and is not accompanied by internal conversion of heart to the Lord. He is the OT prophet of social justice par excellence. Because of their empty worship and toleration of injustice, Amos prophesies that the Israelites in the North will be conquered and carried off into exile. That is what happened 30 years later in 721 B.C.

In the first two chapters Amos utters condemnations of the surrounding nations, and also Judea and Israel. In chapters 3-6 he strongly attacks the corruption in Israel. He warns them about the "Day of Yahweh" and the coming doom. In chapters 7-9 the prophet describes five symbolic visions (locusts, fire, plumb-line, basket of ripe fruit, sanctuary) given to him by the Lord which signal the coming destruction of Israel and Samaria for their sins. The conclusion promises a restoration of Israel from exile, so the book ends on a note of hope.

Amos is the first prophet in the OT to have a whole book named after him. He emphasizes the threatening dimension of God's word rather than the aspect of love, mercy and forgiveness. Because of their sins and their neglect of the Law of Moses, Amos saw their impending doom. God was about to punish them for sins. He introduces the concept of the "Day of Yahweh." The people of Samaria have deceived themselves into thinking that the "Day" would be a time of reward; Amos says that it will be a time of divine judgment and terror for the unjust.

All is not gloom. Amos knew that the Lord would preserve "a remnant of Joseph" that would continue the practice of justice. This remnant will be the basis of hope for the future restoration. God's action in history, therefore, is to save and not to destroy. The book ends on a note of hope.

Reading Assignment

Read the four prophets covered in this lesson. Read two articles in a biblical dictionary on prophets and the nature of prophecy in the OT.

Writing Assignment

Write an essay of about 1000 words on one of the following topics: apocalyptic literature as exemplified in Daniel and Joel; or, Hosea's use of marriage as a type of God's relations to man; or, the nature of prophecy in the OT.

Suggestion

Research the influence of Daniel, Hosea and Joel on the NT.

Lesson 11: Obediah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk

Obediah: (1 chapter; Ca. 450 B.C.)

Nothing is known about Obediah except that he composed this brief prophecy against Edom. The date is about 450 since verse 15 is quoted by Joel in 400 B.C.

The theme of the first half is the destruction of the country of Edom, south and east of Judah; the theme of the second half is the Day of the Lord and the restoration of Israel. The people of Edom were descended from Esau, the twin brother of Jacob who stole the birthright from him. There was intense rivalry between them--and this continued for generations among the descendants of the two brothers. When the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 587 B.C. they were assisted by the Edomites. The people of Judah bitterly resented that and it is reflected in this prophecy.

The short prophecy consists of two parts--the first announces God's judgment on Edom (1-15), and the second proclaims the salvation of Jerusalem (16-18). Obediah expresses a passionate appeal for vengeance against an ancient enemy who took advantage of Judah when she was down. Obediah prophesies that "on the Day of Yahweh" the Lord will overthrow Israel's oppressors and will reveal his salvation to his own people. In the final analysis, tyrants will suffer from their own tyranny, and they will

fall into the pit they have dug for others. Because God is the Lord of history, he will save his own people and bring his judgment upon the hostile nations.

Jonah: (4 chapters; ca. 450 B.C.)

The Hebrew of the book of Jonah is like the Hebrew of Ezra-Nehemiah so it was probably written in the 5th century around 450 B.C. Nothing is known about the author except his name.

The theme is God's compassionate love for all mankind, Jew and Gentile. The author tries to reassure his fellow Jews that the divine oracles against their pagan neighbors were conditional, that is, conditioned by their repentance and conversion. God does not hate any of the peoples he has made.

Jonah is unlike the other prophets, for the book does not contain oracles. It is an interesting story about a reluctant prophet who is called by God to go to Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria which had always been hostile and cruel to Israel, to preach conversion to them and faith in Yahweh, the God of Israel. Jonah does not relish the call, so he tries to flee from God by taking a ship to Tarshish, perhaps a place far away in Spain. But God pursues him with a great storm; the pagan sailors discover that Jonah is the reason for the danger, so they throw him overboard. Immediately he is swallowed by a big fish and the storm stops. After three days the fish disgorges him on the shore near Nineveh. Jonah goes to Nineveh and preaches repentance. All the people, including the king, do penance and are converted. Jonah leaves the city and climbs a hill nearby to see whether or not God will destroy the pagan city. God spares the city out of mercy and compassion.

