

# **The Origins of the Bible**

## **Part 1: Examining the Aura Created Around the Bible**

How did the Bible come to be written? Does it reflect a single point of view, even a single inspiration or has that been an idea imposed upon it by religious devotees? Since what we now call the Bible was written by many authors over a period of about 1000 years, what were the particular circumstances that prompted the writing of each piece? What was the process by which these individual pieces got designated as "Holy Scripture?" Were there other works that competed for inclusion in the Bible, but for some reason were not chosen? If so, who made those decisions and on what criteria? Are all parts of the Bible to be regarded as equally holy, equally valid or does the Bible embrace concepts that are demonstrably untrue and proclaim attitudes that modern sensitivity and an expanded consciousness now find both repellent and repulsive? Amazing as it may seem, these perfectly obvious questions are seldom raised in the various churches of the Christian world and indeed are regarded by some Christians as hostile, faithless and inappropriate. In the great theological centres of learning, however, these inquiries are routine and commonplace. Yet when one leaves these theological centres for a career as a pastor serving people who occupy the pews of our churches, there appears to be almost a conspiracy of silence about biblical knowledge. In the heartland of religious life, these newly-minted clergy confront a Bible that has been covered with an aura of sanctity, which is so powerful that it blunts critical questions, regarding them not as a search for truth, but as attacks on holiness, upon God, on the Bible itself. So before beginning to look at the Bible itself, I want us to look first at this defence shield erected over the centuries by pious, but not well informed people and designed to protect the Bible and its "revealed truth" from erosion.

One runs into this biblical defence shield almost everywhere. It is present in the propaganda emanating from religious fundamentalists. Television evangelists like Albert Mohler, Pat Robertson, and the late Jerry Falwell constantly refer to the Bible as "the inerrant word of God". They quote from its pages to attack evolution, the rise of feminism, homosexuality and even environmental concerns. These contemporary fundamentalists have their roots in a group of Evangelical Protestants who, between 1910 and 1915 in America, published, with the help from the Universal Oil Company of California (Unocal) and spread across the world, a series of tracts called "The Fundamentals", which in fact produced the word "fundamentalism". This tractarian movement proclaimed that the only true Christian position on the scriptures was to regard every word of the Bible as both revealed and inerrant truth.

If one looks further back in history, one discovers that this mentality was present even at the time of Galileo in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, when representatives of Roman Catholic Christianity condemned Galileo's idea that the earth was not the centre of a three-tiered universe and that the sun did not rotate around it. What was the proof that they offered for this condemnation? It was a passage from the Book of Joshua (10:12-14) in which God, in response to Joshua's prayers, stopped the sun in the sky to allow more daylight in which Joshua could pursue his military rout of the Amorites. This, the church fathers argued, was clear proof from the "inerrant word of God" that Galileo was wrong.

This defensive shield around the Bible is also daily constructed even in those mainline churches that would be embarrassed to be called fundamentalists, since they regard themselves as more learned and sophisticated than those they think of as fundamentalists. Yet at the end of biblical readings Christian churches of all denominations still use some version of the phrase "This is the word of the Lord", to which the people dutifully reply with some version of the phrase "Thanks be to God". This common liturgical usage reinforces attitudes that the Bible's origins are not to be the subject of the questions we might apply to any other piece of literature. In the more formal liturgical Christian traditions, when the gospel is read there is normally some kind of procession into the congregation with the gospel book elevated, presumably for the adoration of the people. Then the reader announces: "The Holy Gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ according to..." and then identifies which gospel provided the reading for that day. While this is going on, the appointed reader might well make some magical sign of the cross on the gospel text itself as if to bless it again and not coincidentally, to remove that text from any critical analysis. Next the reader might also cross himself or herself as if to say that only a holy person can read these sacred words. In many churches the reading of the gospel is in fact reserved for one who is ordained, which suggests special status for the gospels themselves.

When the gospel passage is complete, the reader then proclaims: "The Gospel of the Lord", to which the people once again dutifully respond, "Praise to you Lord Christ". The clear message communicated by these pious acts,

which occur Sunday after Sunday and year after year is to reinforce an attitude toward the Bible in general and the gospels in particular, that any critical questioning of biblical content is deemed inappropriate. The ancient biblical defence shield is thus regularly made more solid. Those who seek to remove it, to go around it or beneath it, raise the threat level of believers and so they proceed at their own peril. Clergy, especially newly ordained clergy, are loath to attack this "Maginot Line". A pattern is thus set.

This defence shield is also revealed in other far more subtle ways. Until relatively recently, Bibles were generally printed on gilt-edged tissue thin pages inside a floppy leather cover, sometimes with a gold cross on the front, all of which served to designate this book as different from all other books. The Bible was to be given the place of honour on the book shelf or to be prominently displayed on the coffee table as it was in my childhood home. One learned quickly in that pious age not to place any other book on top of that Bible, for that would be a desecration. These "family Bibles" were seldom opened and then primarily not to be read, but to record the family history of baptisms, marriages and deaths. This book thus served as the repository in which all of the solemn, sacred moments of a family's transition were recorded. One did not trifle with the content of its pages.

Yet another mark of the Bible's special claim on truth is found in that this book was normally printed with two columns of text on each page. That seemed to be standard. Even today, both the Harper Collins Study Bible and the Oxford University Study Bible still use the twin-columned format. Most books that people read are not laid out this way. Have you ever wondered how this custom developed or why it has become so uniform? When the Revised Standard Version of the Bible was published between 1946 and 1952 in three volumes (two for the Old Testament and one for the New Testament), this two-column format was abandoned. However, this RSV was so mightily resisted by evangelical churches that book burnings were held in various parts of America. There were several reasons for this, some located in the way various texts were translated, but making the Bible appear like any other book was clearly, if subliminally, another source of irritation. The only other books normally published in a two column per page format are reference books like encyclopaedias and dictionaries. Both are sources of authority. One goes to an encyclopaedia to get facts that are assumed to be accurate. One goes to a dictionary to get definitions and meanings that are the last word. By printing the Bible in this authoritative way religious propaganda appears to be implying that this book too is a source of ultimate and inerrant answers. The format itself was part of the aura of sanctity, which served, albeit unconsciously, to make it quite difficult for people to relate to the Bible in any other way except as beyond questioning. Someone at an early date must have consciously made this decision.

Recall that for most of history, universal education was not commonly available so the vast majority of people in the pre-modern world could not read. Even with that barrier to knowledge firmly in place, for centuries the Bible was still kept in Latin that the masses did not speak anyway. In parts of Christian history it was a crime punishable by death to translate the sacred scriptures. In this manner the biblical defence shield was constantly reinforced. By translating the Bible into the vernacular, the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century began the process of eroding ecclesiastical authority. That erosion has yet to be stopped. That same Reformation, however, also produced a Protestant tradition that no longer had a central authority like the Papal office to determine truth for all believers. Feeling the anxiety of that lack quite deeply, Protestants began to treat the Bible as a paper Pope, investing its words with the same infallibility that the Catholic tradition has claimed for the Papal office, thus powerfully reinforcing the defence shield around the Bible even as expanding knowledge tore it away.

So the first step in studying the origins of the Bible is to navigate a pathway through this biblical defence shield in order to examine the text of the Bible itself without the presuppositions of religious propaganda. That is what I plan to do in this protracted series of columns. I hope the result will be salutary not just for modern faith but for intellectual integrity.

**– John Shelby Spong**

## Part II: Biblical Contradictions, Discredited Attitudes and Horror Stories

The aura of holiness, the defence shield that endows the Bible with an unchallengeable authority, can exist only so long as people do not bother to read its content very closely. That is, of course, what has happened during most of Christian history. Few people in medieval history other than the clergy could read and even if they could the Bible was available only in the Latin language that most did not understand. Prior to the invention of the printing press in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, books were scarce because they were prohibitively expensive. Books had to be hand copied, which meant that they tended to be community property and not individual possessions. This meant that it was only at Sunday worship services that the words of scriptures were actually heard by the people and even there the leaders of the church were quite judicious in their selectivity, so that none of the Bible's contradictions, discredited ideas or horror stories were ever read on public occasions in worship services. Lectionaries can be quite effective in controlling access to content.

Biblical contradictions begin, however, in the creation stories found on page one. In the opening verses of Genesis (1:1-2:4a), God first creates the fish of the sea, then the birds of the air and then the beasts of the field. Finally, in the crowning achievement of divine creativity, God makes the man and the woman. They are created together and instantaneously, this narrative suggests, and both in God's image. In the second creation story beginning in chapter two (2:4b-24), God creates first the man, who alone is in God's image, and God places him into a garden uninhabited by any other living creatures. The loneliness of that garden, however, becomes quite unbearable for Adam. Then the Bible tells us that God decided that "it is not good for man to dwell alone," so God fashioned all the animals of the world in an attempt to make an appropriate companion for Adam. When none of these creatures satisfied the man, God "took a rib from Adam's side and made Miss Eve to be his bride." The woman, therefore, was not assumed to have been made in God's image. She was rather fashioned out of the male for the primary purpose of being the male's "helpmeet." Her second class status was both signified and guaranteed when Adam named her, as he had named all the animals, as a sign of his authority over all living things. The two stories are immediately contradictory. We need to inquire as to which version should be called "The Word of God."

There are also the contradictions found in the three versions of the Ten Commandments contained in the Bible (Exodus 34:1-28, Exodus 20:1-17, Deuteronomy 5:1-21). How can all three versions be true if they are not the same? The oldest version (Exodus 34) is from the pen of the "J" or Jahwist writer and is not one of which many have ever heard. The final commandment in this earliest version reads "You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk." Why, we are led to wonder, was this original set of Ten Commandments rejected or replaced? The second version (Exodus 20) was from the pen of the "E" or Elohist writer, but was greatly expanded about four centuries later by a group of people called the "P" or priestly writers. Did these writers, who added so much to the entire body of the Jewish Scriptures, do so because they judged the original version to be so woefully inadequate that it required major additions and editing? Does one alter or tamper with what one believes to be "The Word of God?" The third version (Deuteronomy 5) was from the pen of the "D" or Deuteronomist writers composed somewhere between the original writing of Exodus 20 and the expansion done on that same text some 400 or so years later. For example, the version in Deuteronomy did not offer as the reason the Sabbath must be observed the fact that God rested on the Sabbath, for the version of that seven day creation story had not yet been written. So this author states that the Sabbath is to be observed because the people of Israel must remember that they were once slaves in Egypt and even slaves must have a day of rest. Which of these versions of the Ten Commandments, we might ask, can qualify as "The Word of God?"

There are also many pre-modern and outdated concepts in the pages of this supposedly divinely inspired book. Divine inspiration does not appear to overcome God's apparent lack of knowledge. "The Word of God" assumed that the earth was the center of a three-tiered universe and that God lived above the sky. According to the Book of Genesis (Chapter 11) that is why people wanted to build a tower so tall that it could reach beyond the sky into heaven where they could commune on a one-to-one basis with God. That is why Moses met God on a mountain top, since the top of a mountain was as close to heaven as a human being could climb. That is why the story of Jesus' ascension into heaven (Acts 1) proclaimed that Jesus simply rose into the sky and traveled beyond the roof of the earth to the abode of God above the sky.

The authors of the Bible also knew nothing about weather fronts, low pressure systems or why rain and wind, hurricanes and tsunamis happen, so they treated weather patterns as acts of divine manipulation designed by God, the judge, to reward good people or to punish evil people. Knowing nothing about germs or viruses, tumours

or coronary occlusions, these writers also assumed that sickness was divinely sent punishment for sin, and therefore the way to treat it was with prayers and sacrifices. It is hard to regard these narratives as "The Word of God" since the presuppositions on which these stories rest are believed by no one today. Why, we must wonder, was God so badly informed when the Bible was written, if this book is "The Word of God?"

The most difficult revelation, however, that challenges the traditional belief comes in those passages, which in the light of modern sensitivities, are brutal, wrong, insensitive and even immoral. The Bible, for example, calls for capital punishment for a wilfully disobedient child who talks back to his or her parents, for worshipping a false god, for being homosexual, for committing adultery and even for having sex with one's mother-in-law! Would anyone today salute these laws as moral norms? Then there is that strange story about the concubine in the book of Judges who is first gang raped and then thrown on the porch of her master's house, barely breathing, but presumably still alive. Her master then proceeds to cut her into twelve portions, sending one to each of the twelve tribes of Israel as a call to war (Judges 19). If that is not sufficiently grotesque, there is the story of Jephthah murdering his daughter to keep a vow to God (Judges 11). No one can read these stories in church and say, "This is the Word of the Lord."

The Bible contains stories that reek with vengeance, like the account in the book of Psalms (139:9), where the psalmist fantasizes about the desire to dash the heads of Babylonian children against the rocks, or the story in which the prophet Elisha is portrayed in the Book of Kings (II Kings 2) as greeting the taunts of some little boys making fun of his bald head by calling some she bears out of the woods to tear these boys apart and to eat them. Can anyone claim that these narratives are "The Word of the Lord?"

In chapter one of Romans, Paul argues that homosexuality is God's punishment on those who do not worship God properly. When talking about women, Paul and/or his surrogates forbid allowing any woman from having authority over a man. This means, if taken literally, that no woman could ever walk the path that leads to economic, political or ecclesiastical power. I have four daughters. One is the managing director of a major southern financial institution, one is a lawyer working in the office of the Virginia attorney general, one has a PhD in Physics and is the Chief Information Officer of a west coast high-tech start-up company, and one is a veteran of a nine year tour of duty in the United States Marine Corps, with 21 months of active duty in the second Iraqi war to her credit. Will these women or countless others like them ever be able or willing to call the Bible the inerrant "Word of God" so long as these grossly discriminating verses are in that book?

Both the Old and the New Testaments endorse slavery as a morally acceptable institution. The Torah prohibits slavery, but only among fellow Jews. "You are to take your slaves from neighbouring countries," is its exhortation. I suppose that if citizens of the United States were to call these verses "The Word of God," it would put Canadians and Mexicans at risk.

In Paul's epistles to Philemon and Colossians (if he actually wrote Colossians), this apostle seems to think that slavery is quite legitimate, but that Christians have a duty to make slavery "kinder and gentler." There is no doubt that a kinder and gentler slavery is better than a cruel and hostile slavery, but does anyone today really argue that slavery in any form is not demeaning, life destroying and evil? Yet of a book that contains these directives, there are many who still say, "This is the Word of the Lord!"

Once people could read the Bible for themselves, the claims that the church has made for these scriptures over the centuries became tempered by reality. Many things in the Bible are clearly not "the Word of God." They are immoral, unjust, uninspired and evil.

No religious institution or individual believer can today deny these facts. No one should want to and the convoluted reasoning employed by trapped and exposed fundamentalists is no longer a sufficient cover for profound ignorance.

A literally understood Bible is fated to be abandoned by all educated, thinking people. Does that mean there is no value that can still be attached to this ancient text? No, but it does mean that literalism must be exposed and expelled. What then? We continue next week.

**John Shelby Spong**

### Part III: Breaking Open the Books of Moses – The Torah

The Bible began to be written, relatively speaking, only a short time ago. When one considers the fact that the universe is some 13.7 billion years old and the birth of the planet Earth can be reliably dated between four and a half and five billion years ago, the beginning of Bible writing near 1000BC is very recent. Scientists now date the appearance of human life on this planet somewhere between two million and 100,000 years ago, depending on how one defines human life. The beginning of civilisation is placed by anthropologists about 15,000 years ago. The person we call Abraham, who is regarded in the Bible as the founder of the Jewish nation, is generally dated about the year 1850BC. Yet the earliest strand of continuous material in the Bible appears to have been written in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century BC, making it a relatively late arrival on the scene. People have been trained by the Bible itself to think that the biblical story begins at the moment of creation. Bishop James Ussher of Ireland, using the Bible's "inerrant words" and dates, asserted that creation actually occurred on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 4004BC. One of his later contemporaries, James Lightfoot, added the note that it was at 9am GMT! If we want to analyse the Bible, first we need to comprehend the fact that the earliest part of the Bible to be written was only about 3000 years ago, between 950 and 1000BCE. That fact alone immediately introduces a note of radical relativity into the biblical assertions of many people.

Next comes the realisation that if Abraham lived around 1850BC and the earliest written part of the Bible is after 1000BCE, then everything that we learn about Abraham in that story had to have been passed on orally for about 900 years or through as many as 45 generations before entering written form. That knowledge forces us to embrace the fact that this biblical story cannot be historically accurate, but has the character of folk tale and myth in which the facts of history are all but lost inside the developing tradition. Abraham might well not even have been a Jew. He was identified with the shrine at Hebron. Isaac, who is described as his son, was identified with the shrine at Beersheba and Jacob, called his grandson in the Bible, was identified with the shrine at Bethel. Their identifications with specific shrines opens up the possibility that these three patriarchs may originally have been unrelated Canaanite holy men, whose lives were later intertwined and interpreted as the founding generations of the Jewish people to provide justification for the Jewish invasion of this land that occurred around 1250BC. The purpose of these patriarchal tales in Genesis was to establish the Jewish claim that they were only taking over this land that God had promised to their ancestors hundreds of years earlier. As rational claims these things make no sense, but as propaganda they constituted then and still do now powerful influences in human history.

Other facts about the biblical story are even more threatening to those who treat the Bible magically and who pretend that in its words both historic accuracy and literal truth have been captured. Moses, who is an even more pivotal person in Jewish history than Abraham, lived some 300 years before the earliest part of the Old Testament was written. This means that we must embrace the fact that everything attributed to Moses in the Bible, including the Exodus from Egypt and the giving of the Law at Sinai, are sacred traditions that passed through oral transmission for as many as 15 generations before achieving permanent status in a written form. How much did these crucial Moses stories grow in that oral period? Did the Red Sea come to replace the Sea of Reeds as the centre of the splitting of the waters story? Did the discovery of the droppings of the Tamarisk tree in the wilderness, with its white flaky residue lying on the ground, give rise to the story of God raining heavenly bread called manna down on the hungry Hebrew people? Did an eruption of burning natural gas in that oil and gas rich desert give rise to the story of God's call to Moses at a burning bush that was not consumed? What was the process through which the community's code of laws, including the Ten Commandments, went before they settled into the familiar form that we find in Exodus? Is the number "ten" for the commandments more important than the content of the ten? Is the fact that the Bible contains a multiplicity of versions of the Ten Commandments an attempt to explain the biblical story that Moses broke the clay tablets containing the Ten Commandments when he saw that the people of Israel had forsaken the God who had brought them out of Egypt for a Golden Calf and that he, therefore, had to return to Sinai to get a second version? How much of the story of Exodus is history and how much of that narrative has been bent to conform to the developing liturgy of the Passover that was designed primarily to let the Jewish people observe the moment of their national birth liturgically? None of these were questions that could be raised until the idea that the Bible is not an eyewitness account of ancient history was both faced and accepted. With each new discovery the Bible began to be viewed as a quite human book that needs to be examined critically and not as the divinely-inspired literal word of God that was inerrant because it had been revealed by or even dictated by God on high.

In the late 1800s, a group of scholars in Germany led by Professors K. H. Graf and Julius Wellhausen began to study rigorously the details of the first five books of the Bible - Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. These books, called the Torah or the Books of Moses, constitute the most sacred part of the Hebrew Scriptures and were traditionally required by the Jews to be read in their entirety on the Sabbaths of a single year in the synagogues of the Jewish world. These scholars began to apply to these texts the insights of literary criticism. To do this, they had to set aside the claims that these works constituted the "Word of God", or that they possessed some magical relationship with truth. The results were salutary and more than anything else opened the doors to a new academic interest in the Bible itself.

Analysing these texts carefully, these scholars discovered that there were many observable differences that could be noted which led them to the conclusion that the Torah consisted of several strands of what had once been independent material. One strand referred to God by the name Yahweh, or at least by an unpronounceable set of consonants that were written as YHWH and it called the holy mountain of the Jews Mt. Sinai. Another strand of material called God by the name of Elohim and it called the holy mountain Mt. Horeb. A third strand of material reflected life in the Kingdom of Judah in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century BC. Still another strand appeared to be dated during the time of the Exile and perhaps even later. When they began to separate these strands from one another, other insights became available. The material that called God YHWH appeared to be centred in Jerusalem for it extolled the institutions identified with Jerusalem, such as the King, the High Priest and the Temple. It reflected that period of Jewish history in which the nation was undivided and was ruled from Jerusalem. The strand that called God Elohim reflected the values of the northern part of the land of the Jews that achieved independence from Jerusalem rule in a rebellion led by a military general named Jereboam against the newly crowned Jerusalem king named Rehoboam, who was, the Bible tells us, the son of Solomon and the grandson of King David. That rebellion, which occurred around the year 920BC, was successful and brought into being a new Jewish state called the Northern Kingdom, or Israel.

Ultimately, this new nation had its capital and worship centre in the city of Samaria and traced its Jewish roots back primarily to Joseph, whom it called the "favourite son" of the patriarch Jacob. Joseph was said to be the child of Jacob by his favourite wife Rachel and his father was said to have endowed him, among other things, with a coat of many colours. The patriarch Joseph in this narrative of the Elohist writer was always juxtaposed to his older brother Judah, who remained the dominant ancestral figure of the Jewish people whose life centred in Jerusalem. Judah was the son of Jacob by Rachel's older sister Leah. According to this story Jacob had been tricked into marrying Leah instead of Rachel by their father Laban. Only by marrying Rachel's older sister did Jacob also manage to win Rachel as his second wife. Leah was described in this text rather cruelly as being unloved and even as having eyes that popped out of her head like those of a cow. This Elohist document was designed on many levels to counter the claims made by the tribe of Judah that they were destined to rule over these northern ten tribes. In the service of this theme the Elohist writer went so far as to assert that Judah betrayed his younger brother Joseph by selling him into slavery for twenty pieces of silver. In time, however, Joseph was said to have used this act of treachery to save all of his brothers, including Judah, from death by starvation, which he did by taking them down into Egypt, where they remained for 400 years, eventually falling into slavery, from which Moses would ultimately lead them to freedom in their "promised land". As these strands came to be viewed as quite different stories written to reflect quite different times in history, these scholars began to recognise that they had cracked the code of biblical origins. The first five books of the Torah were not written by Moses or indeed by any single author. They were a composite of written materials that had been blended and intertwined into a single story over a period of as much as 500 years. Biblical scholarship had taken an enormous leap into modernity. The old claims, held so tenaciously for so long by so many, were shaken to their very foundations. The era of critical biblical scholarship was being born.

We will return to this brief overview later and develop each of these four strands of the Torah in much greater detail, so stay tuned.

**– John Shelby Spong**

## Part IV - The Story of the Yahwist Document

Thus far in this series on the origins of the Bible, my efforts have been directed toward how the Torah, which contains the oldest material found in the Bible, came into being. The Torah, also called "The Law" and "The Books of Moses", is the Jewish name for the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Their creation in the world of literature did not happen the way many people today seem to think. No one, including Moses, simply sat down and started writing. In fact, the Torah was written over a period of about 500 years by a series of authors. Many of the stories told in this part of the Bible were a combination of myths, folk tales and political propaganda with only the slightest bit, if any, of actual historical memory. The opening biblical stories from Adam and Eve through to the flood have absolutely no connection with history, despite the fact that some of the world's more foolish people still try to locate the Noah's ark on Mt Ararat. The first shred of history appears in the Abraham story and it is slight indeed. If a person named Abraham lived at all it would have been about 900 years or 45 generations prior to the writing of the Abraham story in the book of Genesis. Moses, the greatest hero in the Jewish story, lived about 300 years or 15 generations before the Moses narratives in were written in Exodus and as many as 700 years before the Moses stories that appear in Deuteronomy. This means that most of these biblical accounts are not history at all, at least not in any technical sense, but are rather interpretive folk lore. That needs to be said again and again. Even after constant repetition it is hard to make this truth heard, since most people have grown up in the power of 2000 years of lateralisation that continues to affect our reasoning today. In this column, I want to trace in more detail the beginning of what is called "The Yahwist Document" that scholars today designate as the oldest part of the Torah and thus the oldest part of the biblical story.

Writing history, which is what the Torah purported to be, is an activity that normally starts only when a nation has become established and secure enough to begin to look at itself with some objectivity. While the Jews were fleeing Egypt, journeying through the wilderness, or invading and conquering the land of the Canaanites, there was little time or interest in transforming its experienced history into a written narrative. It is also important to note that in the ancient world, one who could write was first of all rare, a skill possessed in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century BC in the Middle East by less than one tenth of one percent of the entire population. Thus the one who wrote this first part of the Torah can be accurately presumed to have been high in either government or ecclesiastical circles. Writing also required considerable wealth, or at least access to wealth, since both parchment and ink were very expensive. We can assume, therefore, that both education and wealth were the marks of this original author of biblical material. Inevitably, such a person would reflect the attitudes and biases of the ruling classes which he represented. I use the word "he" not to be insensitive, but to recognise the fact that in this period of history the privileges of education and status had simply not yet been conferred upon women.

The Yahwist Document got its name from the fact that this narrative referred to God by the name Yahweh (YHWH), the name it claimed had been revealed to Moses at the "burning bush". Those letters in Hebrew were in some way identified with the verb "to be" and it was translated in the book of Exodus to mean, "I am that I am". Since the verb "to be" is the foundation verb of any language, it seemed to be a fitting name for the deity who was regarded as the foundation of the tribe's identity.

When this strand of material is lifted out of the Torah and separated from the later strands, its historical setting becomes immediately visible. The Jewish nation has been established. Saul, the first king, a member of the tribe of Benjamin, had been unable to secure his throne. The narrative describes Saul as a melancholy, depressed man, who could not unite the various tribes of Israel. When all of Saul's sons, save for a crippled child, were killed along with the King in a battle against the Philistines at Mt. Giboa, his throne was claimed by his military captain, a man named David. It is David who is the clear hero of this Yahwist writer. David was portrayed as chosen by God and anointed by the prophet Samuel to be king of the Jews at a very early age, indeed while still a shepherd boy keeping the flocks of his father Jesse. Heroic tales had obviously gathered around him in the memory of the people as tends to happen to a popular leader. It was said of the young David that he had killed a lion, a bear and finally that he had killed Goliath, a Philistine. When David moved to claim the throne for himself, the Yahwist writer suggests that he immediately instituted a series of political moves to solidify that claim and to win popular support. He ordered a national time for mourning the deaths of King Saul and his sons, punished anyone who appeared to take pleasure in Saul's demise and made plans to conquer the city of the Jebusites, called Jerusalem, to make it his new capital. If he was going to unite the disparate tribes of Israel into a single political entity he needed a neutral city as a symbol of that new unity into which he intended to call the people of his nation. These tactics appeared to work.

With his power at home firmly established, David began to expand his realm with a series of military victories. In the final test for a monarch, David completed a forty year reign and then was able to pass his throne on to his son Solomon, thus establishing the continuity of his nation in a continuing royal family. Among his last acts according to this narrative was to delegate to his son Solomon the task of building the Temple in Jerusalem, which would make that city not just the political, but also the spiritual capital of the Jewish people. With these three institutions now established, the throne of David, the city of Jerusalem and the Temple of Solomon that was finished in the first decade of King Solomon's rule, the time was right for someone to set this nation into the stream of history by telling their national story. That was the setting in which a court historian, perhaps a member of the royal family, perhaps a priest associated with the Temple, or perhaps someone who was both, was commissioned, probably by the king, to write the history of this Hebrew nation. This is how the first strand of that material, which would later be called "Sacred Scripture", came into being.

The date was some time around the year 950BC. Solomon had been on the throne for about a decade. The Jewish people had become wealthy because tribute money from David's conquests was now flowing into Jerusalem. This part of the Middle East was at peace. The Temple, thought to be God's earthly dwelling place, was complete and the life of the nation was widely believed to be resting safely in the arms of its two protectors, God and the King. This was the time to write the story of their origins. So the work of the Yahwist writer was begun. When his story was complete, the image of Israel as God's chosen people was secure. It was buttressed by the claims made in this narrative. They were basically three: God had chosen the House of David and thus the tribe of Judah, to rule over the chosen people, the will of God was expressed through the Temple in which God lived as a protective presence, and the high priest specifically and the Temple priesthood in general were alone designated to order the religious life of the nation as the sign of God's continuous blessing.

As soon as this narrative was complete, it began to be read as part of the liturgy of the people gathered in the Temple for worship, as is the destiny of all sacred scripture. In that process this narrative with its power claims achieved the status of being "God's revealed truth". This idea was certainly encouraged by the priesthood, who were well served as the aura of sanctity began to grow around these words. It also served the interests of the royal family, since what came to be called "God's Word" affirmed their divine right to rule. The role of Jerusalem in the national life of the Jews as a symbol of the people's unity was established. In this manner the vested interests of each of Jerusalem's power centres were solidified. The Jewish people, so recently a loose knit confederation ruled by local judges and worshiping at shrines located in Hebron, Beersheba and Bethel, now found unity in a new federation that was being imposed on them as nothing less than an expression of the will of God.

In a world in which there was no division between Church and State (i.e. religion and politics), this first text to become part of the scriptures of the people was in fact a very political document. By tracing the Jewish story from creation to the call of Abraham, this narrative had gone from the universal beginning of human history to the dawn of their own national history. By relating the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph this narrative established, as both legitimate and moral, the Jewish claim to the land that they had in fact conquered. By incorporating the ancient shrines of Hebron, Beersheba and Bethel into their story they identified the religious traditions of the past with a new centre in Jerusalem, which was their ultimate and grander successor. By telling the story of the noble history of the Jews prior to falling into slavery in Egypt, this narrative rebuilt their national reputation. It was political propaganda at its best, a powerful and effective attempt to define what it meant to be a Jew, a member of the "Chosen People".

What would happen, however, if and when the Jewish nation was ever to be divided in civil war? Such a rebellion would have to be against the scriptures as well as against the Temple and the King. That was destined to occur sometime after 920 and the death of Solomon. That was when the second strand of material that composes the Torah today came into being. To that story, I will turn when this series continues.

**- John Shelby Spong**

## Part V - The Elohist Document

Most people do not seem to realise that events in what we call the secular world of history shaped so much of the writing of the biblical story. When I get to the formation of the gospels in this series, it will become obvious that the Jewish war with Rome that began in 66AD in Galilee and ended in 73AD in Masada shaped the content of all four gospels in a dramatic way. In 70AD, in the midst of that war, the city of Jerusalem fell and the Jewish nation for all practical purposes disappeared from the maps of the world until it was restored in 1948 under the plan that had been set out in the Balfour Declaration of 1917. To read the gospels with no sense of the historical context in which they were written leads to dramatically ill-informed understandings. Not only did the cataclysmic effects of this war shape the apocalyptic “end of the world” chapters in Mark, Matthew and Luke, but I would argue that the story of Jesus’ transfiguration makes no sense unless the reader is aware that the Temple in Jerusalem has already been destroyed. This is one of the ways that we are able to date the gospels so accurately.

Likewise, in Jewish history a wrenching and datable split in the nation of the Jews was responsible for the development of the second strain of written material that would someday constitute the Torah. This split was basically between the Joseph tribes in the north that came to be called the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the powerful southern tribe of Judah, from whom the north chose to separate itself around the year 920BC. This Jewish division, however, had its roots in a far more ancient time. Some scholars even suggest that the escaping slave people from Egypt, about whom the book of Exodus writes so lavishly, were not all of the Jewish people, but perhaps only those who would later be called the Joseph tribes. Certainly Joseph is the central figure, according to the biblical narrative, in the settlement of the Jews in Egypt. At the time of their escape the narrative tells us that life in Egypt had degenerated for the Jews because a Pharaoh arose in Egypt “*who knew not Joseph*”. Joseph, according to the Hebrew memory that stretched back some 400 years according to the book of Exodus, had risen to power in Egypt, achieving a position in the land second only to that of the Pharaoh. The Torah said that Joseph had done this through his prescience and foresight that enabled him to build up the food supply in time of plenty and then to administer it in time of famine. This allowed the Egyptian nation to survive hard times. When the Jews made their exit from Egypt, the book of Exodus informs us the Jews took with them the bones of Joseph so he could be buried in the soil of his former home. Joseph was a figure clearly identified with the Jewish slave people who came out of Egypt.

More Semitic people than just the fleeing slaves, however, were included in the Jewish nation and clearly made up the conquering army that overran the Canaanites. In defence of this historical reconstruction of the conquest of Canaan under Joshua, these same scholars see evidence in the Torah itself, that during the wilderness years the escaping slaves came together with other nomadic Semites in an oasis named Kadesh to form a common cause. Their common ethnic kinship was recognised, as was their common heritage. Eventually they formed a political alliance and began to think of themselves as a single united people, but organised in a loose confederation. Even their folklore made it clear that while they recognised their kinship, there was always a distinct difference between the two groups. This split was accounted for in the biblical story by suggesting that their father Jacob has actually had two wives. Leah, the first one, was the mother of Judah, whose descendants formed the tribe that settled the South. Rachel, the second wife, was the mother of Joseph, whose descendants settled the North. There were of course other tribes, indeed twelve it was said, but they tended to be satellites of the two major tribes. The Northern Kingdom was later called the “Ten Tribes”, while the tiny tribe of Benjamin tended to be associated with Judah as the remaining two. They were more an alliance than a unified people. The biblical book of Judges described this phase of Jewish history. Survival in that day, however, required them to become a strong and unified nation. The way to reach that goal was to have a king.

The first king of the unified nation was Saul, who was a member of the tribe of Benjamin. Saul was not, however, able to bring about the needed unity or to pass the throne on to his son. The second king was Saul’s military captain, David, a member of the dominant tribe of Judah. About Judah’s power the Joseph tribes of the North were already apprehensive. David, with both military and political skill, unified the country and reigned for forty years, passing on the throne to his son Solomon who, in turn, reigned for another forty years. It was during the reign of Solomon that the first strand of the Bible, identified today as the “Yahwist Document”, was created to tell the story of the history of the Jewish people. As we noted in a former column in this series the “Yahwist Document” had a clear political agenda. It extolled the royal house of David, the capital city of Jerusalem and the Temple in Jerusalem from which the religious life of the nation was organised. The theme of this writer was that each of these centres of power was an expression of the will of God. To rebel against the king, the high priest or the city of Jerusalem was to rebel against God.

Tensions, however, between these two ancient Jewish groups grew during the reign of Solomon, as the people of the North felt that they were over taxed to provide the wealth of the people of Jerusalem. When Solomon died around the year 920BC the throne passed in an orderly fashion to his oldest son, Rehoboam. The people of the North, however, were not ready to pledge their allegiance to Rehoboam without some changes and so, led by one of their military generals named Jeroboam, a delegation came to Jerusalem to negotiate their grievances with the new king. Those negotiations were not successful and when they collapsed the new and perhaps rash young King Rehoboam decided that he must put this rebellion down with brute force. The people of the North, led by Jeroboam, then organised for resistance and in the ensuing civil war won their independence. There were now two Jewish states: The Northern Kingdom that would build its capital in Samaria and the Southern Kingdom with its capital in Jerusalem.

The only written narrative that either group possessed at this time was the Yahwist document that was so pro the institutions of the South that it would hardly do for the rebellious tribes of the North. That version implied that the Northern Jews had violated God's chosen House of David, God's dwelling place in the holy city of Jerusalem and God's chosen high priest. It condemned all that they stood for and it did so in the name of God, so the Jews of the North began to feel a need to create a new version of the sacred history of the Jewish people. Once again a court historian was appointed, but now by the king of the Northern Kingdom, to write this story. The result was a second version of Jewish sacred history.

There were many differences between the two documents. This writer called God by an earlier Canaanite name El or Elohim, so his work became known as the "Elohists Document". For the Elohist writer, Joseph, not David, was the hero. We see that idea develop in the story about Joseph being the favourite son of Jacob, his father. That is also why Joseph was said to have received the coat of many colours. Rachel, Joseph's mother, was portrayed by this writer as Jacob's favourite wife, while Leah, Rachel's older sister and the mother of Judah, was pictured as having "eyes like a cow" and was actually thrust on Jacob by their scheming father, Laban. This "E" document also portrayed Judah as the evil brother who sold Joseph into slavery. He de-emphasised Jerusalem, relativised the Temple and re-opened and re-sanctified the ancient shrines in the north. Finally the divine right of kings was dismissed by this writer, who claimed that the king was not chosen by God to rule the people, but was elected by the people and was, therefore, subject to the will of the people. If the king violated his trust, the people were competent to remove him. This was the claim that solidified the rightness of their rebellion against King Rehoboam. While these differences were sharp, many of the stories in the two histories were nonetheless quite similar. By around 850BC the Elohist narrative appears to have been substantially complete. Now there were two Jewish nations, two kings, two worship centres and two sacred stories that were read in worship and each was called "The Word of God". The two Jewish nations fought each other in numerous indecisive wars and formed competing alliances with foreign powers, frequently on opposite sides. When Assyria became the major Middle Eastern power, the Northern Kingdom joined Syria in armed resistance, while the Kingdom of Judah formed an alliance with Assyria and accepted vassal status.

In 721BC the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom and exiled most of its people to lands under their control. Then they imported peoples to re-populate the land that had been the Northern Kingdom. In time these foreigners intermarried with the remaining Jews and their descendants became known as the half-breed Samaritans. After this defeat, however, some unknown person managed to escape to the South and brought with him or her a copy of the Elohist document. Over the years in Jerusalem the two sacred stories were merged. The dominant Yahwist version was given priority, but the Elohist story and the point of view of the lost Northern kingdom succeeded in being intertwined with it. By the turn of the century, certainly before 690BC, the sacred story of the Jews had become the Yahwist-Elohist version. The scriptures of the Jews were growing. There would be more changes and transitions to come, but this was stage two in the development of the Torah. Stage three will be discussed when this series continues.

**- John Shelby Spong**

## Part VI - The Third Document in the Torah

The name of the Torah's fifth and final book, according to the Bible, is Deuteronomy. That name comes to us from the combination of two Greek words: "*deutero*", which means second and "*nomas*" which means law. Deuteronomy thus means the second giving of the law and in that title the story of the book's origin is revealed.

First, a quick review of what I have covered in this series thus far. We began by identifying the oldest strand of narrative material that is found in the Bible, namely that part of the Torah that is called the "Yahwist" version, written in the middle years of the 10<sup>th</sup> Century. This narrative represented the history of the dominant tradition of the Jews, located in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. It extolled the centres of power in that part of the Jewish world: the Royal House of David that ruled by divine right; the capital city of Jerusalem, which was believed to be the place where heaven and earth came together; the Temple, the very dwelling place of God; and the High Priest, believed to be the authoritative voice of God on earth.

This was the only sacred history the Jews had until a civil war, following the death of King Solomon, succeeded in separating the ten Northern tribes of the Hebrew people from the Kingdom of Judah and its satellite, the little tribe of Benjamin. This successful revolution removed the Israelites in the North from each of those centres of Southern Jewish power, the House of David, the city of Jerusalem and the Temple and its priests. The Jews of the North could thus hardly continue to use the Yahwist document as their sacred story, since that text judged them with its own words as rebels against God, God's Temple, God's city and those thought to be both chosen and anointed by God. In time this new country, born in revolution, established its own monarchy, but on a very different and more democratic basis. The king was now chosen by the people and thus was subject to removal by the people. A new capital city of Samaria was built and the ancient shrines in Hebron, Beersheba and Bethel were set up to be worship places to rival the Temple in Jerusalem. In time these tribes even felt compelled to write their version of their sacred history and so a court historian was chosen to do this task. This narrative would focus not on King David, but on the one they portrayed as Jacob's favourite son, who was the child of his favourite wife, Rachel. His name was Joseph and he was regarded as the patriarch and founder of the Northern Kingdom. Because this new history referred to God as Elohim, it became known as the Elohist or "E" version of the Jewish sacred story.

These two rival kingdoms lived together side by side, although not always in peace, until the Northern Kingdom was defeated in warfare by the Assyrians in 721BC (BCE). The people of the Northern Kingdom were then removed by their conquerors to other lands and disappeared into the DNA of the Middle East. After this disaster, an unknown person brought a copy of the Elohist document to Jerusalem and in time the two sacred stories were merged into one document with the Yahwist tradition clearly dominant over the Elohist story. This merged version was then the sacred scriptures of the Jewish people for about a century.

In 621BC in the Southern Kingdom, encouraged and shaped by a group of prophets, among whom Jeremiah was surely one, there was a growing fervour for religious reform. These prophets focused their hopes on a young king named Josiah, who had succeeded to the throne at the age of eight when his father, King Amon, was murdered by his own servants. Josiah was a king who, in the eyes of the prophets, "did what was right in the sight of the Lord and walked in the way of his father David; he did not turn aside to the right or the left." (II Kings 22:1-2) Perhaps that was because King Josiah was attentive to and a supporter of the worship of the Temple. When the king reached the age of 26, he ordered major renovations to be done on the Temple that presumably had fallen into some disrepair and neglect under the reigns of previous kings in the line of David, who had allowed many pagan practices in the Temple. This restoration of the Temple was hugely popular with the religious authorities and the prophets.

During this restoration, however, a mysterious event occurred that was destined to shape the worship life of the entire country. First, the Book of Kings tells us that these renovations were to be done with the money collected from the people over the years and presumably not spent by previous kings. Second, it was ordered that no accounting of their expenditures would be required for "they deal honestly". (II Kings 22:7) Next came an "electrifying discovery". In the renovation, perhaps hidden behind some of the plaster that was being torn away, the workers found a book that purported to be "a book of the law". The book even claimed to have been written by Moses, who by this time had been dead for some 600 years.

The book, discovered by Hilkiyah the High Priest, was sent to the king by a man named Shaphan, who was described as "the secretary in the house of the Lord" and it was read to the king in its entirety. When King Josiah heard these words, we are told that he tore his clothes in an act of public penitence because it was obvious that the "Word of the Lord" found in this book had not been obeyed by their ancestors. Next, a female prophetess

named Huldah was produced and she declared, in her most solemn voice I'm sure, that unless the commands of this book were obeyed, God would bring "disaster on this place and its inhabitants". Huldah went on to say that because the good King Josiah had responded with penitence and had "humbled himself before the Lord" by tearing his clothes and weeping publicly, that so long as he was king, these terrible punishments would not occur. This message was then delivered to the king.

Josiah, empowered by the word of God that in this newly discovered book claimed to be the words of the prophet Moses and said by the prophetess Huldah to have the ability of holding back the wrath of God as long as he was alive, clearly now had the authority to proceed. The words of this new book were then read to the whole people and a new covenant, reflecting its values, was adopted and it was established that this book would henceforth govern their common life. A great reformation of the worship practices of the Temple and Judah was then carried out. The reformers removed from the Temple all the vessels made for deities other than Yahweh. All idolatrous priests were deposed. All houses of male temple prostitutes, associated with the fertility rites of the deity known as Baal, were closed and torn down. Religious shrines suspected of encouraging pagan worship were destroyed. All mediums, soothsayers and fortune tellers were put out of business. Josiah even went into what had once been the Northern Kingdom and destroyed the rival shrines in Samaria and Bethel. This reform also required that the Passover be celebrated only in Jerusalem, where its liturgical purity could be guaranteed. The prophets of Yahweh said of King Josiah that there had been "no king like him, who turned to the Lord with all his heart, with all his soul and with all his might, according to the Law of Moses; nor did anyone like him arise after him". (II Kings 23:25)

One purpose of worship is always the human attempt to please the deity and thus to win divine blessing and protection. That was certainly the hope of those who engineered this enthusiastic reformation. They were also the ones who, in all probability, wrote, planted and "discovered" this new book of Moses. They then engineered the political campaign that led to its adoption. We do not know the names of the people who constituted this group of reformers, although the prophet Jeremiah clearly seems to have been one of them. They are simply called the "Deuteronomic Writers". By the power of their leadership in this reformation, however, they took the Jewish sacred story previously known as the "Yahwist-Elohist" version of the scriptures and incorporated into it the Book of Deuteronomy, "the second giving of the law". Then they set about to edit the entire sacred story into a consistent narrative until it became identified as the Yahwist-Elohist-Deuteronomic version of the scriptures. The third strand of material that would some day be called the Torah was now in place.

The great hoped for protection of God that they believed would come to them if they only worshiped God properly, however, did not materialise. The distress and hard times that had fallen on the land of Judah not only continued, but seemed to intensify. The Book of Kings (specifically II Kings 23:26) recorded the fact that despite these wide-ranging reforms: "Still the Lord did not turn from the fierceness of his great wrath, which his anger had kindled against Judah". The Lord was heard to warn that just as Israel (the Northern Kingdom) had been removed from the face of the earth, so Judah (the Southern Kingdom) would also be removed, but not so long as Josiah lived.

A few short years later, Josiah was killed on the battlefield of Megiddo by Pharaoh Necho of Egypt, who was fighting against Josiah's ally, the Assyrians. His death was so devastating to the Jews that Megiddo came to be thought of as the site where the ultimate battle that would precede the end of the world would occur. Armageddon is nothing but the modern spelling of Megiddo. The deluge that had been promised by the prophets to come only after the death of King Josiah now began to fall on the Jewish nation. It came in the form of defeat, devastation and an exile into Babylon from their land that was destined to last some three generations. It was in that desperate period of Jewish history that the final strand of material that was to constitute the Torah was written. Again, the earlier strands were edited in the light of this new material reflecting Judah's new circumstances. We will turn to that story when this series continues.

- **John Shelby Spong**

## Part VII: The Final Strand of the Torah, The Priestly Document (A)

Time after time we discover that it was the external events of human history that more than anything else shaped the content of those writings that would someday be called the Holy Scriptures. That should not surprise us since all books have human authors who live in a context of both time and place. Only those who ascribe a supernatural source to these ancient texts find this insight disturbing. There is, however, no rational argument in the world that would assert a divine origin for either the Bible or the Koran. We have already traced this interplay in the first three stages of the development of the Torah. This week we come to the fourth and final stage.

The earliest document in the Bible was a 10th Century BC (BCE) product of the dominant tribe of Judah, which focused on the power symbols of that part of the Jewish world: the city of Jerusalem, the royal house of David, the Temple and the high priest. It was written probably during the reign of King Solomon, but its ultimate hero was King David. We call it the "J" version for it referred to God by the name JHWH. The next strand of the Torah was a 9<sup>th</sup> Century product of the Northern Kingdom, written after its successful revolution, which separated it from Judah, creating a second Hebrew state. The Northern Kingdom, which called itself Israel, was, not surprisingly, far more democratic in nature. Power was vested in the people, allowing them to choose and to dismiss their rulers. This version called god Elohim and was known as the "E" document. It also made Joseph, the favourite son of the patriarch Jacob, the hero of its story, not King David, as the "J" document had done. In 721 BC this Northern Kingdom was overrun and destroyed by the Assyrians, their people becoming in the process the "ten lost tribes of Israel". The conquering Assyrians resettled the citizens of that defeated nation in foreign lands, where they disappeared into the DNA of the Middle East. A survivor of this crushing war, however, did escape to Jerusalem with a copy of the "E" document. In time this material was woven into the "J" document and the Jewish story was now the "JE" version, which remained for a century the scriptures of the Jews.

In 621 BC a "new book of Moses" was "discovered" hidden in the walls of the Temple during a period of Temple repairs. It was called Deuteronomy, from "*deutero*" meaning second and "*nomos*" meaning law. Under its influence a massive reform of Temple worship was carried out. We suspect that the prophet Jeremiah was a part of this reforming group that wrote, planted and discovered the book. When Deuteronomy was woven into the JE version, the Deuteronomic writers also edited the entire corpus, placing their stamp onto Israel's history. This JED account was the Jewish sacred scriptures for only a brief time before Judah's worst calamity unfolded. This tragedy began in 609 BC when Pharaoh Necho of Egypt sent troops to attack his enemy, the Assyrians, on the plains of Megiddo. King Josiah of Judah, the hero of the Deuteronomic reforms and an ally of the Assyrians, intercepted the invading Egyptians. In the ensuing battle, King Josiah, probably the most popular king of the Jews since David, was slain. Despair and fear now set in among the Jews. Assyria was declining and the Babylonians, led by their warrior king, Nebuchadnezzar, proceeded to defeat its army, destroy Nineveh its capital and to replace it as the dominant power in that region of the world.

In the early years of the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC, Nebuchadnezzar consolidated his power sufficiently to begin a war of conquest. Sweeping out of the North, he conquered everything in sight before arriving at the walls of Jerusalem to begin a siege in 598. Jerusalem was eminently defensible, located as it was high on a fortress-like hill and possessing an internal water supply. It had not been conquered by a foreign army in the last 400 years. The Jewish strategy before marauding armies was to retreat into "Fortress Jerusalem" where they always kept sufficient food supplies to wait out a siege. Normally, the enemy would grow weary and a negotiated settlement would be reached, leaving Judah free but poor. Jerusalem had thus developed an aura of invincibility, causing the Jews to assert that as the earthly dwelling place of God, God would not allow it to be either conquered or destroyed. The Babylonians, however, proved to be more persistent than any previous enemy and the siege lasted for two full years, by which time both the food and the weapons of war were exhausted. Even rocks and spears once hurled were not retrievable. Finally, the walls were breached and the Babylonian army poured in, destroying everything before them. Even God's house, the Temple, was levelled.