Is the book of Jonah factual history? Or is it a parable? Opinions on this matter are divided. Until the 20th century, for about 2500 years, Jews and then Christians understood it to be an historical account. It is so much a part of western culture that virtually everyone has heard about "Jonah and the Whale." The weight of history is on the side of this interpretation. The plus side of this view is that it avoids pitfalls involved with a "symbolic" or "mythical" view of historical events related in the Bible which, in the hands of some interpreters, destroys the historical value of the Bible and makes it all "myth." The problem, though, with this interpretation is that it ignores the literary form of "parable" which is present in both the OT and the NT-- Jesus himself used it frequently in his teaching (cf. Good Samaritan, Prodigal Son, Matt. 13, etc.).

Liberal Protestant interpreters in the 20th century, and currently most Catholic biblical scholars, interpret the book of Jonah as a parable or "didactic fiction," or even as allegory. Almost all agree that it is not a historical account. This view raises difficulties with some of the words of Jesus, because he seems to quote Jonah as if it were a historical account of being three days in the belly of a big fish.

What is the meaning of the book of Jonah? The main point is this: God's love and compassion extend to all human beings, Jew and gentile. Jonah himself is an example of the particularism found among many Jews of the time. They thought God loved only

Israel and that God hated their pagan neighbors and had only punishment in store for them. So the book is a rejection of that Jewish narrowness. In this sense, the book of Jonah is a giant step forward in biblical religion, seeing that God's love and salvation are meant for all mankind but coming to them through Israel, the chosen people.

In the NT, Jesus makes reference to "the Sign of Jonah" as a type of his three days of death in the tomb before his resurrection (see Matt. 2:39 and Luke 11:30).

Micah: (7 chapters; 740 to 701 B.C.)

Micah was a contemporary of Isaiah. Some of his oracles precede the destruction of Samaria in 721 and some come after that. Like Amos, he lived in the country and rebukes the corrupt ways of city dwellers in Samaria and Jerusalem.

The book bounces back and forth from threats to promises. He threatens Israel and Judah with punishment and destruction if they do not repent of their sins of injustice. If they do repent, God will be gracious to them and promises to bless them abundantly. The prophet sees the Assyrians as the instruments in the hands of God to punish his people. But a remnant will survive to be the carriers of God's promises to his people.

Micah proclaims that the political and military disasters which threaten Israel and Judah come from the anger of the Lord which the people have aroused by their sins. Micah views the coming punishment as something through which Israel must pass in order to survive. The reason for the punishment is to save and not to destroy.

Micah predicts the destruction of Jerusalem in 3:12--which happened over 100 years later. For him the charisma of the prophet is power and the spirit of Yahweh, judgment and strength to denounce sin and injustice. Micah practically summarizes the teachings of the prophets when he says bluntly what the Lord asks of his people, "Only this, to do what is right, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God" (6:8).

St. Matthew in 2:5-6 quotes Micah 5:1-3 to prove that Jesus is the Messiah because the prophet had predicted he would be born in Bethlehem. There is also an allusion to Micah 7:20 in the Canticle of Zechariah, the *Benedictus*, in Luke 1:72.

Nahum: (3 chapters; ca. 610 B.C.)

Nothing is known of Nahum except his name and that he is from the town of Elkosh which is not mentioned elsewhere in the Bible. The book was most probably written either during or shortly after the siege and fall of Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, by the Babylonians in 612 B.C.

The theme of the book is simple: the fall of Nineveh. The Assyrians had harassed and devastated Israel and Judah for over 100 years. Now they are to be repaid for all the evil they have done to God's people. The Assyrians had destroyed the ten tribes of Israel in the north and had brought in foreign peoples to settle there and mingle with the few Israelites left; together they became the semi-pagan Samaritans who were

despised by faithful Jews. Nahum utters oracles of doom and exultation over the destruction of the chief enemy of Judah and Jerusalem.

The prophecy seems to be quite secular and political. There are no threats against his own people and the name of Yahweh is mentioned twice (2:13; 3:5). The prophet sees that the fall of Nineveh proves the principle of Israelite belief that the Lord will eventually punish the wicked and those who oppress others.

From a literary point of view, the oracles of Nahum reach a high poetic level. Some scholars consider Nahum to be among the best written books in the OT.

Habakkuk: (3 chapters; ca. 600 B.C.)

Because of the subject matter of railing against the Babylonians, and before the invasion of 597 B.C., it is most likely that the prophecy was composed between 605 and 597. Nothing is known of the life of Habakkuk except that he seems to have been associated with the Temple in Jerusalem in some way.

The theme of the book is the problem of evil, and specifically how God permits his ends to be accomplished by evil and unbelieving oppressors.