The Babylonians rounded up the captive people and prepared them for deportation to Babylon. Only the elderly and the physically impaired would remain. The period of Jewish history known as the Babylonian Captivity was about to begin. A puppet ruler named Zedekiah, of the house of David, but loyal to Judah's new master, was placed on the throne. All others were forced to march into resettlement in Babylon. This experience would remain the darkest moment in Jewish history until it was superseded by the Holocaust in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. These

Jewish exiles left everything they knew. They would never again see the sacred soil of Judah. They were removed from their Temple with its sacred feasts and fasts, which had served to give a sense of order and purpose to their lives. They even assumed that to be removed from the Temple was to be removed from God. According to one of the psalms (137), the conquered Jews were taunted by their captors. The words of this psalm are plaintive: *"By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, when we remembered thee O Zion. As for our harps we hanged them upon the trees that are therein. For they that led us away captive required of us then a song and melody in our heaviness: Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"* They were destined to live as slaves or as a perpetual underclass in a land where the name of their God was never to be spoken in public. They did not believe that God could even hear their prayers in this foreign place.

Their spiritual crisis was even deeper than this. In this primitive time the defeat of a nation was understood to be a defeat for their God. This meant that their God had been demonstrated to be impotent in the face of the gods of Babylon. Their God had in effect been destroyed. If they were to continue to be believers, they would have to be, to use a phrase I would coin some 2600 years later, *"believers in exile"*. They were now separated from everything that under-girded their understanding of God. It was a crisis of dire proportions in which their God would either perish or grow. There were no other alternatives. Most ancient peoples did not survive such an ordeal. This norm had in fact been the fate of the people of the Northern Kingdom. In only two or three generations they had completely lost their identity and were soon absorbed into the general population, becoming what we now call the "ten lost tribes of Israel". The only hope a conquered people had for survival lay in their ability to remain separate and distinct from their neighbours, thus making it impossible for amalgamation to occur. The Jews now lived with the ultimate hope that someday, in some unknown future their descendants, if still cohesive and recognised as Jews, might just have the opportunity to return to their homeland and rebuild their nation and Jerusalem. This hope became their dream and the ultimate value for which they lived while in captivity.

Included among those who were taken into exile was the man we know as Ezekiel, along with a number of other priests. Almost inevitably they became the new leaders of the exiled people, moving at once to build and to install into the consciousness of these conquered people the virtues of remaining separate from the Babylonians and to guarantee that their descendants would cling to the dream and the tribal duty of returning someday to their homeland. In the service of that dream these priestly leaders identified three essential marks of Judaism that they set out to stamp so deeply on the psyches of their people that they would serve to keep them separate from the others in Babylon. Firstly, they reintroduced the Sabbath, making it the sign of their national identity. These Jews became known as those strange people who refused to work on the seventh day. This custom disrupted work crews to which they had been assigned as labourers, causing frustration and anger to grow among the Babylonians, but it also served to identify the Jews as "different", perhaps weird, thus aiding the Jewish desire to remain separate. Secondly, these priestly leaders urged upon their people the adoption of kosher dietary laws, mandating that the food that the captive people ate had to be prepared in kosher kitchens. This meant, effectively, that all social discourse with those who were not Jews was cut off. Since Jews could not eat with non-Jews, this meant that there was little chance that close relationships could ever grow, since most human relationships develop in the act of eating together. Thirdly, these priestly leaders revived the practice of circumcision as the distinguishing mark of Judaism, literally cutting that mark into the bodies of every Jewish male at the time of puberty. This made it impossible for a Jewish male to hide his Judaism from the world, which also served to make intermarriage difficult. The plan worked. The Jews became a people separate from all others. All of these practices were seen to be religious mandates. Ezekiel and his priestly leaders then decided that the sacred story of the Jewish people had to be revised to include these mandates as part of Jewish life and practice from the very beginning of their nation's history. They now undertook a major editorial revision of what had been the Yahwist-Elohism-Deuteronomistic story of the Jewish people. This fourth strand of material was to be called the priestly or the "P" document and to its content I will turn next week.

- John Shelby Spong

## **Part VIII: The Priestly Revision of the Jewish Sacred Story (B)**

While the first wave of Jews entered the Babylonian Exile around the year 596, a second wave came in 586 after a rebellion was put down by the Babylonians and all of the identifiable descendants of King David were executed. Both groups of captive people carried with them their sacred story, which at that time consisted of the merger of the Yahwist strand from the dominant land of Judah, the Elohist strand produced by the breakaway Northern Kingdom and the book of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic revisions of the entire text carried out probably by Jeremiah and the Deuteronomic writers with the encouragement of King Josiah. When they left their Babylonian captivity, which they did in waves from 50 to 150 years later, that text had been completely rewritten and greatly expanded by a group of priestly writers, one of whom appears to have been the prophet Ezekiel. Now the Jewish sacred story reflected two things: the Jewish struggle for survival, which they had accomplished by making isolation from their captors a primary religious requirement, and a new understanding of their ultimate mission in this world, which was to return someday to their sacred soil, rebuild their capital city of Jerusalem and restore their ordered life of worship centred, as it had previously been, in the Temple. It was the stated mission of the priestly writers to create such a deep sense of what it meant to be Jews that their identity would never again be compromised individually or corporately. This could only be done by asserting that their sacred scriptures were in fact the absolute law of God, that these scriptures expressed the will of God for them and that their obedience to the Torah must be total and complete. So the priestly writers edited the sacred text of the Jews to illustrate that the story of their ancestors included the mandates of Sabbath observance, kosher dietary laws and the absolute requirement that all of the males of the tribe be circumcised. They also wrote into the Torah rules that were to govern every aspect of their common life. Representing a monumental revision, the priestly writers set about to accomplish this literary task, and accomplish it they did.

The opening segment of the Torah was rewritten to reflect God's command at the beginning of the world that all Jews must obey the Sabbath. This was a new creation story, actually modelled on a Babylonian story of God creating the world in a specific number of days. It suggested that creation was accomplished in six days so that God could obey the Sabbath by resting from the divine labours on that day, thus setting the pattern for all Jews to follow. This creation narrative moved from the idea of the spirit of God brooding over the chaos of darkness to bring forth life to the story of how light was separated from darkness on the first day. On the second day a firmament to be called "heaven" was made to separate the waters above the earth, from whence the rains came, from the waters below that presumably at that time covered the entire planet. On the third day the waters of the earth were gathered into one place and called the seas, and thus separated from the dry land which was to be called the earth. This enabled the dry land to bring forth grass, herbs, fruit trees and vegetables to be used for food as soon as living things arrived. On the fourth day God created the sun to light the day and the moon to light the night, dividing day from night and creating both seasons and years. God was also said to have made the stars on that day. On the fifth day the fish of the sea and the birds of the air were created and ordered to fill the sea and the air. On the sixth day God made the beasts of the fields and "everything that creeps in the earth." Finally, on that same day as the last divine act, God made the man and the woman, together, instantaneously, both in the image of God. These human parents were also ordered to be fruitful, to multiply and to fill the earth. The work of creation was now finished and God pronounced it to be complete and good. So on the seventh day God inaugurated the Sabbath of rest, blessed it and hallowed it; enjoining its observance upon the subsequent generations of the Jewish people as their sacred duty. This whole creation story was the product of the priestly school in the Babylonian Exile and was designed, not to inform people about what happened at the dawn of creation, but in order to make observance of the Sabbath the original and defining mark of Judaism. It was the opening salvo of the priestly writers' campaign to reshape the sacred story of the Jews in order to aid their goal of tribal survival as a distinct group of people living in and through a critical experience.

Once that purpose in the creation story is understood, then the other priestly editorial changes can be noted and understood. In the story about God providing manna to the hungry Jews in the wilderness on their original trek from slavery in Egypt to what they believed was their Promised Land, the priestly writers inserted new details to reinforce the Sabbath. The manna from heaven was said now to have fallen only on six days of the week so that neither God in sending, nor the people in gathering up this heavenly gift had to work on the Sabbath.

When the priestly writers came to the story of the Ten Commandments being given by God at Mt. Sinai, they added their creation story motif to the Sabbath Day Commandment as commentary. The earlier reason for the Sabbath (see Deuteronomy 5) was that the Jews were to remember from their days of slavery in Egypt that even

slaves are entitled to a day of rest. It had nothing to do with a creation story since that story had not yet been written. Now, however, that was the reason the Commandments gave for a strict observance of the Sabbath.

The priestly writers then sought in their revision to locate each of the distinctive marks of Judaism in the earlier narratives in order to attribute them all to Moses. So the kosher dietary laws were written into the Book of Leviticus as the commands of God through Moses. Circumcision was placed into the stories of both Abraham and Moses as something mandated by God. The elaborate rites of Jewish worship were spelled out in detail and adapted to their exile status, so that they could be observed even in captivity. Synagogues, as local teaching centres, were established to compensate for the loss of the Temple. Even the story of Noah was adapted so that Noah would have on board sufficient animals to carry out all of the required ritual sacrifices without jeopardizing the future of any species of which there was supposedly only a single pair that made it into the ark.

The revision process of the sacred story went on for perhaps as long as 200 years. It was thus not the product of a single author or even of a single generation, but it accomplished its stated purpose. It stamped an identity on the Jewish people that became indelible. The Torah or Sacred Scriptures of the Jews was now the Jahwist-Elohistic-Deuteronomistic-Priestly version. The text had more than doubled in size. Great chunks of new material had been added, mostly to govern worship and behaviour. Priestly additions included almost all of the Book of Exodus after the story of Sinai (Exodus 20), all of the Book of Leviticus and significant parts of Numbers, as well as editorial revisions of the entire text. It may not have come into its finished form until as late as the fourth century BCE. There is a narrative in the Book of Nehemiah (Chapter 8) in which a group of the Jewish people, having returned from the Exile and having rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem, were gathered "before the Water Gate." There upon orders from the Governor, Nehemiah, Ezra the priest had brought to him "The book of the law of Moses" and he proceeded to read it to them in its entirety. This reading occurred, we are told, on the first day of the seventh month of the Jewish year. That was the day on which the New Year or Rosh Hashanah was to be celebrated and the people covenanted to be bound by this law. What Ezra read on that day was in all probability pretty much the substance of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible.

Two results of this new text of the law of God through Moses would soon affect the pattern of Jewish history. First, the passion to keep separate from Gentile infiltration in order to survive as a recognized people in exile got interpreted, when they returned to their homeland, to be a passion for ethnic purity. Genealogies were kept so that people could demonstrate their blood lines and prove their unpolluted Jewish heritage. This led to purges of those husbands, wives and children who were not demonstrably full blooded Jews, as well as to the judgment, found in New Testament times, that Gentiles were by definition unclean and thus to be avoided. It also led to the violent prejudice against those who came to be called Samaritans. These were the descendents of the people who had been brought in to resettle the land after the Jews had been exiled to Babylon, who had intermarried with those few Jews who had been left behind. Not only was their Jewishness compromised, but their religion was also corrupted by foreign and thus pagan elements. This meant that prejudices went deep and were justified by appeals to the "word of God" found in the Law of Moses. In time this prejudice against both the unclean Gentiles and the heretical Samaritans would reach such high levels of intensity that it produced protest books like Jonah and Ruth that somehow managed to remain in the Jewish Scriptures. Jonah expressed God's concern for Gentiles and Ruth suggested that even King David would not have passed the racial purity test. The other result was the elevation of the Torah into the status of being the "Holy of Holies" in the Jewish Scriptures and this led to the synagogue practice of requiring the Torah to be read in its entirety on the Sabbaths of a single year in the stricter observing congregations and over three years in those less strict. The essence of Judaism was said to be the "law and the prophets." The Torah was the law. We will turn to the prophets when this series continues.

- John Shelby Spong

## Part IX: The Judges - Transition Between the Law and the Prophets

When one initiates a series of columns on the origins of the Bible and how it came to be written, there are inevitably times when there are transitions. They are not the most exciting part of the story, but they are essential if one is going to hear the story in its entirety. We come to such a transition part of the story in this column. Let me set the stage. Thus far we have examined the development of the Torah, the name by which the Jews refer to the first five books of the Bible. Though they are popularly known as "The Book of Moses", today scholars are universal in denying the Mosaic authorship of these books for three reasons that, upon examination, seem quite obvious. Firstly, Moses had been dead some 300 years before the first verse of the Torah was written, making it, shall we say, somewhat impossible for him to be its author. Secondly, the Torah contains an account (Deuteronomy 34) of Moses' death and burial, a rather remarkable thing for an author to be able to write. Thirdly, an analysis of the Torah reveals it to be the combination of at least four separate strands of material written over a period of some 500 years from 950BC (BCE) to 450BC, but reflecting events in Israel's earlier history. Recent scholarship has finally and completely dismissed one of the prevailing fantasies marking biblical literalism. In this week's column, we transition beyond the Torah and toward the prophets.

Jewish tradition was built on the "twin towers" of the law and the prophets. Moses was the Jewish face of the law and his name became a synonym for the law. The prophets, however, were not identified with a person in the same way, even though Elijah has been designated, I think inaccurately, as the father of the prophetic movement. Elijah lived in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century BC, a time in which the Jewish people were divided into competing nations, the Northern Kingdom, with its capital in Samaria and Judah with its capital in Jerusalem. Elijah was identified with the Northern Kingdom.

The Torah (Genesis-Deuteronomy) covers Jewish history from the moment of creation to the time when Israel was poised on the edge of what they called "The Promised Land". The Exodus and the Conquest of Canaan are located in the 1250-1200BC period. The prophetic movement appears in the reign of King David, but its golden age does not arrive until the 8<sup>th</sup> Century BC. So there is a considerable gap of time between the Torah and the prophets. During this gap the solitary Jewish nation divided through a civil war into two separate nations. The Northern Kingdom lasted until 721BC, when it was destroyed by the Assyrians and the nation called Judah lasted until 586, when it was destroyed and its people exiled to the land of the Babylonians. These constitute the stories related in the biblical books from Judges to II Kings, which now come into our focus. These books probably do not give us much real history. They are rather filled with folk tales, hero stories and national propaganda, but they do provide information into the character of Judaism. We look first at the books of Joshua and Judges.

It is still a much debated question as to whether Joshua was a historic person. Historians wonder whether the conquest of the land of Canaan was done in a single military conflict resulting in a Jewish victory, as the Bible suggests, or whether that conquest occurred over hundreds of years as marauding Semitic bands settled in this land and only later did their stories merge into a consistent Jewish history. What we do have in the biblical story is that Joshua was the successor to Moses and that he was of the tribe of Ephraim, which made him a member of one of the two Joseph tribes that would some day constitute the bulk of the Northern Kingdom. Many Moses stories appear to have been wrapped around Joshua. Certainly the splitting of the Jordan River so that the people of Israel could walk across it on dry land on their way to conquer Jericho is a Red Sea story being retold. The conquest of Canaan by Joshua is portrayed in the Bible as being total, but later history shows Jews and Canaanites living side by side and even intermarrying long after Joshua, which would seem to indicate that Joshua enjoyed something less than total victory.

The Book of Joshua actually only relates three major military campaigns: The Battle of Jericho, which is told in great detail; the battle against the kings of the South and the battle against the kings of the North, both of which have scant details. If you read the word *kings* here as if they were more like mayors of various villages, you would have a truer picture of these battles. After these three campaigns the Bible suggests that the people settled down into loosely-knit confederations under the leadership of local judges. The period of the Judges in Jewish history produced folk tales, hero stories and myths that are quite distinct even in the Bible. People tend not to be familiar with these stories, except for the narrative about the strong man, Samson and of his dramatic undoing at the hands of his lover, Delilah. As delightful as the story of Samson is, it is only one of many that we find in the Book of Judges. There is also the account of Jael, who finds the number one enemy of her people, a Canaanite general named Sisera, delivered miraculously into her hands. After giving him a glass of milk laced

with sufficient drugs to render him unconscious, she proceeds to nail his head to the floor with a mallet and a tent peg. It is a rather gory story! There is also the story of Jephthah and his rash vow to sacrifice anyone who comes out to greet him on his return from a military victory. The innocent one who gets trapped in this vow turns out to be his own daughter. Then there was the story of Ehud, the left-handed judge, who managed to drive his sword so deeply into the stomach of Eglon, the hugely fat king of Moab, that his hand actually disappeared in the king's flesh. Perhaps the most repellent story in the Bible is the narrative in the Book of Judges about a man who travels with his concubine to Jerusalem where, to save himself from abuse, he offers his concubine to the men of the city for gang rape. When they have done their worst to her, they threw her unconscious body on the porch of the home where this man was staying. He then proceeds to carve this woman into twelve pieces, sending part of her to each of the twelve tribes of Israel to call them to arms (Judges 19). The stories found in the Book of Judges are not necessarily the passages one reads in church and then says, "This is the word of the Lord!"

This period in Jewish history when local judges were the real rulers might best be understood as analogous to that period of American history when the people of this nation lived under the articles of confederation as a loose union of states with little or no national power. Having just endured the life of submissive colonies ruled by a foreign power, these early Americans were not eager to cede local authority to anyone. The Israelites also had searing memories of their oppression at the hands of the Egyptians and so, having found freedom, they were also not eager to be submissive to a distant authority again. That is a natural reaction, but it is hardly ever a permanent solution. The American Colonies would never have maintained their independent life had they not become a unified nation. The tribes of Israel would never have maintained their independent life had they not become a nation. The new union in both nations was, we recall, quite fragile and was tested by secession. It was 80 years after the kingship of David was established that the ten Northern tribes seceded from the nation ruled by the tribe of Judah. It was 73 years after the United States established the central government, under the presidency of George Washington that secession from this union occurred that ultimately involved eleven states. The process of nation building seems to go through certain inevitable stages.

The period of the Judges came to an end under the leadership of the final judge, whose name was Samuel. He is clearly the pivotal figure in this period of Israel's history between being a people in the wilderness and having an established nation. As seems to be the case with every pivotal figure in Jewish history, Samuel becomes a model for Jewish messianic thinking. Certainly the Jesus story shows the influence of Samuel. Samuel had something of a miraculous birth. His mother, Hannah, had been unable to have children until, as the story says, God intervened to answer her prayers. When Samuel was born Hannah was said to have sung a song that is quite similar to the Song of Mary that we call the Magnificat. When Luke tells the story of Jesus going up to the Temple at the age of twelve, there are many similarities with Hannah taking Samuel to the shrine where Eli the priest lived.

Samuel is also the pivotal figure in the establishment of the monarchy. At first he was said to have resisted the pressure to have a king, warning the people that kings can be tyrants and yet he anoints Saul to be the first king of the unified Jewish nation. When Saul proved to be a poor choice, Samuel sought out and anointed a shepherd boy named David, the son of Jesse, to be the second king and it was David who established the lasting monarchy. It was also during the reign of King David that a lone man, armed with nothing except a sense of his belief in the immutable moral law of God, challenged King David publicly for what he believed was the king's immoral behaviour. By this act this man established the prophetic principle, which was rare indeed among the ancient nations, that even the king must live under and be judged by the law of God. Ultimately this principle would make Israel a very different nation from all of the rest. To this man's story and its role in the rise of the prophetic movement we will turn when this series continues.

**– John Shelby Spong**

## Part X

### The Rise of the Prophetic Movement: Nathan – Prophecy's Father

The prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures are not religious versions of Drew Pearson or Jeane Dixon. They do not predict future events. Prophets are those who are in touch with values, truth, perhaps we could call it God, and who thus see the issues of life more deeply than other people see them. Perhaps they are the ones who, by standing on the shoulders of others, can perceive future trends and speak to them before others see them developing.

We have known artists to whom prescience has been attributed. A well known Spanish painter, for example, painted a scene several years before the Spanish Civil War that portrayed his country torn apart in a violent struggle. The Bible might well have called him prophetic. He saw what there was to be seen, but not everyone was able to see it. The power of the prophets was also derived not from the established structures of the social order, but from the prophet's vision. They were always outside the lives of either political or ecclesiastical authority. As such, they were what King Ahab called the prophet Elijah, "Troublers of Israel". The established priesthood always resented the prophets for they were not ordained or trained. They were free spirits who somehow spoke with an authority that established figures wished they possessed. The ability to speak to authority in a way that demanded the authority's attention was the signal mark of the prophetic spirit.

None of this, however, answers the question of just why it was that the role of the prophet was able to rise in Israel to such heights that the religion of Israel was said to rest with equal weight on the law (the Torah) and the prophets. It all began, I believe, in a charismatic confrontation between Israel's most powerful king and a man armed only with a sense of God's righteousness. That story is told in the Second Book of Samuel and it remains powerful today.

King David lived in the biggest and tallest house in the city of Jerusalem, which meant that when he was out on his roof top he could look at the roof tops of all of Jerusalem's citizens. One afternoon when he was doing just that, he spied a beautiful woman taking a bath in what she assumed was the privacy of her own roof top. The king was smitten with her charms and at once sent a messenger to her with an invitation to visit the palace to have a tryst with her king. The woman came. Perhaps in the power equations of that world she had no choice, perhaps she wanted to come, the text doesn't tell us and so we will never know. The two of them, nonetheless, became lovers at least for this brief time. When the lovemaking was over, the woman, whose name was Bathsheba, returned to her home. I suspect this was neither the first nor the last such affair that King David had had and so he did not think much about it once the rendezvous had ended. So it was that that weeks passed and memories faded until they were newly called to mind by a message arriving at the palace directed to the king's eyes alone. The message read: "King David, I need for you to know that I am expecting your child." It was signed, Bathsheba.

When David read it, he responded in a typically male, evasive way. "You are a married woman", he said. That is the first time that we learn from the biblical source that this tryst was an adulterous relationship that the king had had with a married woman. "Why do you assume that I am the father of this baby?" To which Bathsheba responded immediately, "I am indeed a married woman, but my husband Uriah is a soldier in the king's army. He has been fighting the king's wars under Joab, the king's military leader and thus he has not been home for months. There is no doubt, O King, that you are this baby's father." Still unwilling to accept responsibility, the king decided on an alternative course of action. It was plan B. He would grant Uriah a furlough so that Uriah could then come home, enjoy the privilege of his wife's bed and then, in this pre-DNA testing world, they could say this baby came early. It would not be the first time that tactic had been employed. So this permission for leave was conveyed by a royal messenger to the field and a very surprised Uriah found himself being granted an unprecedented furlough. What King David did not anticipate, however, was that Uriah had the make up of the "original boy scout". He was a soldier first, drunk with the camaraderie of warfare. "It would not be fair or appropriate for me to enjoy the comforts of my home and my wife while my buddies are bleeding and dying on the battlefield from which I have somehow been removed. Therefore, in solidarity with them", he concluded, "I will not enter my home on this leave." Very ostentatiously Uriah set up a pup tent on the walk beside his home and spent his entire leave there. On viewing this, David, feeling trapped, said: "What a turkey" and began to develop Plan C. Once again a sealed royal order was conveyed to Joab, the commanding officer, this time by the hand of Uriah himself. In this letter David commanded Joab to organise his army into a flying wedge and

hurl it at the gates of his enemy's capital city. Uriah was to be placed at the front tip of the flying wedge, where his death was all but inevitable. It was done. Uriah was struck down and killed. Joab then notified the king that his problem was now solved. King David sent for Bathsheba and she became a member, perhaps the dominant member, of his harem. Finally King David felt that his problem was solved.

This outrageous kingly behaviour, however, did not escape the notice of a highly respected holy man whose name was Nathan. He decided that he must confront the king about the king's action. The reputation of Nathan was such that the king, unsuspecting of what was to come, granted him the audience that he requested. It must have been a strange confrontation. Here was King David in his royal chambers surrounded by all the wealth, power and opulence of royalty. Standing before him was Nathan, armed only with a sense of righteousness that is contained in what he believed was the moral law of God and the universe. When the two of them were alone Nathan said to the king that an episode of gross injustice in the king's realm had occurred and that Nathan felt compelled to bring it to the king's attention. The king encouraged Nathan to speak on. Nathan did so in terms of a parable.