The book moves from a certain doubt about the evil around us, to a vision of how God will deal with it, and finally to a basic trust in God no matter how bad things may appear to be.

The first step in the answer to the problem of evil is that God brings down one oppressing nation (Assyria) by another (Babylon). The next step is that in the rise and fall of nations the just or righteous man will survive by his fidelity to Yahweh (2:4). The final step is that Yahweh himself is the one who saves the just man (ch. 3).

In this prophecy for the first time in Israelite literature a man questions the way of God. For Habakkuk calls him to account for his governance of the world. God replies that he is using Babylon to punish the wicked, but he reassures the prophet that the just Israelite will not perish in the coming disaster.

Because there are several obscurities and ambiguities in the book of Habakkuk, it has stimulated many commentaries over the centuries.

In developing the idea of faith, St. Paul quotes Habakkuk that the just man lives by faith (Gal. 3:11; Rom. 1:17; cf Hab. 2:4). The author of Hebrews quotes the same text to stress the importance of faith in order to persevere in times of persecution (Heb. 10:38; cf Hab. 2:3-4). Finally, in her Magnificat Mary, the Mother of Jesus, is an example of the faith and confidence in God foreshadowed in Habakkuk when she prays, "My spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 1:47; cf. Hab. 3:18).

Reading Assignment

Read the five minor prophets covered in this lesson. Read a commentary on one of them in *The International Bible Commentary* (1998).

Writing Assignment

Write an essay of about 1000 words on one of these five prophecies; or, write the essay on the historicity of the book of Jonah; or, write an essay on the Assyrians and Babylonians and their influence on the chosen people as reflected in the Bible.

Lesson 12: Zephanaiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi

Zephanaiah: (3 chapters; Ca. 630 B.C.)

Zephanaiah prophesied under King Josiah but before his religious reform, so about 635-630 B.C. He seems to have been a native of Jerusalem with connections to the royal court. He lived at the end of the period of the kings of Judah just before the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C., the exile and the restoration. Two themes stand out in the prophecy which he got from his predecessors, Amos and Isaiah: 1) the Day of the Lord is coming soon, and 2) a remnant will survive in Judah.

The sins Zephanaiah attacks are the superstitions and idol worship practiced under Manasseh, Amon and the early Josiah in the 7th century B.C. He knows that the oppressive Assyrian empire is about to fall to the Babylonians. The coming fall of Judah and Jerusalem will be the Day of Yahweh (1:7, 14-17), which will be an intervention of Yahweh in history in a theophany of power and judgment.

Zephanaiah is faithful to the prophetic tradition in his conception of judgment and punishment as the result of sin, especially the sins of idolatry and injustice to one's neighbor; because Judah has sinned she will be severely punished. He is one of the less original prophets, since he borrows heavily from Amos and Isaiah, especially the key notions of the Day of Yahweh, the holy remnant, the deliverance and the glory of Israel.

There are no direct quotes of Zephanaiah in the NT, but the graphic description of the dreaded Day of Yahweh in 1:14-18 inspired the opening words of the famous medieval dirge, *Dies Irae*.

Haggai: (2 chapters; 520 B.C.)

The book of Haggai was written between August and December in 520 B.C., the second year of the reign of Darius I of Persia. Nothing is known about the life and person of Haggai, but he is mentioned as a prophet, along with Zechariah, in Ezra 5:1 and 6:14.

The theme of the book is an exhortation by the prophet to the leaders and people of Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple which had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 B.C. The city was destroyed, some of the leaders were executed and the rest were taken into exile in Babylon. Poor people were left in the land to survive as best they could.

In 539 B.C. the Persians under Cyrus conquered the Babylonians. Cyrus decreed that the conquered peoples could return home, so in 537 the first group of Judean exiles returned to a devastated Jerusalem / Judah. They immediately began to rebuild the Temple but soon gave up the project because of a lack of funds and personnel.

In 520 God raised up the prophet Haggai to give the people heart and to urge them to finish the job of rebuilding the Temple in 515 B.C. when it was consecrated and dedicated to the worship of the Lord Yahweh.

The Temple in Jerusalem is very important in the Jewish religion because it locates the presence of God with his people (Hag. 1:13; 2:4). Those who returned from exile are the remnant of Israel, that is, the small group that God will use to fulfill his promises to David and his descendants. By mentioning the remnant Haggai reminds us of God's promise to David in 2 Sam. 7 (cf also Ps. 89) which is essential in understanding the role of David in salvation history; for Jesus is the "Son of David" who fulfills all the promises. So even though the prophecy is mainly an exhortation to the people to rebuild the Temple, it has a very strong Messianic tone. In the context of the whole Bible, it points to Jesus as the Messiah.