A certain poor man, he told the king, had a single ewe lamb that was treated as a pet in his family. This lamb was fed from the family's table, slept in the family's home and shared in the family's love. Another man who lived nearby, Nathan continued, was very wealthy and owned great flocks of sheep. One day this rich man had a distinguished visitor that he was required by the mores of his culture to honour by entertaining him at a banquet. Instead of taking a lamb from his own flocks, however, he went to the house of his poor neighbour, took his only ewe lamb, slaughtered, dressed and roasted it and set it before his guest. The rich man and his guest dined sumptuously while the poor man and his family were grief stricken. Nathan let the pathos hang as he finished his story. David, upon hearing this tale, was filled with anger and declared: "The man who has done this thing must surely die".

Then in one of the Bible's most dramatic moments, Nathan fixed his eyes on the king and said: "Thou art the man!" The king, thought to be all powerful, had been called to answer for his deeds. No one is above the law of God, he learned. That was a lesson rare in the ancient world, indeed it was a message unique to the people of Israel. David might have been divinely chosen to be king, as the biblical story suggests, but the King of Israel still lived under the authority of the law of God and must answer for his behaviour. David, to his great credit, did not banish Nathan from his presence, but heard the voice of God through the words of Nathan and publicly repented. He sought to do acts of restitution. When the child of this adulterous liaison died shortly after his birth, David and the biblical writers interpreted this death as divine punishment. Perhaps in a further act of trying to make things right, David lifted Bathsheba out of his harem and into the public role as his queen. Their second child was born a while later. His name was Solomon and he was to be the successor to David's throne and to solidify the royal line of David that was destined to last, at least the Southern Kingdom, for over 400 years until it was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586BC (BCE).

For Nathan's act of courage to be included in the Jewish Scriptures meant that this episode had entered the annals of Jewish memory. By becoming part of the sacred text of the Jewish people, it was destined to be read in worship settings over the centuries and in time to become identified as a mark of Judaism. In retrospect, Nathan was called a prophet and because of that the prophet's role in Jewish life was established. It was the duty of the prophets to speak for God in the citadels of power, to claim for God's law a place of absolute influence and to assert that there is no one in the land who was not subject to the law of God. Monarchy was not absolute in Israel from that moment on.

Nathan originated the prophetic role in Israel. He established Israel as the one nation where no one's power would be above the power of the law. This was the reality that made the Jewish nation different from all the other nations of the ancient world. Certainly it was this nation alone that was destined to produce the prophetic tradition that would become so strong that it was not "the law and the Temple" but "the law and the prophets", that would characterise this people. We will look at a number of the prophetic voices as this series on the origins of the Bible continues.

**- John Shelby Spong**

## Part XI - The Meaning of the Prophets

If one takes the Book of Daniel out of the Old Testament, a much clearer view of the prophets of Israel becomes visible. Daniel, written during the time of the Maccabees and not during the Persian period, as it pretends to be, really doesn't fit. The fact is the Book of Daniel should be in the Apocrypha, not in the Old Testament, but that would upset those people who like to predict the end of the world by quoting from this source.

If one excises Daniel, the remaining prophetic works of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and what was originally called the Book of the Twelve, but what we now call the "minor prophets", including everything from Hosea to Malachi, can be looked at through a number of lenses. First of all, if we treat the Book of the Twelve as a single volume, which is the way the Jews regarded them, we note that along with Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel they are about the same length. The reason for this has nothing to do with the profundity of the content, but with the length of the scroll on which the words were written. That also helps us to understand why new writings, judged worthy of inclusion in the sacred texts, were simply added to an available scroll if there was space. Jeremiah and Ezekiel seem to be authentic wholes written by a single author, but Isaiah and obviously the Book of the Twelve are not. Isaiah has been identified as the work of at least three writers who are separated in time by as much as three hundred years. The Book of Zechariah, one of the Twelve, is today viewed as the work of at least two writers (1-8 and 9-14), separated in time by a minimum of at least a century. There is even widespread speculation that the final book of the Twelve, Malachi, is really III Zechariah (which would make it chapters 15-18) and that this is why this book has no name, Malachi being a word that means "my messenger". I go into these preliminary explanations to set the stage for our consideration of the content of these various books of the Bible called the Prophets, more specifically, the Writing Prophets, whose work was incorporated into the Sacred Scriptures of the Jewish people.

The prophet's role had been a part of Jewish life since the days of Samuel, who lived in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century BC. Samuel, however, was more the last of the judges of Israel than the first of the prophets. He was, nonetheless, a pivotal figure in Jewish history. Earlier in this series, I related the story of Nathan and the role he played in the history of the Jewish prophetic movement. By confronting King David, in the name of the moral law of God, Nathan established the prophet's true identity. It was and is to speak for God outside the structures of ecclesiastical authority, but inside the citadels of national power. Elijah and Elisha continued Nathan's understanding and earned for themselves and for the prophets of the future the title bestowed on Elijah by King Ahab: "The troublers of Israel" (I Kings 18:17). There is no such thing as a self-proclaimed prophet, a fact that is widely misunderstood by religious folk. To be "a prophet in residence" is not a role for which one can apply, nor can anyone study for a prophetic career. The designation of prophet is bestowed by history alone and normally well after the end of the potential prophet's career. Prophets are recognised in retrospect and posthumously.

Are there any modern day prophets who might help us to understand the role more adequately? One thinks immediately of two: Martin Luther King, Jr. and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. King spoke from outside the power structures of both church and state when he became the voice of America's black population, segregated from the mainstream of society and wrapped in the cocoon of prejudice and fear. King confronted the political world with the unwillingness of the black population to continue accepting the status of outcasts. He confronted the leaders of the ecclesiastical establishment in his letter from a Birmingham jail. He was regularly arrested by local police, vilified by local politicians and newspapers, spied on with telephone taps by none less than J. Edgar Hoover, the closeted homosexual director of the FBI and ultimately he was murdered when he sought to lead the garbage workers' strike in Memphis. King gave hope and dignity to his people. He called the nation into both repentance for the past and dreams for a society based on justice in the future. In that society he said the value assigned to people was that they should be judged by "the content of their character" rather than by the "colour of their skin". Well after his death in 1968, a grateful nation acknowledged his prophetic leadership and created a national holiday to honour his memory. Forty years after his death, his legacy can still be seen in the fact that an African-American named Barack Obama is now the nominee of the Democratic Party to be the president of the United States, an unthinkable thought in pre-Martin Luther King days. In campaigning for the nomination, Senator Obama quoted Dr. King every time people suggested he was too young, too inexperienced for the high office he sought. Dr. King had referred "to the fierce urgency of now". When forces of change coalesce around a candidate and lift that candidate to centre stage, it is the signal that the time is now. "This is our time, our moment", he declared and the people responded. The history of this nation was changed by Dr. King. It was fitting that after his death, this nation designated him a prophet.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn spoke through his literary talents to the centres of Communist power in the old Soviet Union. Unable to bear the weight of his words, he suffered the prophet's fate. The Soviet leaders had him expelled from the writers' union, imprisoned in the gulags of his day and finally banished from his homeland. They were unwilling to execute this nemesis to the established order because the intellectuals of the world publicly came to his support. People as diverse as Jean Paul Sartre in France; W. H. Auden in England; and Arthur Miller, Truman Capote and John Updike in America, made the Soviet treatment of Solzhenitsyn a matter of international concern. While Solzhenitsyn lived in exile in Vermont, his books were read everywhere. *'One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich'* and *'The Gulag Archipelago'* among others, made the case against the demeaning of humanity by his government a worldwide concern. People in the West thought of him as their champion, not understanding that the prophet is not the servant of anyone, but the truth. This became obvious, however, when Solzhenitsyn was invited to be the commencement speaker at Harvard in 1978. People across the United States and the western world expected to hear words of commendation from one who would validate their positions. This expectation was a clear example of the old adage that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend". A prophet like Solzhenitsyn, however, served a different master and, as prophets tend to do, he marched to the beat of his own drummer. In that address he called America "spiritually weak, mired in materialism". He chastised our government for its weakness in the defeat in Vietnam, suggesting that our leaders had been too hasty in retreating before the evils of communism to satisfy local political pressures. He went on to criticise the press for violating the standards of decency and any government that believed it could defend freedom by using the tactics of dictators, like tapping telephones, invading privacy and launching wars of aggression.

Under President Vladimir Putin, Solzhenitsyn was finally allowed in his old age to return to Russia, where he recently died. His death was a front page story in America, with long biographical sketches detailing his role in history. In Russia, his death was merely noted with no attendant fanfare, fulfilling the observation made by Jesus of Nazareth that a prophet is not without honour "save in his own community or among his own people". Tributes, however, do not make a prophet. Prophets rise after their deaths when people begin to realise that someone of great vision has lived among them. In two generations Solzhenitsyn will be hailed as a prophet, honoured in his homeland, ranked with literary giants like Tolstoy and Chekhov, as one who has made a difference.

That is also the way it was with the biblical prophets. Each of them was dead long before their writings were lifted into the body of Sacred Scripture by their descendants. For example, it was only when the Jewish powers-that-be decided that Isaiah, Amos, Micah and Zechariah were prophets, whose words demanded to be heard by every generation, that they were moved from the status of being words of a troublemaker into being words in which the voice of God is heard. Do all of the biblical prophets speak with equal weight and authority? Of course not! I do not believe the world would be significantly poorer if the words of Haggai, Nahum or Zephaniah had not been preserved. The fact is that most people who say they value the Bible today have no idea what the message of these books was or is. Yet people are still moved by Hosea's understanding of God as love; by Amos' portrait of God as justice; by Micah's clear distinction between liturgy and life; by Jonah's understanding of universality and by the magnificent portraits of the "servant" found in II Isaiah and the "Good Shepherd" found in II Zechariah. It was largely through the words of the prophets that 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jewish people processed their experience with Jesus of Nazareth.

We turn now in this series on the Origins of the Bible to look at some of these prophets. I invite you, my readers, to break out of your stained glass prisons in which the power of the prophets has been lost and to enter with me into the study of these voices that the Jews called "the prophets" and begin to understand how they shaped our history and our lives.

– John Shelby Spong

## Part XII - Introducing the Prophet Isaiah

Bernard Baruch, a Jewish American from Camden, South Carolina, was well known in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as the unofficial advisor to Presidents. He played key roles in the think tanks of Presidents Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman. As the son of a surgeon who served on the staff of Confederate General Robert E. Lee, dealing with power seemed to come naturally to him. David Gergen, a native of Durham, North Carolina, played a similar role in American history in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as an advisor to Presidents Nixon, Ford, Reagan, George H. W. Bush and Clinton. Baruch and Gergen are representatives of that rare ability to ride a long political tide and to provide objective analysis in the midst of partisan conflict and thus to guide the ship of state through choppy waters.

The biblical figure we call "I Isaiah" played a similar role in the ancient world. His writings are found in Isaiah, chapters 1-39. His life spanned the reigns of four monarchs who ruled in Jerusalem. Kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, according to Old Testament scholar William F. Albright, ruled between 783-687 BC, a total of 96 years. Isaiah was centre stage for more than 50 of them, a tribute to his longevity. He emerged into public view, he says, "In the year that King Uzziah died" and he lived through one of the most difficult periods of Jewish history.

The great power abroad in those days was Assyria. This warlike nation had succeeded in conquering or reducing to vassalage status most of the nations in the Middle East. It was the Assyrians who in 721 BC destroyed the Northern Kingdom of the Jews, known as Israel and deported its people from their land for resettlement in the Assyrian Empire, from whence they never returned. They became known as the ten lost tribes of Israel and despite the mythology that developed over the years with people claiming to be descendants of these "Lost Tribes", the fact is that these Jews simply disappeared into the DNA of the Middle East. It was the same fate that had befallen the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Amalekites and the Edomites before them.

The Prophet Isaiah may himself have been a member of the royal family, all of whom were descendants of King David. He certainly shared their life style, educational background, values and perspectives. Perhaps it was this "blood relative" connection that provided the doorway through which he walked into his prophetic and perhaps priestly career in the upper echelons of political power in Jerusalem.

A number of passages in Isaiah have entered the consciousness of the western world sufficiently to be familiar to many people. Among them is his oracle about whether or not God was moved by ritualistic activity and sacrifices. In chapter 1, Isaiah writes: *"What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? I have had enough of the burnt offering of rams...I do not delight in the blood of goats...Incense is an abomination to me. When you spread forth your hands, I will lift my eyes from you. Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen..."* It was a powerful denunciation of worship designed to manipulate the deity and a call instead to "Remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do good, seek justice, correct oppression, defend the fatherless and plead for the widow." The tension between the words and acts of worship and the quality of the lives of the worshipers has always been present in both Jewish and Christian religious life.

Also in Chapter 1 are the words that President Lyndon Johnson quoted regularly during his days as Senate Majority Leader and later in the White House: "Come let us reason together, saith the Lord". Unfortunately, Johnson's idea of reasoning together was for his opponents to line up, drop their pants and have the LBJ brand burned into what the Bible called "their hindquarters".

Probably the most influential passage of Isaiah in religious history occurs in the seventh chapter, where the prophet writes in verse 14 the words that were later translated to read: "Behold a virgin will conceive and bring forth a son and you shall call his name Immanuel". That text was the inspiration that caused Matthew, the writer of the second gospel, to create the narrative that we now know as the Virgin Birth. That story, which did not enter the Christian tradition until the 9<sup>th</sup> Decade of the Christian era, was destined to shape both the Christian creeds and later doctrinal development. The facts are that neither Paul, who wrote between 51-64, nor Mark, written in the early 70s, had ever heard of this virgin birth tradition. Paul says of Jesus' birth only that he was born of a woman like everyone else and that he was born "under the law" like every Jew (Galatians 4:4). Mark portrays Jesus' mother as thinking that her adult son was out of his mind and seeking to put him away (Mark 3:19-35). That is hardly the behaviour of one whom an angel had promised, "the child to be born will be called holy, the Son

of God" (Luke 1:35). Matthew clearly misused this text, whether by design or by mistake we will never know. First, he did not quote Isaiah accurately. The original Hebrew in Isaiah 7 does not say, "Behold a virgin will conceive", it says, "Behold a woman is with child". These two statements are clearly not the same and the Christian Church has known of this mistake since the middle years of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century, when Trypho the Jew pointed it out to Justin Martyr in a written dialogue whose contents are still available.

The second thing that is wrong with Matthew's peculiar use of the text is that the child who is anticipated by Isaiah was to be a sign to King Ahaz in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century BC that the besieging armies of King Pekah of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and King Rezin of Syria, who were surrounding Jerusalem at that moment, would not bring down the Holy City. Pekah and Resin had gone to war against Judah for not joining them in a defence alliance against the growing Assyrian power. King Ahaz preferred vassal status to defeat and so after this threat he signed a treaty with the Assyrians. The Northern Kingdom, bent on resistance, was destroyed. It was a straight line from Matthew's misquotation of this text to the inclusion of "born of the Virgin Mary" in the creeds, to the contents of the Christmas pageants, to the development in Christian history that turned Mary first into a virgin mother, then into a permanent virgin, then into a post partum virgin, then into herself being immaculately conceived and finally into being bodily assumed into heaven. Words do have power and ideas do have consequences.

The next part of Isaiah that has been influential in religious history is his description of what the coming of the Kingdom of God would mean that is found in his apocalyptic chapters 34 and 35. Here the prophet begs the nations of the world to listen. He informs them that the Lord is angry and will avenge the nations of the world for their evil and bring about the Kingdom of God on earth. It will be, said Isaiah, a day of vengeance against the enemies of God's people. Tribal religion was in full force. When "*The day of the Lord arrives*", Isaiah proclaimed, the signs will be that of fulfilment and wholeness. He writes: "*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and bloom, like the crocus, it shall bloom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a hart, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. The waters shall break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground, springs of water. And a highway shall be there, And it shall be called the holy way...And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, And come to Zion with singing.*" (Isaiah 35:1, 2, 5, 6, 8, 10)

This passage in Isaiah shaped the gospel story of Jesus dramatically. We need to be aware that it was Mark who first added miracles to the story of Jesus. Paul knew nothing about Jesus as a miracle worker. Matthew and Luke, both of whom copied substantial parts of Mark into their narratives, expanded the miracles and even connected them to Isaiah 35 so there would be no mistaking their source. According to Matthew and Luke, John the Baptist sent messengers to Jesus inquiring as to whether he was "the one who is to come (i.e. the messiah) or shall we look for another?" Jesus responded by saying, "Go tell John what you hear and see" and then he quotes Isaiah 35, claiming that the signs of the Kingdom are occurring in his life: The blind see, the deaf hear, the lame leap and the mute sing (see Matthew 11:1-6, Luke 7:18-23).

Well after his crucifixion, when the disciples of Jesus came to believe that in his life the Kingdom of God had actually arrived or at least the "first fruits" of that Kingdom had come, they placed the signs of the Kingdom into their story of Jesus. This is how the miracles came to be part of the story. They were not literal events, but signs that in Jesus the Kingdom of God was dawning. No, the Kingdom did not fully come with Jesus. His life was but a "foretaste of glory divine". For his work of establishing the Kingdom fully, Jesus was required to "come again". That is how the image of the second coming of Jesus became part of the Christian narrative.

These are a few of the major contributions of the prophet Isaiah to Christianity. It needs to be noted, however, that these contributions all come from chapters 1-39 of this book, which is from what scholars call I Isaiah. Chapters 40-55 were written by a second Isaiah and probably a third Isaiah wrote chapters 56-66. I will turn to II Isaiah when this series continues.

**John Shelby Spong**

## Part XIII: II Isaiah - The Figure of the "Servant"

If I were to ask an ordinary group of people, even church people, to tell me about the message of the prophet we call II Isaiah, I suspect I would be greeted by a glassy-eyed stare. Yet if I were to ask the same group if they had ever heard or even sung in a production of Handel's Oratorio, entitled "Messiah", almost every hand would go up. The sad fact about our educational system, both secular and ecclesiastical, is that few people seem to know that Handel's Messiah is in large measure a musical rendition of II Isaiah and that the "expected" one about whom II Isaiah writes in this work is not Jesus, but a mythical figure that we know simply as the "Servant", sometimes called the "Suffering Servant". It is about this "Servant", not Jesus, that Handel sets to music II Isaiah's words to form a magnificent contralto solo: "He was despised, rejected, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief". The confusion of the "Servant" with Jesus should not be surprising, since the earliest gospel, Mark, drew heavily upon II Isaiah to compose his narrative of the crucifixion. People are accustomed to reading the Good Friday story as if it were a historical recollection of Jesus' death. It is not. It is, rather, an interpretive portrait of Jesus' death drawn, not from eyewitnesses on the scene, but from II Isaiah. It is II Isaiah, not history, that supplied such familiar details in the crucifixion story as Jesus' silence before his accusers (Isaiah 55:7), the presence of the thieves on either side of him during his crucifixion (Isaiah 55:12) and the narrative of the rich man, Joseph of Arimathea, providing a tomb for his burial (Isaiah 53:9). The interpretation of Jesus' death as an act of vicarious suffering also originates in II Isaiah, as does the way the gospels and even St. Paul interpreted the meaning of the death of Jesus as one of vicarious suffering. It was the "Servant" who was punished in place of the guilty. It was about the "Servant" that II Isaiah wrote: "Surely he has borne our grief, yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted; but he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities, the chastisement of our peace was upon him and with his stripes we are healed" (Isaiah 53:4, 5 KJV).

Over the years, however, these words have been so deeply associated with Jesus in our memories that most people think they were actually written about him. The familiar Protestant interpretation of the cross, "Jesus died for my sins", comes directly from II Isaiah. The Catholic understanding of the Mass as a sacrifice, in which Jesus paid the price of Adam's fall to bring about salvation, is also drawn from II Isaiah. The words of II Isaiah have shaped Christianity so deeply that we have, by a process of religious osmosis, absorbed much of II Isaiah into our conscious and unconscious minds. When these words then got literalised in Christian history as doctrine and dogma, the significant distortions that mark the Christian faith today, that focus on blood, sacrifice, guilt and atonement, began to take shape. That was, however, not the original meaning of these words. What then was? And who is the "Servant"? To answer these questions we must undertake an historical analysis of II Isaiah, which is, I believe the most influential of all the Jewish prophetic works.

The book we call II Isaiah is made up of the words written by an unknown Jewish person who lived during the time that the Babylonian Exile was coming to an end, roughly between 550 and 500 BC. The thing that brought that exile to an end was the rise to power of the Persians (roughly modern day Iran), which challenged the hegemony of the Babylonians (roughly modern day Iraq). Cyrus, the king who led the Persian onslaught, awakened such hope among the captive Jews that II Isaiah described him with these words: "How beautiful upon the mountain are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace, that bringeth tidings of good that publisheth salvation, that saith unto Zion, thy God reigneth" (Isaiah 52:7 KJV). Cyrus was well known for his policy of allowing conquered peoples to return to their homeland and in this reputation the Jews vested their hopes. These exiled people, who were to be the beneficiaries of Cyrus' policy, were by now the grandchildren and great grandchildren of those who had originally been taken from their homes by the conquering Babylonian army some 50-60 years earlier. Thus they saw Cyrus as God's instrument, who would enable them to go home. The beauty of Jerusalem, the glory and grandeur of the land of the Jews, had been passed on by those who died in captivity to these second and third generation descendents who had never set a foot upon the land of the Jews. The fantasies accompanying their desire to return to that "promised land" clearly grew as they always do in the absence of reality. They were thrilled at the prospect of going "home". It was for this purpose that they kept themselves intact as an identifiable people. If they were going to reclaim what they believed was their national destiny, to be the "people through whom all the nations of the world would be blessed", they then had to restore their nation. That destiny would only come from a revived people who had reclaimed their place of honour among the nations and re-established the city of Jerusalem as the centre of the world, even as the place where heaven and earth touched. Those were the thoughts that motivated their yearning to return to the land of their ancestors. The defeated Babylonians were no longer their conquerors and so the migration back to their ancestral home began.

These exiles, however, were not prepared for the sight that greeted them when they reached the land of which they had dreamed for so long. Judah was a wasteland and Jerusalem a pile of rubble. It took only one glimpse of this devastation to put an end to their dreams and their hopes. There was no way a nation so defeated and so downtrodden could ever aspire to become "a light to enlighten the Gentiles". They saw no way that they could ever be "a blessing to the nations of the world". The unknown writer we call II Isaiah, seeing this, sank into a period of intense depression and darkness. He had to walk through his own "dark night of the soul". When he finally emerged, however, he took his quill in hand and began to sketch out a new role and a new vocation for the Jewish people, based on the now established fact that never again would they be powerful, never again could they dream about being rulers and never again would they be listed among the respected peoples of the world. In his dramatic words he personified the Jewish nation under a literary symbol that he simply called the "Servant". That is the context in which this mythical figure emerged in Jewish history.

It would be the role of the "Servant", wrote II Isaiah, to bear affliction, to endure the pain of being among the world's outcasts. The "Servant", however, must never respond to hatred with hatred or to hostility with hostility. The "Servant" must, rather, absorb these attacks upon his dignity and return them as kindness. The "Servant" would thus drain the world of its anger and in the process, transform that anger into love and thus create wholeness. The "Servant" would pay the price of the dis-ease of others by allowing that dis-ease to become his own without seeking to get even. In so doing the "Servant" would bring life to the world: "by his stripes we are healed". This new vocation for the "chosen people" of God was not popular. No one is drawn to the masochistic possibility of perpetual suffering. The human desire is always to get even, to act in self-protective ways and to achieve survival through the use of power. So II Isaiah's vicarious image of the "Servant", who suffered for others, languished. Yet the words of this unknown visionary Jew of the Exile were written into the blank space remaining on the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah. This meant that over the years his incredible words would be read periodically in the Synagogue and they would be endowed with the authority of the name Isaiah. In this way the words of II Isaiah, along with his portrait of a radically different role for the Jews in human history became, almost inadvertently, part of the scriptures of the Jewish people.

In the first century the disciples of a Jewish man named Jesus found in II Isaiah's portrait of the "Servant" a way that enabled them to understand and to interpret the meaning of their experience with the one who had taught them that love must embrace even their enemies and who himself was crucified for his efforts. They saw Jesus as the embodiment of the "Servant" role, that is, as one who would absorb the world's anger and hatred, transform it and give it back to them as love. So they leapt on this image and used it to tell the Jesus story.

Quite apart from this later Christian interpretation of II Isaiah, what we have in this remarkable book is the picture of a new breakthrough in human consciousness. Here in the words of this unknown 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC person, we see a portrait of human life that has finally transcended the survival mentality of our evolutionary past. If the "survival of the fittest", so natural to all living things in the jungle called life, is allowed in self-conscious human beings to become the purpose of living, then finally human life will grind down to a single survivor, upon whose death the grand experiment with self-conscious life will disappear from the face of the earth. As Gandhi once observed, if an eye for an eye is followed consistently enough, everyone becomes blind. We have arrived at the top of the world's food chain, but if we cannot evolve beyond that, genocide is our human destiny. Only a new consciousness can break this cycle. In II Isaiah a portrait of a human life that has transcended the survival mentality emerges, suggesting that life is a gift that is meant to be given in love for another. How amazing it is that an unknown Jew some 2600 years ago grasped this idea and portrayed it so eloquently, creating in the process the holiest part of Jewish religious history, carrying in his words hope for a human future. II Isaiah's inclusion in the Bible is one of the reasons we call that book "Holy Scripture".

**– John Shelby Spong**

## Part XIV: Jeremiah, the Prophet of Doom

The book of Jeremiah, the second of the Major Prophets in the Bible after Isaiah, is not only a large and complicated piece of writing, but it exhibits no narrative line that can easily be followed or recalled. Most people, including most clergy, could not cite a single passage from this book if you asked them to do so. The book of Jeremiah does not lend itself to memorable prose. I know of no major scholarly work that has been done specifically on this book. No one comes to mind who might be called a "Jeremiah scholar". Yet this book has shaped many aspects of our religious history and quite specifically has helped to form the Christian story.

Many of the familiar images that were incorporated into the birth narratives in the gospels of Matthew and Luke were originally found in Jeremiah. In chapters 26 and 27, Israel is referred to as a virgin who is to bring forth God's firstborn son, who will keep Israel as a shepherd keeps his flock. It is an image out of Jeremiah that portrays Rachel as "weeping for her children who were not", which Matthew quotes as the biblical basis for his story of King Herod killing the innocent boy babies in Bethlehem, in his effort to remove God's deliverer. The words in Jeremiah, "a righteous branch shall spring forth from the root of Jesse", the father of King David, "who will be called the Lord our righteousness", may have led to the popular theme that Jesus was the heir to the throne of David. The Hebrew word for root is "nazir", which may be what Matthew was referring to when he wrote that the prophets say Jesus would be called a "Nazarene". Even the story of Mary and Joseph finding no room in the inn, told only by Luke, may have been based on a passage from Jeremiah, who refers to "the hope of Israel" being treated as a stranger in the land by being turned aside", not able to stay "for even a night". Other biblical themes that find mention in Jeremiah deserve a brief mention.

1. Jeremiah along with Ezekiel, his younger colleague, are the biblical voices suggesting that individualism is beginning to appear in the land of Israel about the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC. "Every one shall die of his own sins", writes Jeremiah. Individualism will shape substantially the Jewish idea of life after death that emerges in their sacred writings, called the Apocrypha, around 200 BC.
2. There is in Jeremiah a hint of universalism that challenges the ancient tribal mentality. This prophet has God refer to Nebuchadnezzar twice as "my servant" and he sees the threat that the Babylonians represent as God's instrument for punishing the waywardness of God's people.
3. A theme finding expression in Matthew's Parable of the Judgment identifying God with justice appears in Jeremiah, who writes that "to know God is also to know the poor and needy".
4. The identification of Israel with a fig tree not bearing fruit and on which even the leaves have withered, may be the origin of the story told in Mark that Jesus laid a curse on a fig tree for not bearing fruit, just before the cleansing of the Temple. That fig tree withered to its roots.
5. The words of the Negro Spiritual "There is a balm in Gilead" come from a text in Jeremiah.
6. Jeremiah, like the book of Job, wrestled with the problem of evil. "Why do the ways of the wicked prosper?" he asked.
7. The early Christians called themselves "the followers of the way". That name may come from Jeremiah, who portrays God as setting before the Jews a choice between the way of life and the way of death and demanding that they choose.

Other texts from Jeremiah have been used to illumine current events. One thinks of the present condition of the American economy, especially in light of the seven hundred billion dollar bailout of Wall Street, when one reads in Jeremiah that "everyone is greedy for unjust gain...they do not even know how to blush". To read of the insurance giant AIG spending \$400,000 to entertain lavishly their independent agents just days after they had been given billions of taxpayer dollars to rescue them from bankruptcy, is a case in point. They do not realise how out of touch they are. "They don't even blush", nor do they "get it..."

My favourite personal recollection involving a text from Jeremiah came at the start of the first Iraq war in 1991. President George H. W. Bush, trying to perfume his military efforts to push back Saddam Hussein, had Billy Graham come to pray with him at the White House as the bombs began to fall. Using religion for political purposes seems to run in that family. Outside the White House that same night were anti-war protestors and pickets led by the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Edmond Browning. One of the signs carried in that silent procession quoted words from Jeremiah, "My heart is beating wildly. I cannot keep silent for I hear the sound of the trumpet and the alarm of war..."

Jeremiah writes of a sense of destiny, maybe even a sense of being pre-ordained or predestined for a particular role in life. As such he has been the inspiration for many who found themselves in the right place at the right time - and were able to change history. That was what it meant, in Jeremiah's words, to assume the mantle of the prophet. God is reported to have said to Jeremiah in this book, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you to be a prophet to the nations". Setting Jeremiah in the context of the time through which he lived and about which he wrote might be helpful. His was a particularly difficult and turbulent period of Jewish history. Everything in this book reflects that fact. The Northern Kingdom of Israel had been destroyed in 721 BC by the Assyrians, who ruled the world with an iron hand until they were overthrown by the Babylonians around the year 612 BC. Jeremiah watched the struggle between the Egyptians, the Assyrians and the rising power of the Babylonians, as power ebbed and flowed in the region between those two dates. His sympathies seemed to be with the Assyrians, so he was destined not to be a winner. His little country of Judah had escaped the destruction that had befallen the Northern Kingdom, only by accepting vassal status to the Assyrians, so they viewed with alarm the rise of Babylonian power. As a small country they were regularly little more than pawns in the hands of the competing nations of the Middle East. It was best for them when the major powers were tied up jockeying for power against each other. This situation had existed before Assyria fell to the Babylonians, so Judah had enjoyed a period of "Indian summer". It was during this period that the book of Deuteronomy appeared and the Deuteronomic Reforms took place in the land of Judah. Jeremiah may have been involved with those reforms. Some Old Testament scholars think that Jeremiah was the author of the book of Deuteronomy and was involved in the placing of this book into the walls of the Temple where it could be "discovered" during the time of renovations under the popular King Josiah around the year 621 BC. However, that is not universally agreed to, though it remains a possibility.

The hopes of Judah at that time in its history were vested in King Josiah. This young king had succeeded to the throne in 640 BC, when he was only eight years old. He was enormously popular with the priests and the prophets because of his genuine religious interests. There is even the suggestion that one of the prophets had been his regent prior to the time he came of age and that his religious devotion was the result of that. The Deuteronomic Reforms, about which I have written earlier in this series (*Origins of the Bible - Part VI – sent my me on 16th May 2008 - Wes*), were very pleasing and affirming to the religious leaders. The prophet Huldah had even suggested when these reforms were being carried out that God's blessing would be on Judah at least as long as King Josiah lived. So much of their hope and their sense of the security of God's blessing rested in Josiah, who was thought to be their guarantor of God's favour. That is why his death at the young age of thirty-nine was deemed to be almost like the end of the world. Pharaoh Necho of Egypt had marched to war hoping to claim some of Assyria's empire for itself. King Josiah, a former ally of Assyria, set out to intercept the Egyptian force in a battle on the plains of Megiddo in 609 BC. The Jews were defeated and King Josiah was struck down. History unravelled for the Jews from that point on. With Josiah's death Judah's sense of security died. Their Assyrian protector was no longer able to come to their aid. The powerful Babylonians were rising. Judah was on the wrong side of history. In less than ten years the Babylonians would be besieging Jerusalem. When Jerusalem fell in 596 BC, the Babylonian Exile began. Jeremiah saw this impending calamity and warned of its coming with regularity. No one heeded him. His message was so relentless and so hopeless that they actually wanted to kill him. Jerusalem was a city that had not been invaded for four hundred years. People did not believe that it could be taken. He likened what was about to befall Judah to the time when they were slaves in Egypt. No image could have been more fearful. When his message came true and his nation was prostrate, Jeremiah was carted off to Egypt, where he died in poverty and of a broken spirit. One image of Jeremiah is that of a weeping prophet, even a madman. Both are accurate. Time, however, is usually a prophet's greatest friend. At some time after his death the words of Jeremiah were added to the sacred story of the Jews and thus were preserved as scripture. So we have access to his words, painful though some of them are and his truth was validated. The job of the prophet is to illumine the pain, not to eliminate it, to help people walk through it and to transcend it. It is not helpful to deny the pain and pretend that there is another reality in which the pain is not present. Jeremiah was in this tradition. Perhaps that is what the world needs today as it stands on the brink of a worldwide recession and all the political dislocation that this will inevitably bring.

– John Shelby Spong

## Part XV - Ezekiel

When Americans are asked to name the great presidents of this nation, four names appear more often than any others: George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt. The thing that each of these presidents has in common is that they presided over a time of trauma, transition and change in our nation's history: Washington at the birth of our nation; Lincoln during the dissolution of the Union; Wilson over World War I; and Roosevelt during both the great depression and World War II. This list thus begs the question: Does the nation in crisis call forth great leaders? Or do leaders become great because they have to deal with a crisis? I suggest that it is the latter, but historians will debate that forever.

When we study the prophets, the same question arises. Does a crisis in the life of the Jewish people serve to call great people into leadership or do these leaders become great because they had to deal with a crisis? Once again I suspect it is the latter, but biblical scholars will debate this forever. There have been two great crises in Jewish history where the extinction of the whole nation was a real possibility. One was in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century when six million Jews were exterminated by the Nazi government in Germany. The other was the time of the conquest of the Jews at the hands of the Babylonians and their subsequent exile in the land of Babylon.

The crisis in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century called David Ben-Gurion into leadership. The earlier biblical crisis, occurring in the first half of the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC, called the Prophet Ezekiel into leadership. This week in our series on the origins of the Bible we turn to a consideration of this great figure upon whom the continuation of the Jewish nation literally hung. The book of Ezekiel is the third of the "Major Prophets". We have looked already at the first two, Isaiah and Jeremiah. Ezekiel is probably not as well known as these, but perhaps he should be. His star still burns brightly in the Jewish diadem as a critical life in Jewish history.

It is hard to recreate the person Ezekiel from the text of the book that bears his name, since we now know that the text has been edited a number of times, corrupted badly and even that chapters 40 to 48 are generally regarded as a later addition to this text by another author, a kind of II Ezekiel. Yet there is a real figure who stands in the shadows behind the words of this book, one who lived in history and who changed the character of the Jewish people. Since his life overlapped with Jeremiah they shared some common background. Let me review it. In the late 8<sup>th</sup> Century BC, the nation of Assyria was the scourge of the Middle Eastern world. They had a disciplined and fierce military establishment. The first nation to develop horse-drawn iron chariots, the precursor of tank divisions, to hurl into battle, they destroyed their enemies on every side. The Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to them in 721 BC and in the process, its people became known as "The Ten Lost Tribes" that today live only in mythology. The fate of these Jews in defeat was to be removed from their land, resettled across the Assyrian Empire and ultimately to disappear in to the DNA and gene pool of the Arab-Semitic world. The Southern kingdom of Judah, with its capital in Jerusalem, survived this scourge by becoming a vassal state of Assyria, who then ruled that world with an iron fist until falling to the rising power of Babylon in 612 BC. After a period of consolidating their power, the army of the Babylonians swept down on and destroyed Judah and Jerusalem in 596 BC. This was the first time the city of Jerusalem had been conquered in 400 years. For the "Holy City", believed by the Jews to be the dwelling place of God, to fall was devastating. Leading Jewish citizens were then rounded up and marched off to Babylon to be resettled as an underclass in the service of their conquerors. They appeared destined to disappear as the Northern Kingdom had done about 125 years earlier. Among those exiles, however, was a young prophet whose name was Ezekiel, who was apparently a member of a well respected priestly family. In that crisis this young man rose to become a determinative leader of his people.

The first problem to be faced in the exile was that of survival as an identifiable people. What could keep these exiled people intact and separate, the bearers in history of a national destiny? Even if they never saw their homeland again, they had to create the desire in their descendents to do so. The fate of the Jews of the Northern Kingdom must not be allowed to be the fate of these Jews. Ezekiel saw that as his primary task. This man was a psychiatrist's delight. He had vivid dreams, perhaps even in Technicolor, which he used to galvanise his people. Two of his dreams made such indelible impressions on future generations that they have been turned into Negro spirituals and used to illumine the black experience of being first exiled from their native Africa and second being enslaved by their white oppressors. The first of these spirituals was based on the first chapter of Ezekiel and proclaimed that "Ezekiel saw the wheel, way up in the middle of the air", words that expressed a yearning for deliverance to come from on high. The second, based on Ezekiel 37 was entitled "Dem bones gonna rise again". In this dream, Ezekiel saw the Jewish nation under the analogy of a valley filled with dead, dry, fleshless bones. There was no hope of restoration or resurrection. God speaks to Ezekiel in this dream, addressing him by his

favourite title, "Son of Man", to ask: "Can these bones live again?" To which Ezekiel replied, "Lord, only thou knowest!" Hope for a future life for the Jewish nation was at that time beyond Ezekiel's imagination. Behind both of these dreams was the biblical idea that God was the source of life.

In the Jewish myth of creation it was the breath of God that was breathed into Adam, transforming him from being an inert body of clay into a God-infused living soul. God's breath had also been identified in the Jewish tradition with the wind that animated the forest. Now, Ezekiel's dream proclaimed, the breath of God also has the ability to recreate the lifeless Jewish nation. So it was that in Ezekiel's dream the breath of God blew over that valley and caused those dead bones to be reassembled. That is, "the toe bone connected to the foot bone, the foot bone connected to the ankle bone, the ankle bone to the leg bone" until they were all standing up again. The Jewish nation was destined to be revived with the life force, the breath of God. That dream now became Ezekiel's task to fulfil. Of course it was a task that no one person could accomplish on his or her own. It would indeed be the task of several generations. One person, however, had to have the dream, see the vision, stamp it on the minds of his people and turn it into a reality. That person was Ezekiel.

The exiled people under Ezekiel's influence made separation, which was the prerequisite to survival, their highest priority. In three distinct ways they set out on a national agenda to make themselves different, to keep themselves separate and to maintain their Jewish identity. Firstly, they resurrected the ancient Sabbath Day observance, a tradition that had long ago fallen into disuse. They codified every detail of the Sabbath. Jews not only refrained from work on that day, they even immobilised themselves. A Sabbath Day's journey was defined as three-fifths of a mile. No Jew could walk more than that on the Sabbath without violating the law. These Jews were "different" and "separate" and to remain so they made these Sabbath Day observances the very mark of their Judaism. This was the time when the seven day creation story with which the Bible now opens was written and added to their sacred text. Its purpose was to ground the Sabbath Day observance in the act of creation as the command of God.

The second thing they did was to adopt kosher dietary laws. The Jews would not eat the flesh of swine or shellfish and Jewish food had to be prepared in kosher kitchens. So Jews never ate with Babylonians. It was, they said, the law of God, designed to keep them separate. The third thing they did was to revive the practice of circumcision that had also fallen into disuse. This meant that they literally carved into the flesh of every Jewish male the mark of Judaism, making intermarriage very difficult and enhancing separation. To ground these practices in the will of God a group of priestly writers, inspired by Ezekiel, edited the entire sacred narrative of the Jews so that these traditions were seen as unique to the entire history of their call from God to be God's people. Thus the priestly version of the scriptures came into being.

It worked. The Jews were the only defeated and exiled people in human history to return intact to their homeland after defeat and exile to re-establish their national history. That vocation was burned deep into the Jewish psyche and would forever remain a characteristic of these people. They would need it again some 2,500 years later: in 70 AD, Jerusalem was destroyed again, this time by the Romans and the Jewish people were scattered across the face of the earth. The maps of human history contained no Jewish state from 70 until 1948, when the nation of Israel was established in accordance with the Balfour Declaration of 1917. During that exile time the Jews endured many horrors, much persecution and even the Holocaust, but the lessons of Ezekiel were too deep to be ignored and so they survived once more to return to the land of their fathers and mothers.

I do not mean to minimise the pain and dislocation that the return of the Jews to Israel and to the land of Palestine caused in 1948 and since. I do mean to suggest that a people who can maintain their national identity for almost 1900 years as a homeless people is a remarkable accomplishment. They have Ezekiel to thank for this survival.

**– John Shelby Spong**

## Part XVI: Daniel

History is not well served by the way the Bible is organised. For example, the Torah (Genesis-Deuteronomy), which seems to tell a continuous story, was actually written over a period of about five hundred years and describes events that occurred over as long a time frame as fourteen hundred years. Yet it is always read in worship as if it is a single story, which makes some of its described events little more than historical nonsense. To take another illustration, a book like Isaiah was written in three parts. The first, roughly chapters 1-39, was composed in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century BC; the second part, roughly chapters 40-55, was written some two centuries later in the late 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC; and the third, chapters 56-66, is the work of a 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC author. Yet for most of both Jewish and Christian history this book has been read as a single cohesive work, making a proper interpretation of its pages all but impossible.

The same distortion of history is found in the line-up of the prophets. The four so-called major prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, are placed in that order in the Bible. Yet Isaiah is written time-wise on both sides of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Daniel is in fact a work of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BC but, just to confuse things, purports to be written at the time of the Babylonian Exile in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC. Someone who seeks literal truth or literal history in these pages of the Bible will be quite frustrated.

When I began this series of columns on the origins of the Bible early this year, I knew that I would at some point have to make a decision on what order I would follow. I could treat the books of the Bible as they are written or I could re-organise the entire text on the basis of history and their time of writing. I decided to do both. I have thus far treated the Old Testament in the order that it appears in our printed Bible. I started with the documents behind the Torah that produced the books from Genesis to Deuteronomy, then turned to the prophetic movement, dealing with the books of Joshua through II Kings. Even there, however, to make a continuous story I had to skip over such books as Job, The Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations and even the tiny but significant book of Ruth, in order to deal with the prophets as they appear in the Bible. I will go back to these books later. When I come to the New Testament I will treat it in the order that it was written, not the order in which it appears in the Bible. This means that I will begin with Paul and then move to the gospels. That way everyone becomes confused, but I think truth will be better served.

The timing problem becomes most apparent this week when I reach the book of Daniel, which is a piece of mythological, allegorical writing designed to strengthen Jewish resistance to the Seleucid king, Antiochus Epiphanes, during the period of the Maccabean revolution in the 160s BC. This means that the book of Daniel should not time-wise even be in the Bible at all. It should be part of the Apocrypha, that group of inter-testament books that are no longer considered a constituent part of the Old Testament, at least in Protestant Christianity. It is also true that several stories that were originally additions to the book of Daniel, like "Bel and the Dragon", the "Prayer of Azarias and the Song of the Three Young Men" and "Susanna", were in fact taken out of Daniel and placed into the Apocrypha by later biblical editors, but the book of Daniel itself was kept in the canon of the Old Testament despite not belonging there. This act of inclusion means that the stories left in Daniel have become far better known in the Christian world than those relegated to the Apocrypha. We are generally familiar with Daniel in the Lion's Den and with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the fiery furnace. Familiar phrases from Daniel have also enriched our language, like calling God "The Ancient of Days", referring to some impending doom as "the handwriting on the wall", a fatal weakness as possessing "feet of clay", or taking on strong opponents as "entering the lion's den". It is also a fact that Daniel in the Old Testament and the book of Revelation in the New Testament are the two biblical works that are quoted most frequently by those who like to predict the end of the world. We have happily passed through many such projected dates in western history, yet predictions still come from the loony fringe of religion. I do not think they are worth much consideration.

My favourite end of the world story came when I received a warning letter from a priest that the world was about to come to an end. He had a specific date and time on which he seemed sure that this would happen. He quoted a number of biblical sources, including Daniel, to prove his point. I must say that I did not begin to make preparations. A few days later I received an invitation from the wife of this priest inviting me to his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration. The party was scheduled for about ten days after the end of the world. What a relief! Not even his wife believed his theory.

When we turn to the content of the book of Daniel, we discover that it is divided into two primary sections. The first is a series of stories about Daniel which fills chapter 1-6. The second section is a series of visions that have

played a role in the development of Christian history. The first vision has a character in it known as the "Son of Man". It was Ezekiel who first introduced this phrase to our religious vocabulary. When Ezekiel used it, however, it was just a title by which God called Ezekiel, simply Ezekiel's name. It designated him only as a human being. It had no divine connotations. When Jesus used that title many years later, however, it had a much more dramatic meaning. It was in fact a claim of divinity. That title had to have made quite a journey for its meaning to have been transformed that dramatically from Ezekiel to Jesus. It did, and it was in one of the visions of Daniel that it was transformed. "Son of Man" in Daniel was the name of an apocalyptic supernatural divine figure who would usher in the Kingdom of God and put an end to the persecution of the faithful. The "Son of Man" in Daniel travelled on the clouds of heaven and was given dominion, glory and kingship. All the nations of the world would serve him. His throne would be everlasting and of his kingdom there would be no end. We become aware, when we read the New Testament, that these images were attached to the Jesus story, first by Matthew in his parable of the Judgment, when the Son of Man will separate the sheep from the goats and, second, in Matthew's account of Jesus appearing as the resurrected one to the disciples out of the sky on a mountain top in Galilee. In that narrative he came on the clouds clothed with the authority of heaven and earth to send the disciples out on a mission "to all the world". Luke also borrows Daniel's imagery when he told the story of Jesus' ascension.

Daniel was also a pivotal book in the Jewish development of ideas about life after death. In the last chapter of Daniel the author refers to the time at the end of the world when the great deliverance would come. "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth", says Daniel, "shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to everlasting shame and contempt". Reward and punishment from this time on became the major feature of life after death.

Prior to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BC, the Jewish people spoke little about life after death. The only concept generally abroad was that of "Sheol". Sheol was located in the "middle of the earth". It was not a place of reward or punishment, it was simply the abode of the dead. No one looked forward to it. No one was comforted by it. Everyone who died went to it. If it was described at all, it was described as shadowy or as shades of life, ghostlike with no sense of joy. When Daniel was written, however, religious persecution against the Jews had reached horrendous proportions. The Jews were forced by their enemies to eat food they regarded as unclean. The Temple was itself polluted with the installation of the head of a swine in the "Holy of Holies", an unclean animal in the very dwelling place of God. The Jews called it "the abomination of desolation". Those Jews who refused to violate their religious practices were summarily executed. The book we call II Maccabees, written at the same time the book of Daniel was written, tells the story of seven brothers who, along with their mother, were arrested and were compelled to eat the flesh of a swine. The oldest brother refused and his tongue was cut out. Then he was scalped and his hands and feet were chopped off. Finally, he was taken, still breathing, to a fire and burned up. With this vision still vivid, the next brother was told he should eat the flesh of the swine or suffer the same fate. He refused and was similarly disposed of. This procedure continued until all seven brothers had been murdered. Then the mother died. It is a dreadful story.

That story, however, became a powerful instrument in giving birth to a new concept and a new passion among the Jews for life after death. That is what finds expression in the 12<sup>th</sup> and final chapter of Daniel. The driving theme was that without life after death for these faithful martyrs, the very justice of God was at stake. If faithfulness to God is not rewarded beyond this life, then God cannot be just. Then evil does in fact triumph over God. So heaven and hell became the categories of divine justice and the afterlife was employed to make fair this unfair world. The book of Daniel was pivotal in this transformation and, as such, exercised an enormous influence on the development of Christianity as the afterlife became crucial to the human sense of justice in both the crucifixion of Jesus and the later persecution of the Christians in loyalty to their Christ. The Book of Daniel is not a profound book, but one wonders what Christianity might have looked like if it had not been for this book. For me, however, to think of the afterlife as a place of reward or punishment distorts that concept completely. That, however, is the subject for a future column, perhaps a future book.

**– John Shelby Spong**

## Part XVII: Hosea – The Prophet Who Changed God's Name to Love

Hosea is probably my favourite of all the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures. His story is so real and so compelling and his expansion of the meaning of God was so closely tied to his personal domestic situation as to make his witness unforgettable. The story line is not always clear in the text, but the facts, as we piece them together from this book are that Hosea and his wife Gomer had three sons to whom they gave strange names: Jezreel, Not Pitied and Not My People. There is some suggestion that Hosea had actually married a prostitute, but I think the data is much more substantial that his wife later became a prostitute and ultimately a slave. We know that Hosea purchased her at a slave market for fifteen pieces of silver and restored her to the place of honour in their home as his wife. It was out of this experience that Hosea came to a new understanding of the unbounded love of God. With these few details, which are all that we can glean from the text, I have let my imagination run to come up with the following story through which I can communicate the powerful message of this book.