Haggai says that the reason for the poverty and suffering of the people is that they have not rebuilt the Temple (1:9). When they begin work on the Temple God will bless them with abundance of food -- grapes, figs, pomegranates and olives. The book ends on a positive note with a promise to Zerubbabel, the current ruler and descendant of David. The prophet says that the Messianic hope of Israel will be fulfilled through Zerubbabel who is a type of the Messiah (i.e. Jesus) whom God will send in the future to restore and save Israel.

Zechariah: (14 chapters; 520-518 B.C.)

Zechariah was a contemporary of Haggai and prophesied during the years 520-518 B.C. He was the son of Iddo who returned from exile with Zerubbabel and Joshua. He was a priest and so shows special attention to the Temple.

The main theme of the prophecy is the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. In this he is closely associated with Haggai. But a very strong feature of the book is its Messianism, especially in the second half. Because of the prodding of these two

prophets, the people went to work and finished the Temple in 515 B.C. when it was consecrated and dedicated to the worship of the Lord Yahweh.

Because of the sharp differences in language and content between chs. 1-8 and 9-14, the vast majority of scholars hold that the last six chapters were added in the late fourth century to the earlier prophecy of Zechariah. The dominant idea, however, in both parts is Messianism. Messianic significance is attributed to the new Temple and also to the governor, Zerubbabel, who was the last member of the house of David to rule over Judah and Jerusalem.

Zechariah stresses the notion of universalism in the sense that the salvation promised to Israel is to be offered to all the nations. Also, the absolute transcendence of God is brought out in this book by the developed theology of angels. God usually does not speak directly to the prophet; he communicates with him through angels and visions.

The second part of Zechariah, often called "Deutero-Zechariah," in addition to being Messianic is also heavily apocalyptic. Jerusalem is mentioned frequently. The Messianism of Deutero-Zechariah plus the emphasis on the "new age" is the reason for the number of quotes of Zechariah found in the four Gospels (v.g., Matt. 21:4-5; John 19:37). Zechariah also influenced St. John in the writing of the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation.

Malachi: (3 chapters; ca. 450 B.C.)

The contents indicate that the book of Malachi was written after the founding of the restored Temple in 515 B.C. and the advent of Ezra about 445. So a reasonable date is the middle of the 5th century B.C. Details about the author are not given. The name of the prophet, "Malachi," in Hebrew means "my messenger" and the word occurs in 3:1. It could be either a proper name or a title; it is probably a proper name.

The book contains six messages or oracles: 1) the Lord loves Israel in spite of her faults; 2) the priests and Levites have been unfaithful by neglecting the standards related to the offering of sacrifices and teaching the Law; 3) God hates divorce and marriage with foreigners; 4) the Lord will surely come to purify the Temple and the Levites; 5) prosperity of the land will return when honest tithing at the Temple is restored; 6) those who fear the Lord and keep his commandments will be saved on the day of judgment. A later editor, probably around 300 B.C., added two appendices about Moses (3:22) and Elijah (3:23-24).

Malachi lays much stress on matters of worship, like Haggai, Zechariah and Joel before him. He regards the Temple, the priesthood and the liturgy as central elements in the restored community and in the Messianic age to come. He confronts the spiritual aridity and mere externalism of his people with a call to fidelity to the Law of God, to reverence for holy things.

Beginning with the Fathers of the Church, Christians have seen a prediction of the Holy Eucharist in the remarkable words found in 1:11, "For from the rising of the sun, even to

its setting, my name is great among the nations; and everywhere they bring sacrifice to my name, a pure offering."

The prophet also condemns social evils, especially divorce which is explicitly rejected in 2:16, "For I hate divorce, says the Lord, the God of Israel." In the final verses the prophet says that God will send "Elijah, the prophet, before the day of the Lord comes." Jesus interpreted this to mean the coming of John the Baptist before his own appearance (Matt. 17:1-13).

By ending his book on the positive note of the coming of the precursor before the Day of the Lord, the last book of the OT leads directly to the NT with the preaching of John the Baptist and his pointing out Jesus as the Lamb of God.

Reading Assignment

Read the four short prophecies covered in this lesson. Read an article on Messianism in a good dictionary of the Bible, like McKenzie's.

Writing Assignment

Write an essay of about 1000 words on the importance of the Temple in Jerusalem in the Jewish religion; or on Messianism in the prophets; or on the notion of sin in the prophets.

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