"Tongues must have wagged in Jewish social circles when the staid and respected holy man Hosea married Gomer, the party-loving youngest daughter of the old merchant Diblaim. Gomer was known for her dark and flashing eyes and her dancing feet. The tongue wagging was also driven by the fact that Hosea was an older and settled man, while Gomer was much younger, one who loved the pace of the social scene and was thought of as overtly flirtatious. People wondered if such a union would last. Hosea, however, was obviously proud of his beautiful young bride and he vowed to do all he could to make her happy. At first, things went well. Hosea seemed to find a whole new lease on life as he accompanied his wife to countless events where he basked in her popularity. The social pace, however, did not slacken after a year or so and Hosea began to yearn for the somewhat quieter life he had known before his marriage. Almost inevitably these realities brought tension into the relationship. From time to time Hosea wanted to leave a party sooner than Gomer, so a compromise was arranged by which he departed earlier and she was escorted home later by their friends. That tactic, though dangerous in that society, seemed to work well. When Hosea finally got to the place where he did not want to go out as often, a much more dangerous compromise was instituted. Gomer occasionally went to a party either with her friends or finally, alone. Over the years these occasions increased until they became the rule not the exception. An unescorted woman was almost unknown in Jewish society for it left her vulnerable and unprotected. This was especially so when that woman was by nature a sensuous and fun-loving person like Gomer."

"Almost inevitably, the fears and suspicions were fulfilled and the night finally came when Gomer did not return home at all. Alarmed, Hosea immediately began to search for her, but to no avail. She vanished without a trace or clue. While Hosea continued to search for her, Gomer, now unburdened by her more sedate husband, became the favourite plaything of the Jewish jet set. She rode this track until it stretched into years. Hosea, his love for her undiminished, continued to search while Gomer continued to play. Life in the fast lane, however, fades for everyone sooner or later and as the years passed, Gomer was no exception. Yesterday's favourite plaything can always be replaced with tomorrow's younger models. Youthful beauty also does not last forever. Even Gomer had begun to notice that 'crows' feet' were appearing around her eyes that cosmetics could not disguise. Next she recognised that she was sagging in places she had never sagged before. Inevitably, she had begun that fateful descent of the femme fatale. Once the favourite plaything of the social pacesetters, she soon had to adjust to being the plaything of anyone who wanted a plaything. When even that activity had run its course, she became a common prostitute, selling what remained of her charms for enough money to survive. Even prostitution, however, is a competitive profession and the day came when those seeking her services were no longer attracted at all. Gomer then descended to the final rung on the social ladder, becoming a slave and offering her labour to the family that owned her in exchange for sustenance."

"Through all these downward spiralling years, Hosea kept up his search for the woman he had married and still loved. As the years passed, the search became less frantic, but it was always on his agenda. Hosea knew the ways of his world, so, after some years had passed, he limited his search to the slave markets, which were only places that seemed to be her likely destination. His was a lonely life. He knew not whether his wife was dead or alive. Then one day it happened. He found a slave market, where the usual riff-raff of society offered loud commentary on the human cargo placed on the block. Hosea moved into the crowd just about the time a woman was placed on the block for public inspection. Her hair was matted, her eyes were bloodshot and her face was lined, revealing the toll that the years had taken. The crowd was delirious in its derision, suggesting by their shouts that no one would be so foolish as to pay anything for this old bag. The slave master tried to ignore them

while he sought in vain to secure a purchaser. Their guffaws, however, were not silenced until Hosea, recognising this woman as his wife Gomer, stepped forward and with a clear and audible voice bid fifteen pieces of silver for her. A momentary stunned silence greeted this bid while the crowd turned to see who had made this incredibly stupid offer. Fifteen pieces of silver was the top price that young, strong male servants would bring. Only someone significantly naïve or totally uninformed could have offered so absurd a price for this battered piece of cargo. The crowd's abusive shouts now shifted quickly from this pathetic woman, who was little more than a throw-in on another sale, to the strange man who had made such an incredible offer. This bidder had been duped, so they hurled their insults at him, profoundly unaware of the drama being acted out before their eyes."

"Taking no notice of their catcalls, Hosea walked forward, paid the offered price, took the woman by the hand and led her past the mocking bystanders until their words faded in the distance. When he reached his home with her, Hosea informed his household that Gomer was not a slave, but his wife and he installed her into the place of honour she had once occupied as the mistress of his household and the centre of his affection. It was following this experience that Hosea began to reflect on his life and on what it meant to be God's prophet. His relationship with Gomer led him to examine what he perceived to be God's relationship to the Jewish people. His thoughts about God began to intertwine with his thoughts about Gomer. Just as he loved Gomer, regardless of her actions, so he began to understand that this is the nature of God's love for God's people. God's love is not conditional, nor is it tempered by Israel's actions. This definition of God began to grow in Hosea. The love of God was not an entity to be earned, it was a reality to be entered, something to be lived. His meditation, born in his own pain, paved the way for him to arrive at a new understanding of what divine love really meant. God's love cannot be earned and God's love cannot be destroyed, no matter what people did. This was the message of Hosea."

"Later in Jewish history, this message of Hosea was seen in Jesus of Nazareth. When the gospels were written that understanding of love permeated every verse. Jesus was portrayed as praying for his tormentors and giving his life and love away even as people thought they were taking it from him. The message of Jesus that the gospels sought to convey was very clear: 'There is nothing you or I can ever do; nothing you or I can ever be that will separate us from the love of God'. As I read this small book, Hosea reaches out to love and even to rescue his wife from the consequences of her own decisions, though by the standards of that day, she would have been judged as not worthy of such a response. That was the message of Jesus 800 years later."

Now, let me quickly say that even in this reconstruction of Hosea, we do not know the whole story. A marital relationship is never one sided. In the biblical text, we do not have access to Gomer's side of the relationship. Hosea may have been an impossibly righteous man. We do know, however, that selfless love is always a doorway into transforming forgiveness, expanded life and perhaps even a larger consciousness. We also know that the idea of God being defined as selfless love brought a whole new dimension to the meaning of worship. After Hosea lived through this experience and found reconciliation, he still had to write his story and someone somewhere had to make the later decision to incorporate that writing into the sacred scriptures of the Jewish people. That is what enabled Hosea's message to reverberate through the ages. Later generations of people listening to the words of Hosea would begin to hear in them the "word of God".

I treasure Hosea for many reasons. His message is real and it counters the anti-Semitic Christian rhetoric of the ages that suggests that the Old Testament portrays a God of judgment while the New Testament portrays a God of love. Judgment is nowhere as severe in the Bible as it is in the New Testament Book of Revelation, which portrays eternal fire and flaming pits as the eternal fate that God has designed for sinners; and love is nowhere portrayed more profoundly than in the Old Testament Book of Hosea, who turned his personal pain into a new understanding of the limitless love of God. God does not change over the course of time, but the human perception of God is ever changing and in the Book of Hosea a new breakthrough into the meaning of God was achieved.

**– John Shelby Spong**

## Part XVIII: Amos – The Prophet Who Transformed God Into Justice

Not every character in the Bible starts out to be a hero. Indeed, one of the great themes of biblical literature is that it is the meek and the lowly who become the channels through which God is known in new ways. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is portrayed as expressing this theme in the Magnificat when she is made to utter these words, "For he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden", but later generations "will call me blessed". The Old Testament prophet who makes this truth powerfully real is named Amos. Today we turn to his story.

Amos was a citizen of the Southern Kingdom of Judah in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century BC. He lived in the village of Tekoa where he was a herdsman and a keeper of sycamore trees, employment that hardly demanded high academic achievements or the credentials that produced great expectations. In those days Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam II was on the throne of the Northern Kingdom. The major powers of the world were pre-occupied with their own problems and with each other, which allowed these two small Jewish states to bask in an Indian summer of prosperity, peace and wealth. The distribution of that wealth was, however, hardly balanced. The worship places of the Jewish world were crowded on holy days and religion was popular among the greedy ones who dominated the social order. There thus appeared to be little relationship between the words of the popular religion and the practices of people's lives in the public arena. In many ways that is not dissimilar from the current situation in the United States, where a few have achieved fortunes by greed and manipulation of the markets, creating a situation in which the wealthy are increasingly wealthy and the poor are increasingly poor and people even now seem not to be concerned. This dichotomy, however, burned itself into the consciousness of this simple herdsman named Amos and, like the proverbial "Hound of Heaven", it allowed him no rest until he had addressed this issue overtly and publicly. Amos packed his suitcase and journeyed from Tekoa in the land of Judah to the shrine of Bethel in the Northern Kingdom to make his witness.

When he arrived Amos entered the courtyard of this holy place, where all of his suspicions were confirmed. He saw the crowds dressed in their finery busily attending to holy things while the poor outside the city gates were largely ignored. Amos wondered how he might get the crowd's attention. He was a clever man, however and knew how to appeal to the instincts of the people. He found a corner in the courtyard, set up a soap box and then, using one of the oldest tricks in human history, he began to solicit first the curiosity and later the full attention of the crowd. Let me try to re-create the story.

"Come closer", Amos shouted from his makeshift pulpit, "Let me tell you about the sins of the people of the city of Damascus". Amos knew that everyone likes to hear gossip about the moral weaknesses of their neighbours and so as he excoriated the Damascans the crowds grew. Next he turned his judgment first on the people of Gaza and then on Tyre, condemning the sinful practices found in both cities. The crowd, loving it, grew even larger as Amos continued to appeal to their prejudices about and suspicions of their neighbours. This strange looking rube from the south said the things they wanted to hear. Then Amos moved to larger targets and his oratory rose to new heights as he focused on the nation states surrounding the Northern Kingdom. First it was the Edomites and about their sins Amos got more specific. The Edomites had pursued "their brothers with a sword, showing them no pity and they had allowed anger to tear perpetually" at the fabric of their society. The ecstatic crowd began to shout, "You tell 'em, preacher". With every loud voice of encouragement, the people gathered in ever greater numbers. Next it was the Amorites' turn. According to Amos, they had attacked Gilead and "ripped up the women with child in order to enlarge their borders". As Amos pronounced his message of doom on these nations, the people gathered around him roared their approval. When he turned to the very unpopular Moabites the frenzy of the crowd exploded.

Next Amos, with the crowd in the palm of his hand and fully attentive, spoke in a bare whisper. "Now let me tell you about the sins of the Southern Jews", he said. These Southern Jews were the people with whom the Jews of the North were the most competitive and with whom they had the deepest rivalry. The relationship between Judah in the South and Israel in the North was like that of New Zealand and Australia today. Signs in shops in New Zealand announce that "New Zealanders have two favourite teams, the All Blacks (the name of New Zealand's national team) and anyone who is playing Australia". So to hear their Jewish rivals in the south be condemned was music to the ears of the Northern Jews. The crowd pressed closer to this strange messenger and its size continued to increase dramatically. Those Southern Jews, Amos said, "despised the Torah; they did not keep God's commandments. Their lies caused them to err constantly", but God's justice is sure, he promised and so Jerusalem will be "devoured by the fire of God". The crowd was ecstatic with enthusiasm, clapping and cheering. No one budged as this crowd-pleasing evangelist reached his climax. Now with every ear straining to

hear, this herdsman arrived at the conclusion for which he had journeyed from Tekoa to the King's chapel in Bethel. His message was ready and so Amos turned to his climax.

"Now", he said, "let me tell you about the worst people in the world". The crowd could hardly wait to hear who that would be. They were not prepared, however, for what was to come. "You Jews of the Northern Kingdom", he said, "are the ultimate culprits in God's world. You are the ones who worship ostentatiously in the sacred shrines, but even as you worship, you sell the righteous for silver and the poor for a pair of shoes. You trample the poor in the dust of the earth. You violate one another sexually. You worship at every altar in garments stolen from the labour of the poor. You profane holy places with heavy drinking of wine purchased with fines levied against the meek. You corrupt holy people, encouraging them to violate their sacred vows. You even silence the prophets." The crowd was suddenly silent and the smiles disappeared from their faces. Then Amos spoke of the punishment that God would send. "This judgment is inevitable", he screamed. It was a devastating message. The stunned crowd took a while to recover from shock, so Amos continued to drive home his key insights. "Worship isolated from life is of no value. Worship is nothing but justice being offered to God and justice is nothing but worship being lived out. If worship and justice are ever separated, idolatry is the inevitable result." It was a stirring message, but suddenly it was not a popular one.

When the members of the crowd recovered sufficiently to respond, they sent for a priest from the Shrine at Bethel named Amaziah and asked him to come to their defence, for they said "Amos has conspired against you and the land and we are not able to bear his words". Amaziah was the voice of the established religion. He would brook no more of this interference with worship at the King's Shrine and so to Amos he said: "O, Seer, go home, flee away to your land in Judah. Prophecy there if you must, but you are never again to come again to Bethel for this is the king's sanctuary. This is the temple of our nation. Your words are not welcome here".

Amos responded to Amaziah, "I am no prophet, nor even a prophet's son. I am a herdsman, a dresser of sycamore trees, yet the Lord took me from my flocks and called me to prophesy to the people of Israel". Once again, he repeated his charges. "The songs of your holy places will become nothing but wailing to the Lord. You cannot worship while you trample the poor. You cannot wring money from the poor to line your pockets with greed. God will turn your sacred feasts into mourning and your pious songs into lamentations." The preaching of Amos was now more than the people were willing to tolerate and so Amos was physically driven from the shrine. Rejected and defeated he returned to his humble life in Tekoa.

In this newly imposed exile he wrote out his prophetic message and that message became known as the words of Amos the Prophet. In time people heard transcendent truth in his words and finally these words were added to the sacred text of the Jewish people and were thus read in worship settings in the temples, synagogues and holy places. That was when people began to recognise that in the words of Amos, they were beginning to hear the "Word of the Lord". That is how the words of Amos came to echo through the centuries. In that process, God was inevitably redefined as justice. Worship and justice could never again be separated in true Judaism and worship came to be viewed, as Amos had suggested, as human justice offered to God while justice was seen as divine worship being acted out. In this context justice became another name for God.

It was through the work of the prophets primarily that God was redefined in Jewish history. Love became the name for God through the writings of Hosea. Justice became the name for God through the writings of Amos. The prophets really do matter, not because they were the predictors of the future as so many of us were once taught, but because they were able to see more deeply into the meaning of God. The prophets more than anyone else made it possible some eight hundred years later for people to see and to hear the presence of God in the life of a crucified one named Jesus of Nazareth. The life of Jesus pointed to a divine nature marked by the dimension of love that Hosea had added to the meaning of God and the dimension of justice that Amos had added to the meaning of God. That resulted in a new understanding of consciousness in which divinity and humanity seemed to flow together as one.

The biblical story was never static, nor is the human understanding of God. It is idolatry and an act of faithlessness that is being expressed when any one thinks that all truth has finally been revealed and that someone or some institution actually possesses it.

**- John Shelby Spong**

## Part XIX: Micah, the Prophet Who Turned Liturgy Into Life

In my career as a bishop I have known churches that spent great time and effort on liturgy and worship. It was clearly the focus, the reason for being, of those congregations and their budgets reflected this priority. Altar hangings, clergy vestments and the garb of the supporting cast of liturgical characters were always co-ordinated. Sacristies, where the vestments and sanctuary coverings were stored, were orderly and reflected care and devotion. These churches also tended to invest heavily in music. A grand organ was generally an essential and of course, one must have a grand organist to make the grand organ functional. Then there must be a professional choir, since an all-volunteer choir might dissipate the beauty of both the organ and organist. Next, there must be a printed bulletin to guide the worshippers, for whom the liturgy was designed, through the Sunday process.

I do not mean to be critical of this. Liturgy that is well done does invite the congregation into the symbols of transcendence. It transforms worship from being the town meeting that it has become in many congregations. Town meeting liturgy is immediately recognised for it is dominated by announcements of coming events and a public listing of the sick, the recently deceased, the soon-to-be married, those celebrating birthdays and anniversaries. Sometimes these announcements are overt, while at other times they are camouflaged under the guise of prayer. These public displays serve to remind people that they are not forgotten and to massage delicate egos. I wonder, however, if either the liturgies of grand proportions or those of a town meeting understand worship, which means the act of investing infinite worth in God, as well as in those who are gathered and in those that this worship will lead them to serve. Liturgy is not an end, but a means to an end. There was one prophetic figure in the biblical tradition who understood this better than anyone else. His name was Micah and to his story we turn this week.

If people have any conscious awareness of the content of the book of Micah, it is probably a vague recollection of his suggestion that the messiah must be born in Bethlehem, because part of the Jewish expectation was that messiah would be heir to the throne of David. This idea found its way into the birth stories of Jesus in both Matthew and Luke and thus gained familiarity by being repeated in Christmas pageants. Matthew, the scripture quoter par excellence, refers directly to this text in Micah when King Herod asks his scribes to search the scriptures to locate the place where messiah is to be born so that he can redirect the Magi's quest to find him. Luke uses this Micah text indirectly to demonstrate the relationship of lineal descent between David and Jesus, when he states that it was by order of the Emperor, Caesar Augustus, that all the descendants of King David had to return to their ancestral home to be enrolled. While this is probably the best known quote from Micah, the power of this book is not found here, but is located in the drama he describes later in the sixth chapter of his small work.

Micah thought of himself as an expert in the law or the Torah. One gets the sense that he yearned to demonstrate his legal skill before the Supreme Court in Jerusalem, but that opportunity had never come to him. In chapter six, however, he fantasises about a trial that was designed to be even more dramatic and universal than one that might have occurred in Jerusalem. It had to do with the proper role of liturgy. Under the skill of Micah's pen he envisioned this trial as being conducted before the throne of God, who served as the ultimate judge. For Micah the mountains and the hills must serve as the jury. Israel was called to stand before this judge and jury as the accused. Micah cast himself in the role of the prosecuting attorney. The trial opens as Micah says to the people of Israel: "Arise, plead your case before the mountains and let the hills hear your voice, for the Lord has a controversy with God's people and God will now contend with Israel". Court is open and Micah's grand trial of the chosen people has begun. The charges are then read out. God demands to be answered by the accused by asking, "What have I done to you? In what have I wearied you?" Why, God is demanding to know, do you not understand how to serve me? Then God recites the things that God has done for Israel throughout history: deliverance from bondage, raising up leaders like Moses, Aaron and Miriam, giving the Torah, the law and protecting these chosen ones from their enemies. This significant list of divine benevolences has, however, clearly not gained for God the hearts of the people.

Israel, hearing these charges, feels the pangs of guilt and seeks to make amends. The response of the people, however, is to recite their faithfulness in religious observances and proper liturgies. Trapped inside this misunderstanding of what it is that God seeks, Israel says, "With what shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before God with burnt offerings and with calves a year old?" From God, however, comes only silence. The people respond to these charges as if God were interested primarily in religion

or in worship. Wondering if their religious observances have been deemed by God to be inadequate, these people vow to enhance their sacrifices. If God is not pleased with the oil that burns the sacrifices or with the year-old calf that is their burnt offering, then maybe God would be pleased if they expanded their worship to new levels of magnanimity: "Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams or with ten thousands of rivers of oil?" Surely such heightened acts of worship would win for Israel the divine favour that they presumed God desired. God is still silent, however, and once again the people of Israel interpreted this silence to mean that their worship and their offerings were still inadequate and once again they sought to make their sacrificial liturgies more worthy of their disappointed God.

God, do you want us to offer our children, our most precious possessions? Would the re-introduction of child sacrifice satisfy you? That is the meaning of the words that Micah now places on the lips of the people: "Shall I give my first born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" This dramatic scene reaches a crescendo before God finally responds and this response forms, in my opinion, the most dramatic and powerful words recorded in the book of Micah: "God has shown you, people of Israel, what is good! And what does the Lord require of you?" It is not beautiful liturgical words, burnt offerings, animal sacrifices or even ten thousands rivers of oil. It is not even the sacrifice of your most cherished children. The only requirement God lays on God's people is "to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God".

The trial is over. The verdict has been rendered. One does not please God with acts of worship. The only sacrifice that God values is the offering of lives lived in justice, mercy and humility. The people of Israel must understand anew what the meaning of worship really is. Worship is human justice being offered to God. Human justice is worship being lived out among men and women. Micah then wrote down his words for the people and they were treasured by them at first simply as the inspired words of their prophet. In time, however, someone decided that in these words they were hearing the "Word of God", so his writings were ultimately added to the sacred scriptures of the Jewish people and in that capacity began to transcend their original setting and to be read not only across the centuries in Temple and synagogue worship services, but poured over also by the rabbis. It was through Micah that the people learned that God requires from them not beautiful liturgy and sacrifices, but "to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God".

God was never a static concept among the Jews. On the pages of the Jewish Scriptures, God was always evolving, changing and growing. In the writings of Hosea, God was defined anew as love. In the writings of Amos, God was defined anew as justice. Now, in the writings of Micah, the people learned that worship is not about form and ceremony. It is not about wearing vestments in a particular style, about chanting the liturgy in effective ways. It is not about a sacred prayer book or a grand organ. It is not about where the altar is located, the style of the liturgy or the nature of one's sacrifices. Worship is always and foremost about living faithfully and ascribing ultimate worth to a God who is manifested in the fullness of human life.

Throughout the national history of the Jews, it was the prophets, who stood outside the sacred traditions and not the priests, who stood within it, who again and again caused the meaning of God to grow. It was the prophets who slowly, but surely, transformed the tribal God of the Jews into a set of universal principles. It was the prophets who made Jesus of Nazareth possible. He was clearly in the prophetic tradition when he proclaimed that the love of God was not to be compromised by religion and that God was to be found in the recognition that there is nothing any of us can do or be that can finally separate us from this divine love. This was demonstrated by Jesus in episode after episode when he set aside religious rules so that the ultimate principle of justice, that no life falls outside this love of God, could become operative. That is what Jesus' disciples saw in him and this insight drove them to assert that in the Christ experience, all human barriers fade. In Christ, said Paul, there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, gay nor straight, baptised nor un-baptised, bond nor free. To assert this as the ultimate meaning of God is the essence of worship. So worship is, therefore, not about liturgy, but about life. Worship leads us not to build ecclesiastical institutions, but to humanise our world. Micah thus becomes the biblical "Word of God" by which all liturgy must be judged.

**– John Shelby Spong**

## Part XX: I and II Zechariah – Primary Shapers of the Christian Story

If you were to search the Scriptures for a book called II Zechariah, you would not find it. There is only a single fourteen-chapter book called Zechariah, buried in the Bible between Haggai and Malachi. It is, however, not a single book by a single author, although that is the way it appears. Chapters 1-8 of Zechariah reflect a period of Jewish history about 100 years earlier than chapters 9-14. The name Zechariah is associated with the author of chapters 1-8 and it ought to be called I Zechariah. Chapters 9-14 were added to the scroll of this small work by an unknown writer and should be designated II Zechariah. Scripture scholars when dealing with the better known book of Isaiah have followed that practice widely. Isaiah 1-39 is regularly called I Isaiah and is dated in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century BC. Chapters 40-55 of this book, which constitute the best known part of the Book of Isaiah because George Frederick Handel set it to music in his popular oratorio "The Messiah", are generally called II Isaiah and are dated in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC. Chapters 56-66, representing a much later period in Jewish history, probably in the 5<sup>th</sup> or even the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, are called III Isaiah.

Zechariah, on the other hand, has been generally ignored by ordinary Christians and scholars alike. Its importance, therefore, has been minimised. Even those people who claim that the Bible is the inerrant word of God, if asked a question about the message of the book of Zechariah, respond with glassy-eyed stares. If they know anything about this book it tends to be a verse from Zechariah 9:9 that reads: *"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your King comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt, the foal of an ass..."* This verse might be recalled because it is read as the Old Testament Lesson on Palm Sunday in almost every church that follows a liturgical lectionary and was clearly the passage on which the Palm Sunday story was modelled. Beyond this, however, most people, biblical fundamentalists and traditional Christians alike, would tend to have no knowledge whatsoever about this book.

Yet the fact is that the Book of Zechariah is quoted overtly by New Testament writers at least eight times and is alluded to even more frequently than that in the shaping of the gospel tradition. With the exception of a few references in the Book of Revelation, almost every verse in Zechariah to which the New Testament points is from II Zechariah, that is, from chapters 9-14. This segment of Zechariah was a remarkably influential book in the formation of the thinking of the early Christians; indeed it was probably second only to the book of Isaiah. To understand the impact of this statement, it is quite important that we get out of a literal biblical mindset. Jesus does not fulfil the prophets in the sense that he somehow said and did things that the prophets had predicted the messiah would do. That is patent nonsense, the product of overt biblical ignorance. Biblical prophets were not the predictors of the future. The gospels are rather interpretative works written two to three generations after the life of Jesus and written in the service of their claim that he was messiah. To underscore this claim, these early Christians searched the scriptures for the content of Israel's messianic hope and expectancy and then they wrote the story of Jesus to be in accord with these expectations. In the various resurrection narratives, the command to do this kind of interpreting was written into the words and actions attributed to Jesus himself. Listen to Luke where he has Jesus say, "O foolish men and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken and beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself..." (Luke 24: 25-27) Later Luke has Jesus repeat this theme just for emphasis, "Everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled. Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures..." (Luke 24: 44-45) Luke was suggesting that it was the resurrected Christ who had directed the early disciples to find references to the scriptures of the Hebrew people by which they could properly interpret the experience they had with the life of Jesus of Nazareth. By the time the gospels were written this practice had become their primary interpretive tool. The Book of Zechariah, and specifically II Zechariah, was in that process one of the most influential books in the Hebrew Bible and they drew on it heavily to interpret the life of Jesus.

II Zechariah begins by introducing his readers to a figure who is, in all probability, intended to be a mythical figure not unlike the suffering servant of II Isaiah. II Zechariah's mythical character is called the shepherd king of Israel. It is this king, he says, who will come to Jerusalem not in pomp and splendour, but in humility and lowliness riding upon a donkey to lay claim to his kingdom. Mark is the first gospel author to write the Palm Sunday story and he did so by incorporating Jesus into that text, quoting it almost verbatim. Matthew and Luke copied Mark with little editorial change. John treats it very differently, as he does so many things. Jesus was not making a triumphant entry into Jerusalem, he was already there and John makes the Palm Sunday story be an aftermath of the raising of Lazarus, a story none of the other gospels relate. John also adds enigmatically that the disciples did not know

what Jesus was doing, but that after Jesus was glorified, they "remembered" that these things had been written about him in the prophets. (see John, Chapter 12)

When Jesus was arrested, the earliest gospel writer notes that "all of the disciples forsook him and fled..." (Mark 14:52) By the time the gospels came to be written (roughly 70 to 100), the twelve had, however, become heroes among the followers of Jesus, so that this apostolic abandonment, which was clearly an indelible memory, had to be transformed. That was done by Mark saying that the prophets had predicted this abandonment so the disciples were merely fulfilling the scriptures and thus were guiltless and consequently, not blameworthy. The text they quoted for this apostolic whitewashing was from II Zechariah, "Strike the Shepherd that the sheep may be scattered..." (Zechariah 13: 7) Matthew repeats and expands this connection. Luke assumes it.

The shepherd king of II Zechariah was said to be doomed by those who "trafficked in sheep", which brings to mind the gospel story of the people who bought and sold animals, primarily sheep, for sacrifice in the temple. This connection with the story of Jesus cleansing the temple is made overt and clear in the last verse of Zechariah, where the prophet writes that when the day of the Lord comes, "There shall no longer be a trader in the House of the Lord..." (Zechariah 14-21) Was the story of Jesus cleansing the Temple not history, but an attempt to interpret Jesus as messiah inspired by II Zechariah? I think it is fair to suggest that it was. The work of the shepherd king was then annulled, says II Zechariah, by these "traffickers in sheep", who paid him off to rid themselves of him. The price of his riddance was "thirty pieces of silver". The shepherd king then hurled this money back into the temple. (Zechariah 11:8, 12-14) Matthew is the gospel writer who introduces the thirty pieces of silver in the story of Judas Iscariot and Matthew has Judas hurl the money into the Temple. Clearly, Zechariah was his source for this part of his story line (Matthew 26:14-16, 27:3-7).

Later II Zechariah states that God will pour out compassion on the people of Jerusalem "so that when they look upon him whom they have pierced, they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child and weep bitterly for him as one weeps over a first born..." (Zechariah 12:10, 11) John used this passage and gave credit to Zechariah when he developed the story of the soldier who pierced Jesus' side with his spear. (see John 7:31-37) Finally, Zechariah portrays the day of the Lord that will come at the end of time. All of the nations of the world will be gathered in Jerusalem in warfare and the Lord will defeat them. The Lord will stand on the Mount of Olives and split the mountain in two. There will be no darkness and finally on that day, living water will flow out of Jerusalem, embracing all of the nations to the East and those to the West and the Lord will become King over all the earth. On that day all will worship the King, the Lord of Hosts and "there will be no traders in the House of the Lord". It was an incredible mythical portrait of the dawning of the Kingdom of God for which the Jews had been taught to yearn. Living water for the Jews is always a symbol of the Holy Spirit. This is thus a Pentecost portrait on which Luke clearly drew when he wrote the Pentecost story in the book of Acts. The Spirit was poured out on the gathered world, said Luke and oneness was created in that they could all speak the language of their hearers. (see Acts 2)

Once we put all of these pieces together, II Zechariah describes in precise order the pattern that was written into the final week of Jesus' life: the Palm Sunday procession on the donkey, the betrayal, the apostolic abandonment, the crucifixion and the day of Pentecost. It is clear that the little book of II Zechariah exercised vast influence on the way the Jesus story was developed, remembered and told. One conclusion is obvious. The gospels are neither history, nor biography. They are interpretive portraits written by Jews, probably in the synagogues, to portray the Jesus who empowered them and who raised them to a new level of consciousness about God's living presence in Jesus and now in them. Messiah had opened them to enter the presence of God. That is how Jesus was identified with the messianic hopes of Israel and that is the basis upon which they made the Christ claim for him as well as the God claim that would develop over the centuries in the creeds. With newly informed eyes the Bible is fun to read and even more fun to understand.

– John Shelby Spong

## Part XXI: Jonah and the Prophetic Lesson Against Prejudice

It was a profound shock to the people of Judah when the City of Jerusalem fell to the army of the Babylonians in the early years of the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC (BCE). This city had not been conquered by an invading power since 1000 BC, when David himself had taken it from the Jebusites to make it the capital of his newly unified country. When Solomon erected the Temple in Jerusalem, the people began to think that this holy city now lived under the protection of its indwelling deity. That idea was shattered with the city's fall in 596. The subsequent relocation of the Jewish people into a Babylonian exile only continued the shock and increased the despair. The depth and pain of these reactions was located in the firm belief that somehow the Jews were God's chosen and favoured people. Yet the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the people seemed a strange way for the "chosen people" to be treated by their God. Life has to be endured as it comes, however and so the Jews lived apart from their holy city and their sacred soil for several generations. Finally, the Persians defeated the Babylonians and allowed the descendants of the exiled Jews to return and resettle their native land. Jewish pilgrims returned in smaller and larger groups over the next two centuries.

The Jews dealt with this trauma in their history by trying to explain why God had allowed the defeat and exile of the chosen people. All of their understanding of God drove them to find some rationality in this experience. This was especially true when a sufficient number had returned to allow them finally to begin to rebuild their country. They wanted to make sure that God's wrath would not descend on them again. They needed to know how they had offended God so that this behaviour would never be repeated. Their first explanation was emotionally unsatisfying, for it placed blame for unfaithfulness on their own ancestors and dishonoured their parents, in direct violation of the Ten Commandments. Then they hit on what seemed a better idea. Alien influences were to blame, they said, "Some of our weaker ancestors had married foreign partners. These Gentile elements then brought corruption to our nation by polluting the true faith and the racial purity of God's people". The way to avoid a future disaster thus seemed clear. They must purge the nation of its non-Jewish elements by banishing them from the land. The half-breed children of these unholy unions must also go. The new land of the Jews must be for Jews only. So the law was decreed and vigilante squads were loosed on the people with instructions to check blood lines to the tenth generation in order to guarantee the racial purity of the newly established Jewish state. The true worship of a pure Jewish people was the only way to secure God's blessing. The Jewish state thus entered a period of internal violence.

It was because of the atmosphere produced by this mentality that an unknown Jewish person, presumably a man, since women were not taught to write at this time, went to his home to devise a means of challenging these prevailing attitudes. He could not attack them openly in a public, political way, for that would be interpreted as running the risk of new defeat and a new exile. He had to confront these attitudes obliquely until their destructiveness was made clear. He had to find a way to hold up a mirror and to force the ruling authorities to look directly into it. Taking his quill in hand he decided to write a fanciful story filled with the exaggeration of a world of make believe, but so enchanting that everyone would want to hear it. In the privacy of his home, he did just that. When he had finished, a text of this story appeared suddenly and anonymously in Jerusalem at the height of the ethnic cleansing. The town crier gathered some people around him in a public square and this is the story he read.

Once upon a time there was a prophet in Israel whose name was Jonah. God called to Jonah and told him that he must go to preach to the people of Nineveh. "Nineveh", said Jonah, "you must be kidding, that is an unclean Gentile city. Why would you want me to do something that weird?" God was adamant, however and God's message was clear, so Jonah had to respond. He did so in the classic way that people do when they are told by an authority figure to do something they really do not want to do, that is, Jonah said "Yes", but he meant "No", since he had no intention of obeying. Jonah, however, went through all the motions. He went to his home, packed a suitcase, went down to the port and booked passage on a boat, but to Tarshish and not to Nineveh. One does not go by sea to Nineveh. If caught, he reasoned, he could claim that he had misunderstood and by this time, God surely would have had second thoughts. All went well as Jonah boarded, unpacked his suitcase in his stateroom, put on his Bermuda shorts, got a good book and positioned himself topside in a deck chair as the ship pulled out into the Mediterranean Sea. The trip was uneventful until a dark cloud in the sky seemed to be shadowing the boat. Aware of this dark presence, the captain tried to escape it by turning the boat both to the right and to the left, but the cloud responded by turning in concert with the boat. While the rest of the sky was clear and blue, this cloud got darker and darker and from within it came flashes of lightning, the roar of thunder and finally rain. So strange was this phenomenon that the captain drew the obvious conclusion, "Someone up

there does not like someone down here". In what he regarded as a scientific fashion, he sought to identify the culprit. He drew straws and the lot fell on Jonah. "What is this that you have done, Jonah?" "Well, God did tell me to go preach to the Ninevites, but I knew that God did not really care for the Ninevites, so I booked passage on this boat." The captain, who did not care for Ninevites either, understood and thought he would ride out the storm until a bolt of lightning struck near and a wave from the sea swept over the boat, hurling Jonah's deck chair from one end of the ship to the other. That was when the captain weighed his own security against Jonah's decision and decided that Jonah had to go. So, with the help of three deck hands, Jonah was seized by his limbs and on the count of three, they heaved him overboard.

Jonah never hit the sea. God had created a great fish (the word *whale* never occurs in this story) that had been swimming in tandem with this boat waiting for its moment in the drama. Jonah fell into its open jaws, which closed over him and Jonah found himself living in the belly of this great fish. Jonah had amazing adaptive qualities, so he settled down to make his new home comfortable by re-arranging the furniture and hanging the curtains. For three days and nights, Jonah lived in this new, but somewhat confining, Mediterranean condominium until even the great fish got tired of Jonah (I think he smoked) and so, with a great primeval belch, the fish threw up Jonah, who tumbled head over heels onto a conveniently located sandbar. Jonah was clearing his head and taking in his new situation, when he heard a voice saying, "Jonah, how would you like to preach to the people of Nineveh?" "Okay, God", he said, "You win. I'll go". In one verse Jonah was in Nineveh, but still convinced that God was making a mistake, so he opted for a new form of resistance. In Frank Sinatra fashion, he concluded, "I'll do it, but I'll do it my way! I'll preach to the Ninevites, but I'll do it by muttering under my breath and only on the back streets and alley ways of the city". Around the city he went saying: "God says to repent. Repent and turn to God", hoping no one would hear. To his amazement everyone heard. Crowds gathered from every house and condominium confessing their sins, tearing their clothes in repentance and begging for God's mercy. Jonah was the most successful evangelist in the history of the world. Jerry Falwell would have eaten his heart out for this kind of response.

Jonah, however, was angry. Storming out of town, he said: "I knew this would happen, God. That is why I did not want to come. These wretched people deserve punishment. I know you, God! I know you will forgive! Why does your love not stop at the boundary of my love?" Jonah found a spot outside the city where he sat and sulked. The sounds of the revival could be heard as "Sweet Hour of Prayer" was being sung by the penitents. God was strangely silent and night fell. When Jonah awoke, a giant plant had grown up near his head. During the day Jonah found protection from the desert sun in its foliage and sanctuary from the biting desert wind in its trunk. That night God created a worm that ate the giant tree, leaving only a small pile of sawdust. When Jonah awoke, he was distraught at the loss of his beloved tree. He wept, mourned and felt the depth of bereavement. Finally, God broke the divine silence and said, "Jonah, how is it that you can have such passionate feelings about this tree and yet no compassion for the 120,000 people of Nineveh, to say nothing of their cattle?"

The Book of Jonah ends there. Imagine that story being read on the streets of Jerusalem while ethnic cleansing was taking place in the city. As the story unfolded, the people roared at the depth of Jonah's bigotry until they realised that Jonah was a fictional portrayal of themselves. The Book of Jonah remains in the Bible to this day to counter human attempts to say that the love of God is limited to the limits of my love or my religion's ability to love. There are no boundaries on the love of God. That is the message of Jonah. In God there are no distinctions between Jew and Gentile, male and female, black and white, gay and straight, left handed and right handed. God's invitation is "Come unto me, all ye" not "some of ye". We are to come "just as we are, without one plea". How dare Popes, or Archbishops of Canterbury, or religious institutions anywhere define anyone as beyond the limits of God's embracing love! When any ecclesiastical leader or religious tradition excludes or diminishes any child of God for the sake of "unity" or by defining God's love as limited, the Book of Jonah stands as biblical judgment on that leader and those attitudes.

- John Shelby Spong

## Part XXII: Malachi and the Dawn of Universalism

Malachi is the last book in the Old Testament as Christians organise the scriptures and it is the last voice to be heard in the Book of the Twelve as the Jews organise the scriptures. It will also be the last of the prophets to whom I will give major attention in this series. Of the twelve so-called "minor prophets" we have examined Hosea, Amos, Micah, Jonah, Zechariah and now Malachi. This means that I have chosen not to treat Joel, Obadiah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah and Haggai. Of course, that is a value judgement, but I have determined that they are not worthy of much time. That may offend those who think that every word of the Bible is the inerrant word of God, which makes a dismissal of any of its content border on blasphemy. This attitude always amazes me and more so when I ask these critics what the message of Obadiah or Nahum is and watch them sputter. These books are little read; they do not reach any heights of spirituality and they are filled with images of a vengeful deity who hates the enemies of the Jews. To make this series complete, however, let me say a few words about each of the omitted books.

Joel is the most quoted of the books I will not cover. Joel 1:14 is regularly read on Ash Wednesday in liturgical churches: "Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly". Joel 2:22 forms a familiar Lenten theme of repentance: "Rend your hearts and not your garments". Joel 2:28 is quoted by Luke in Peter's Pentecost sermon (Acts 2): "I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams and your young men will see visions". Beyond these three verses, however, Joel is little more than a cultic prophet. Obadiah consists of a series of oracles against Israel's enemies, none of which are profound. Nahum is a tribal hymn of praise at the destruction of Nineveh, assuming that since he hates the Assyrians, God must also. Habakkuk contents himself to pronounce woes on wicked nations, apparently not able to hear the universal themes of God's unbounded love. Zephaniah is the work of a Jewish puritan and like "puritans" in all religious traditions, he is more self-righteous than helpful. Haggai, a contemporary of Zechariah, had only one song to sing and that was that the Temple must be rebuilt. If all of these omitted books were lost and for all practical purposes they have always been ignored, the world would not be much poorer for it.

Malachi, however, is different and as such he is a worthy figure to round out our study of the prophets because he helped move the consciousness of the Jews out of their tribal mentality and opened the doors that allowed their religion to grow to levels of universal understanding. The first thing that must be noted is that Malachi is not the name of the author of this little book. The name comes from the first verse of the third chapter, where we find the words, "Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me and the Lord whom you will seek will suddenly come to his Temple, the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold he is coming, says the Lord of Hosts". The Hebrew word for "my messenger" is "mal'akhi" (not dissimilar from the name of the current Prime Minister of Iraq) and that is the name by which the book came to be known. It seems to have been the second anonymous work that was copied onto the scroll of Zechariah and thus might be called III Zechariah. Dating this book is easier than most since it refers to events in history that we can date fairly accurately from other sources. Jerusalem is under the rule of a governor, but both the political and religious life of the nation is at a low ebb. It seems not to be aware of the priestly code that was added to the Torah in the late 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC (BCE). It refers to the priests as sons of Levi, rather than sons of Aaron, as the priestly code does and it mentions that the Edomites, their hated foes, have been conquered by the Nabataean Arabs. These things all point to a time before the great reforming governor Nehemiah came into power in 444 BC, so Malachi is dated somewhere around 450 BC.

The situation is far enough after the Exile for a strong sense of disillusionment to have set in among the people. They had clearly believed their own propaganda that the return from exile would usher in a glorious messianic age. Hopes had skyrocketed, as they tend to do with a change of circumstances or government, but none of these hopes seemed to find fulfilment. Instead, only a small number of Jews actually returned to their homeland and they soon discovered not the messianic age, but a difficult and dangerous life. There were no walls behind which to seek protection from either enemies or robbers. Despair was heavy and people asked why they should bother to continue to worship, when clearly the God of the Jews did not appear to be concerned with the welfare of God's chosen. This little book was thus designed to give hope to these discouraged people. In the process, however, Malachi's message broke the traditional boundaries of Jewish tribal thinking and quite literally redefined the God of the Jews. That is what makes this book so strong and so powerful.

Using a question and answer format, this prophet points first to the same issue that we will discover in the Book of Job. If you are suffering you must deserve it, you must have acted in a way that precipitated God's wrath or that at least caused God to abandon God's people. Searching for an answer, this writer points to their cultic sins and offers those as the reasons for God's punishment. Yet he continues to struggle against the limitations of this kind of tribal thinking, asserting that the God of the Jews is still in control. As evidence of God's continuing presence he cites the destruction of the Edomites, suggesting that this was God's punishment of their traditional enemies because the Edomites had celebrated the sack of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. He continues to insist that the "Day of the Lord" will come, which meant to the Jews that God will yet intervene at the end of history and vindicate the chosen people. It was tribal religion at its tribal best.

As this unknown messenger wrestled with these realities of history, however, a crack began to appear in his tribal mentality. Modern readers need to realise that the world seemed very small to ancient people. Most of them had never been to the sea. They had no idea what lay beyond their coasts or the boundaries formed by mighty rivers or even mountain ranges. They were certain that the earth was the centre of the universe, that the sun rotated around the earth and that the God who lived above the sky had the chosen people in the centre of the divine gaze. They believed that this God controlled the weather, their sicknesses and the plight of the chosen people in history. They had no understanding of either the size of this planet or the vastness of the universe. They viewed life from the centre of their limited self-consciousness. The whole world revolved around their lives and they believed that all of their behaviour, whether it was liturgical and ethical, was judged only on how it pleased God and how God responded to it.

When Malachi finally broke open this mindset, he walked into a stunning new understanding of both God and the world. It began when he observed that all worship, even that of those he called "heathens", was offered to God. If that is so, he concluded, then God must be thought of as a heavenly parent with all people being God's children. In this patriarchal world, he articulated this as the "brotherhood" of the human family under the "fatherhood" of God. The Hebrew Scriptures had hinted at this earlier with its explanations of the origins of the other nations of whom the Jews were aware. Jewish mythology had suggested that the Edomites were the descendants of Esau, Jacob's twin brother, from whom Jacob stole the birthright. The Ammonites and Moabites were the grandchildren of Lot, who was Abraham's nephew. The Arabs were the descendants of Ishmael, Abraham's son. There was indeed a sense of kinship that permeated the region; indeed a common DNA permeated them all. This insight is what finally caused Malachi to say: "Have we not all one father, has not God created us all?" As he thought about these things, Malachi appears to have stepped into a new human awareness and when he did, a majestic monotheistic God suddenly came into view and universality finally broke through the tribal minds of the Jewish people. It was then that Malachi could write: "From the rising of the sun to its setting God's name shall be great among the Gentiles". He did not realise how wide an arc the sweep of the sun created. He did not know that Europe, China or the Western hemisphere existed, but his mind was expanding. He then went on to say, "And in every nation incense shall be offered to God's name". A new realisation about the oneness of God had dawned. Tribal thinking was beginning to die.

Some people say today that God is evolving. I do not think that is accurate. Whatever and whoever God is, surely God is the same yesterday, today and forever. The fact is, however, that the human perception of God is always evolving. We have gone from a multi, spirit-filled, animistic world, first to identifying God with nature's cycles of fertility, then to the warrior deities of tribal life and ultimately to a sense of the oneness and universality of God. The biblical story moves from a God who hates the Egyptians so much that God sends multiple plagues on them and even closes the Red Sea so that the Egyptians drown and a God who hates the Amorites so much that God stops the sun in the sky to allow more daylight in which Joshua's army can slaughter them, to a place where through the eyes of Malachi the Jews begin to see the human family as one. Without Malachi's searing insight it would not have been possible for Jesus to take the next step as he did when he enjoined us even to "Love our enemies". Malachi, the unnamed voice, is thus a major person in the evolving definition of the Jewish God and through the Jews in human development itself. He thus becomes a fitting close to that section of the Bible we call the prophets. We will next look at the protest literature of the Bible and at its wisdom writings.

**– John Shelby Spong**

## Part XXIII: Job, the Icon of New Consciousness

Three books of the Bible, Jonah, Job and Ruth, are known as "protest literature". We treated Jonah in the section of this study on the prophets. We turn now to Job and Ruth. To those outside the traditional religious circles, the Book of Job is probably the best known book in the Bible. It raises the deepest human question and deals with the most ancient of human fears. It examines the issue of meaning through the lens of human suffering and the absence of fairness and justice. As such, the Book of Job has a counterpart in every religious tradition of the world. The great 20<sup>th</sup> Century psychiatrist Carl Jung used this book as the basis of his probing the dimensions of human life in what I want to believe is his most profound work, *The Answer to Job*. Solving the question of why there is evil and suffering has been part of the human inquiry forever. It should surprise no one that these themes find a place in the Bible.

The original story of Job seems to date from about 1000-800 BC (BCE) and versions of it can be found among many nations, leading us to suspect that this is a universal human narrative. The biblical version of this story, however, did not get written until the 500s. We can date it fairly accurately, since it reflects elements of Persian religion that came into Jewish awareness during and after the exile of the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC. The Book of Job, for example, introduces the figure of Satan into the biblical story, but in this book Satan is not yet an evil figure or even a fallen angel. That would develop later. In Job Satan is simply a part of the heavenly court who acts on God's command. The prologue to this book sets the stage for the drama. God and Satan are discussing the faithfulness of God's servant Job. Satan suggests that Job's faithfulness is only because he has been blessed with riches and a large family. "Why should he not be faithful?" Satan asks, "since the system of reward and punishment works for him?" Would he still be faithful, Satan wonders, if his faithfulness was not so abundantly rewarded? God defends Job's faithfulness as sincere, but resolves to determine whether God or Satan is correct. God authorises Satan to test Job for a season. Satan would remove the rewards of the good life from Job in order to determine whether his faithfulness would continue. This is when tragedy sweeps down on Job. His wealth is destroyed, his wives and children are killed and his health is taken from him. Job then tries to reconcile the established wisdom that God rewards faithfulness and punishes evil with his experience. Job is a righteous man. There is no debate about that since even God has certified his goodness in the introduction. Job, however, has now been brought low by these calamities. If calamities result from an evil life, he wonders, how can the righteous Job goodness explain his misfortunes? The stage is set for the entrance of Job's comforters.

Three of Job's friends, Eliphaz, Zophar and Bildad, hear of Job's tragedies and come to console him. The conversation between Job and his friends goes on for some thirty chapters. Supporting their conclusions, Job's friends have the common wisdom of that age, made up of undoubted "truths". God, as a just deity, rewards righteousness and punishes evil. For God to punish a righteous man would not only be inconceivable, but blasphemous. Job's friends buttress their argument by quoting scripture, since the Bible was filled with this traditional interpretation of God. Every defeat that the people of Israel had ever endured was seen by them as God's punishment for their disobedience. The message of the prophets was clear. The Jewish people had been punished with boils when King David conducted a census that displeased God. Moses had been punished with death because he had put God to the test in the wilderness of a place called Meribah. God had rewarded the people of Israel with the Exodus and the miracle at the Red Sea for the faithful endurance of their sufferings under the oppression of the Egyptians. This idea that if one obeyed the law and worshiped God properly one could count on blessings from heaven was a central tenet in popular Jewish religion. If one did not, the vengeance of God was said to be sure and swift. Deep down this firmly held belief delivered the Jewish people from the threat of meaninglessness. There was purpose, not chaos, in life. This purpose was best revealed in that human behaviour controlled the response of God. Human goodness put God on one's side with rewards. Human faithlessness and evil brought God's wrath and divine retribution. Job's friends were confident in the rightness of their convictions.

When they confronted Job's calamities, there was, therefore, only one possible explanation. Job must be guilty of some unseen evil, so they came to help him come to grips with his sinfulness, to beg for forgiveness and to seek the mercy of God. They felt compelled to get Job to see the evil of his ways, believing that to be the only way to bring an end to his tragedy. Theological correctness was thus confronted by human experience and, as so often is the case, it simply did not fit.

Job stood alone against this common theological wisdom. He knew he was not deserving of these calamities. He could not deny the experience of his own character. He knew himself to be upright and honest, one who not only

obeyed the law faithfully, but who also paid proper homage to the God of his ancestors. Yet he also knew that he had witnessed the loss of all that he valued - his family, his fortune and his health. In the most dramatic moment in the story, Job is portrayed as sitting on top of a garbage heap, scratching the infected sores of his body with a piece of broken pottery, alone with his inner integrity. None of his calamities made rational sense unless he was deserving of this treatment. The pressure from his friends was to face and to admit these things, to judge himself as evil and thus to make his suffering make sense.

The meaning of life itself was thus at stake in this debate. Only by the admission of his evil could he keep at bay the deep and perennial human fear that maybe there was not a God who was in control. If there is no God then perhaps life was chaotic, ruled only by chance, fate or luck, possessing no purpose, no meaning and no redemptive qualities. If that turned out to be the case then the human alternative was only to hope for the chance of blessing, since one could not earn it, or to endure endless suffering if that was to be his fate, with no further court of appeal. If the common theological wisdom did not operate then Job had to decide either that God was not just or that there was no God. This was the unspoken fear that Job's tormenters were resisting and like all theological fundamentalists, that was why they pressed their case with such single-minded fervour. Job, on the other hand, was willing to run this enormous risk because the common theological wisdom simply did not interpret properly his experience. With the unprecedented courage of one seeking a new human breakthrough, he stood against the conclusions of his friends, forcing on them a new alternative.

The Book of Job ends not with a negotiated settlement of this dispute, but with a new vision of God who spoke out of the whirlwind to challenge the inadequacy of every human attempt to state how God works and to discredit every human effort to define the holy. The voice of God reminded Job that the human mind cannot embrace the reality of God. "Where were you when the foundations of the world were laid?" The ways of the divine are not the ways of the human. That is always the fatally wrong theological assumption. Religion at its core is based on the arrogance of believing that human beings can not only discern the ways of God, but they can also act in such a way as to control the actions of God. The human sense of fairness is read into the understanding of God. The human attempt to control human behaviour reinforces the common theological wisdom that expresses itself in a reward and punishment mentality. Heaven and hell are nothing more than the assertion that the mind of God, as we human beings have created it, is still operating to reward or punish us after our deaths. Religion almost inevitably creates God in the image of the human being and then tries to force reality into that frame of reference. That is why there is no religious system that is eternal. That is why when human experience can no longer be interpreted adequately inside the traditional religious framework, the framework itself begins to die.

The death of a religious system is never easy. The fear engendered by the loss of religion, or even what we think of as the death of God, engulfs human life in a sea of potential meaninglessness. Such a death always produces emotional denial or fundamentalist fervour; a killing hostility directed toward that which or those who have shattered our religious delusions. It also, however, always produces emancipation from the evils of religion that many people welcome. It is the evils of religion that force us either into a new religious oppression or the building of a new secular city. The struggle to find a new alternative, however, also stretches our consciousness into new dimensions of what it means to be human and that is where hope is born. Job resisted the theological conclusions of his day. Job refused to let his experience be interpreted by the categories of the past. He held on until the birth of a new consciousness engulfed him. Job is thus an icon through which we can see the meaning of a profound religious paradigm shift.

Today we are experiencing exactly that sort of paradigm shift. Our experience has rendered the religious answers of yesterday to be inoperative. The defenders of the inadequate answers of the past are anxious. The critics of those answers feel a new freedom. The God of yesterday dies as we struggle to view the birth of the God of tomorrow. Job is thus an eternal symbol of that eternal human struggle.

**- John Shelby Spong**

## Part XXIV: The Book of Ruth

There are three books in the Hebrew Bible that are designated as "protest literature"; that is, they are all representative of a literary device used by an anonymous author to make a point, human or political, in a particular moment of history. The three books are Jonah, Job and Ruth. None of these books ever pretended to be literal history; the three main characters are not real people who ever lived. They are literary characters created by their respective authors to allow the drama to unfold and as such to carry a specific narrative purpose. Only one who is completely ignorant of biblical history would ever suggest that these three works were ever written to be read as literal history or as the "inerrant word of God".

We have already looked at Jonah and Job in this "Origins of the Bible" series. Jonah is located, incorrectly I believe, in what the Jews call the "Book of the Twelve" and the Christians tend to call "The Minor Prophets". In our consideration of Jonah we noted that, whereas modern people might signal the fictional nature of a story by beginning it with the words "Once upon a time", the Hebrews used gross exaggeration to make the same point. So we read in Jonah of a great fish in whose belly the prophet can live for three days and three nights. In Job the exaggeration takes the form of a rich man whose righteousness was tested by God by having his life wrecked by a series of calamities that his moral character did not deserve, in order to see how he will react. Those things signal the fact that these narratives are not history, but fictional stories with a powerful purpose.

Today we turn to the last of the protest books, the book of Ruth. This small, four-chapter-long story is hidden away in the Bible between the books of Judges and First Samuel. It was written in the post-exilic period of Jewish history, probably near the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, somewhere between 425 and 360 BC (BCE). It received its present position in the Bible prior to the establishment of the house of David and the royal line of Davidic kings because it purports to tell the story of King David's great-grandmother. That was, indeed, the whole point of the book, but to note that here is to get ahead of my story. Let me set the stage.

During the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, the Jewish nation went through a period of intense xenophobia, which grew out of an enormous fear that is always the mother of dislocating prejudices. The Jewish people had had to face the possibility of their own annihilation. First, they had been defeated in battle by the Babylonians in 596 BC. Their supposedly impenetrable walls around Jerusalem, which had not been breached by an enemy for more than 400 years, had given way to the army of Nebuchadnezzar. Their holy city had been laid waste. The Temple built by Solomon around 935 BC and believed to be the earthly house of their God Yahweh, had been levelled. These traumatised Jewish people, who believed themselves to have been chosen by God and thereby promised the land they occupied and who were also convinced that their holy homeland was not only the centre of the earth, but the place where heaven and earth touched, now found themselves unceremoniously marched away into a Babylonian captivity far from their sacred soil. They had thus been ripped away from everything they believed to be holy. They even wondered if they would ever again sing the Lord's song, since it could not, they believed, be sung in a foreign land.

When some of them were finally allowed to return from exile some two generations later, around the year 538 BC, these newly freed descendents interpreted their restoration to mean that finally God would vindicate them and proceed to establish the long-anticipated kingdom of God back on Jewish soil. Surely the end of their captivity was the sign that the kingdom was near and that God was back in charge. That, however, was not what happened. A second return around 490 BC under Zerubbabel also did not give rise to the expected kingdom. A third return under Nehemiah about the year 450 BC met a similar fate, as did a fourth under Ezra between 400-350 BC. With each disappointment the hopelessness of their dreams seemed to be given new confirmation, so they raised haunting questions. Why was God not protecting them? Why would God allow the chosen people to be so badly treated with defeat and exile and then to experience a return made up only of the bitterness of being small, defenceless and continually abused? It was a strange way for God to act, unless God was angry. So they sought to determine what they had done to infuriate their God and to bring about their fate. By the time of Ezra they became convinced that they finally understood the reason for their suffering: they had ceased to be a racially pure people. Some Jews had married non-Jews, who had polluted their pure blood and had even corrupted their true faith. This, they thought, must have angered their God and they came to believe that nothing would change until the Jewish nation purified itself. A new national strategy was thus adopted. All foreign elements were to be purged. Xenophobia set in. Husbands or wives married to non-Jews were to be banished from the land, along with any half-breed children that had issued from these unholy unions. The new Judah was to be for Jews only. This was the context in which an unknown author wrote his protest that we today call the book of Ruth. Listen to this story now from this perspective.

A Jewish man named Elimelech and his Jewish wife, Naomi, took their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion and moved to the land of Moab. Perhaps it was a time of a downturn in the Jewish economy and work was hard to find in Judah. While dwelling in this foreign land, however, Elimelech died and the care of his widow Naomi was left in the hands of their sons. These sons, living far from Judah, then proceeded to take Moabite wives for themselves, one of whom was named Orpah and the other Ruth. Then tragedy struck again, and Mahlon and Chilion died. In that patriarchal society this left a vulnerable and economically non-viable family made up of three single women. Naomi decided that her only choice was to return to Judah, and so she urged her two daughters-in-law to return to their fathers' families. It was a sign of disgrace for them to do so, but an older, widowed mother-in-law without sons had no way to care for these now single younger women. One of them, Orpah, agreed to do so, but the other, Ruth, declined and in a piece of writing that has been quoted as a mark of fidelity through the ages, said to Naomi: "Entreat me not to leave you??...where you will go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people will be my people and your God my God and where you die, I will die and there will I be buried."

The two of them thus returned to Judah without a male protector. It was a hazardous life in a patriarchal world. Determined to survive, they settled near the fields of a man named Boaz, who was a distant kinsman of Naomi's deceased husband. Jewish law required that the poor be allowed to glean in the fields of the rich for enough grain to keep them alive and so each day Ruth brought enough from Boaz' fields to make bread to keep the two of them alive. In the process, Ruth, this foreign woman, won the admiration of her Jewish neighbours, including Boaz, who ordered her to be protected while alone in the fields and to be given access to water.

Naomi, knowing that Boaz was kin to Elimelech, was also aware of the Jewish law requiring the male nearest of kin to a deceased husband to take the widow of his departed kinsman into his care as part of his harem, so she devised a plan to confront Boaz with his responsibility for herself and for Ruth. The plan involved seduction. At the end of the harvest there would be a celebration at which wine would flow freely. Naomi instructed Ruth to bathe, anoint herself with perfume, put on her best dress and go to the party. Ruth was instructed to see that Boaz' heart was made merry with much wine. When well drunk, Boaz lay down on the floor and went to sleep. Ruth gave him a pillow and covered him with a blanket. Then she crawled under the blanket with him. When Boaz awoke the next morning, he found this woman at his side. He had no idea what he had done. "Who are you?" he asked. "I am Ruth", she responded. "Spread your skirt over me for you are next of kin." What she was saying was, "Marry me!" Boaz demurred, admitting his kinship, but saying there was a nearer kinsman than he who must be given first refusal on this new wife. When this man declined, Boaz did the honourable thing and he and Ruth were married. They had a son, whose name was Obed. He in turn had a son named Jesse and Jesse had a son named David. That is where the book of Ruth ends. Ruth was a Moabite. She was David's great-grandmother. David, the hero of the super-patriotic Jews who were at that moment purging from the land all people whose bloodlines were compromised, was himself part Moabite! David would have qualified for purging. That is why the protest book of Ruth was written. It was designed to confront the reigning xenophobia and to reveal its inherent weakness.

As the fear subsided, the xenophobia also faded. It always does. The call of God to human beings is always a call to wholeness. No one is whole when, acting out of fear, he or she seeks to diminish the worth and the dignity of one who is judged to be somehow impure or inferior by reason of some ontological difference: those whose skin colour is of a different hue, whose religion is thought to be deviant and thus not true, or whose sexual orientation is not that of the majority. Ruth is a book written to protest all of the limits that human prejudice forever tries to place on the love of God.

How wonderful that such a book was included in the sacred scriptures of both the Jews and the Christians. The book of Ruth provides us with a biblical mirror into which we can stare at our own prejudices and then be led to free ourselves of them. That is why the Bible is called "Holy".

– John Shelby Spong

## The Origins of the Bible, Part XXVI: The Wisdom Literature

Four books of the Old Testament are generally regarded as being the constituent parts of what has been called "Wisdom Literature". They are Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon. We have treated the book of Job earlier in this series (see Weekly Discussion for 26<sup>th</sup> March 2009 "*The Origins of the Bible, Part XXIII: Job, the Icon of New Consciousness*") and will not repeat that. Job is also listed along with Jonah (see Weekly Discussion for 12<sup>th</sup> February 2009 "*The Origins of the Bible, Part XXI: Jonah and the Prophetic Lesson Against Prejudice*") and Ruth (see Weekly Discussion for 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2009 "*The Origins of the Bible, Part XXIV: The Book of Ruth*") as "protest literature" and it wrestles with the eternal human question of the meaning of justice and the nature of God. Today, I will focus on the other three of the "Wisdom" books, all of which are attributed in the mythology of the Jews to King Solomon, who was regarded as the wisest of the kings of the Jews. That reputation is based primarily on a story found in the I Kings Chapter 3, which portrays Solomon as asking God not for wealth or long life, but for the gift of wisdom to enable him to be a good king. When one reads what the rest of the Bible says about Solomon, however, the idea that his life was marked by wisdom is a very strange claim. He had a harem of 1000 wives. He quite literally dissipated the goodwill of his father, King David. Finally his unwise policies resulted in a rebellion at the time of his death which resulted in the secession of ten tribes from his kingdom to form the nation of Israel, also called the Northern Kingdom. For rebellious Jews to be willing to give up their ties with Jerusalem and the Temple and to break forever the sense of Jewish unity, which contributed over the centuries to Jewish weakness and a history of persecution, strikes me as anything but wise. Mythology, however, has strange power and the image of wise King Solomon has hung on despite the witness of history. The Wisdom Literature claims King Solomon in the same way that we noted earlier that the Book of Psalms claimed King David as its author. In neither affirmation is history well served.

Turning first to the book of Proverbs, one discovers quickly that this book is in reality a compendium of four separate works augmented by several poems and a few appendices. Book I runs from Proverbs 1:1-9:18 and consists of ten extended discourses containing admonitions and warnings, plus two poems in which wisdom is personified. One of them (8:1-36) appears to have influenced the prologue to the Fourth Gospel in which the logos is personified in quite similar language. This first book appears to have been composed in the late 4<sup>th</sup> or early 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BC, some 600 years at least after Solomon's death.

Book II, which includes Proverbs 10:1-22:16 and Book IV, which includes 25:1-29:27, makes the overt claim that these words are "the Proverbs of Solomon". That claim is strange on many levels, but it should be noted that even the book of I Kings claims that Solomon's wisdom covered only the phenomenon of nature, not human behaviour.

Book III is composed of Chapters 22:17-24:42 and appears to have been based on a much earlier Egyptian book of Wisdom, which is dated about 1000BC and is entitled the "Instruction of Amenemope". To this book is attached the first of five appendages 24:23-34. The others, which were attached to Book IV, constitute (1) a dialogue between a sceptic and a believer (30:1-9); (2) proverbs of a numerical type (30: 10-33); (3) the counsel of a Queen Mother to a young monarch (31:1-9); and (4) a portrait of an ideal wife of a prominent man (31:10-31). I have taken these divisions from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, but one can get them from almost any study of the book of Proverbs.

The content of the book of Proverbs has insinuated itself into the common wisdom of our society far more deeply than most people imagine. One only has to recall such familiar sayings as, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom"; "He who troubles the household will inherit the wind"; "A soft answer turns away wrath"; "A good name is to be chosen above great riches"; "Spare the rod and spoil the child" (not exactly the quote from Proverbs, but close and it is most often repeated in this form) and "Train up a child in the way he(or she) should go and when he (or she) is old he (or she) will not depart from it!" Many people, including prominent politicians, repeat these phrases with little knowledge that they derive from the book of Proverbs.

Wisdom literature became popular among the Jews in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Centuries BC, following the return from exile that began around 540. The cultural assumption was that the time of the prophets had passed. Divine revelation could no longer be anticipated and the voice of God was no longer heard, so people searched for guidance in life, in the accumulated experience of human wisdom. The wisdom message, cited time after time, was that good living would be rewarded, not in some after-life, which at this time hardly existed as a concept in Judaism, but in the quality and integrity of their present life. When that did not seem to work out, as was the

case in the story of Job, there was a sense of religious disillusionment. It was that feeling of disillusionment that became particularly apparent in the second major work in the Wisdom section of the Jewish Bible to which I now turn.

The book of Ecclesiastes, or "Qoheloth the Preacher", a title by which this book is also known, is far more a philosophical treatise on the meaning of life than it is a testimony to belief. It even expresses despair about the reality of God and questions the primary beliefs of the Hebrew religion. Portraying God as the "inscrutable" originator of the world and the "determiner" of human fate, Ecclesiastes is sceptical of the human ability to make change and finally declares that no human accomplishments make any difference in determining one's ultimate fate. Thus, for this author, there is no clear meaning in life and no ultimate purpose for life. This means, says this book in its recurring theme, "All is vanity". There is also no hope for life beyond this life in this book, for it asserts that death brings only oblivion.

One wonders how a 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC work of this nature managed to get accepted into the Hebrew canon of Scripture, since it appears to be at odds with most of the Jewish understanding of God. Two reasons are traditionally cited. First, in the first two verses, the book is attributed to the son of King David, a verse that was interpreted to imply authorship by King Solomon. The second is that an orthodox postscript was added in 12: 9-14 that concludes with the admonition that "we are to fear God and keep God's commandments knowing that God will bring every deed into judgment". That is a strange ending for a very different book with a very different message and undoubtedly comes from the pen of a later editor, but this ending probably allowed the book to gain entrance into the sacred text. I have always liked the honesty of Ecclesiastes and the fact that this almost nihilistic writing could find a place in the scriptures of my faith tradition. I suspect, however, that those who claim a magical revelatory source for the Bible always skipped this faithless, despairing work.

The final book in the Wisdom section is entitled "The Song of Solomon". This is a book of lyric poems or fragments of poems about courtship and human love. One commentator suggested that these poems were really bawdy songs sung in a Jewish pub by males lusting after the body of a female. Others have said that they are courtship songs written to be sung at weddings. Still others have suggested that these narratives portray a god and goddess in love. Whatever the explanation the fact remains that The Song of Solomon is erotic and it does extol the beauty and wonder of physical love and sexual attraction. It is quite obvious when reading this book that Israel never produced a Queen Victoria or a Victorian period of sexual repression.

This writing also made it into the Canon of Scripture first by claiming, as it does in the first verse, that it was the work of wise King Solomon and, second, by being allegorised. Hosea, the 8<sup>th</sup> Century BC prophet, had understood God as the husband of Israel (Hosea 7: 16-19) and so these love songs were said to have been between God and God's bride, the Jewish people. In the Christian era, they continued to find allegorical interpretations by playing on the metaphor of the Church as the bride of Christ, a theme stated most overtly in the book of Revelation (21: 2, 9). The Song of Solomon has also been interpreted through the ages as describing "the intimate experience of divine love in the individual soul".

The Wisdom Literature formed another movement in the unfolding life of the biblical narrative. One other note of some historic interest is that the concept of "wisdom" was thought of as feminine and was indeed feminine in the Greek language, into which these Hebrew Scriptures were destined to be translated. So it was that appeals to the "divine Sophia" (the Greek word for wisdom) helped to temper the heavily patriarchal character of biblical thinking about God. Many people would in time see "wisdom" as an aspect of the Holy Spirit and thus advocates for the feminine in the definition of God for the first time found in the "wisdom literature" a scriptural basis to support their claims. That concept, once so foreign in our faith story, has now moved to the place where more and more of us are willing to see God first as both mother and father - and second to recognise that whoever God ultimately is, God is finally beyond the limited language of human gender divisions. In time, with our sexist preconceptions opened up, scholars began to discover in the biblical text ideas that moved us beyond seeing God as an enlarged and unlimited being like ourselves. Then we found other divine images that were trans-personal, viewing God after the analogy of the wind, or the power of love or even after the analogy of a "rock". In each of these metaphors we began to see how it is that most of our God-talk is not really about who or what God is, but about making sense of the human experience of the "holy". There *is* a difference. So embrace the truth found in the biblical "Wisdom Literature", savour it and transform it into the symbols of your own experience. That is finally the only way to read this ancient, sacred and mythological book we call the Bible.

## **The Origins of the Bible, Part XXVII**

### **The Liturgical Books of Lamentations and Esther**

One of the things that seems to escape the notice of those who believe that the Bible was somehow dictated by God is that the Bible is first and foremost a liturgical book. That is, the Bible was written to be used on occasions of public worship. It was never intended to be read as history or biography. We have seen this principle many times on this journey through the scriptures in this column. We noted that the original story of Jesus' passion and death on the cross, as it was composed by Mark (14:17-15:49), was not a description of how Jesus died; it was rather a liturgical reliving of the meaning of his crucifixion. It was originally written to be used by the Christian community while they were still part of the synagogue and thus still observing the Passover. In that early Christian adaptation of Jewish worship, Jesus was likened to the Paschal lamb of Passover who broke the power of death. That is why Mark's Passion narrative was written in eight three-hour segments. It was a liturgical piece designed to satisfy the demands of a twenty-four-hour vigil service. We also noted that Mark's Gospel itself was originally written to be read on the Sabbaths of the liturgical year between Rosh Hashanah and Passover. That is why it suggests that Jesus' public ministry was one year in duration. That was the time span in which his life was liturgically remembered while the followers of Jesus were still involved in the life of the synagogue. The Christian Church did not separate itself from the synagogue until at least 58 years after the crucifixion, by which time Mark's Gospel had been around for at least 17 years.

In other illustrations of the influence of liturgy on scripture we need to note that Psalm 119, the longest psalm in the Psalter, was a hymn to the glory and wonder of the Torah. It was composed to be read at the Jewish festival of Shavuot, or Pentecost, when the giving of the law to Moses on Mt. Sinai was celebrated. In a similar fashion Zechariah 9-14 has a particular connection to the eight-day fall harvest festival of Sukkoth, or Booths. Perhaps that is why this part of Zechariah occupied so favoured a position among the early Christians, who quote from this source constantly, building the Palm Sunday story on Zechariah 9: 9-11. Once this pattern is discerned, two other little-known books of the Bible begin to make sense. I refer to the book of Lamentations, found immediately after the book of Jeremiah; and the book of Esther, found after the book of Nehemiah closes the "history" section of the Old Testament and before the book of Job opens the Wisdom section. I focus today on these two books as we near our completion in this "Origins" series of the Old Testament part of our study.

Lamentations was a book written to be read on the Jewish observance of a holy day known as the 9<sup>th</sup> of Ab, which would come generally in our month of August. It is a series of laments over Jerusalem, designed both to recall and to bewail the fall of that city to the Babylonians in the early years of the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC. The 9<sup>th</sup> of Ab was the day chosen to mark in every generation their ultimate national tragedy. People once attributed this book to Jeremiah and that probably accounts for its placement in the Bible immediately following Jeremiah, but Jeremiah had been dead for hundreds of years before Lamentations was written. It is a book written for liturgical recital on this day of public fasting and mourning. Four of its chapters follow a form we know as alphabetical acrostics, that is, they each have 22 verses, one for each of the 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet. The book was designed to be a series of dirges to allow the defeats of history to be recalled on a day that was set aside for national mourning.

Most Christians are familiar with this book only because it has been adapted for Christian use on Good Friday. Often Good Friday liturgies begin with these words from Lamentations: "Is it nothing to you all ye who pass by? Behold and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow with which the Lord has afflicted me". By using these words from Lamentations on Good Friday, Christians were likening the death of Jesus liturgically to the death of the Jewish nation. Other words from Lamentations that have found their way into Christian worship include the 1822 hymn by John Keble, "New Every Morning is the Love", based on Lamentations 3: 22; the phrase used in Christian prayers to a God who has "taught us in thy holy word that thou dost not willingly grieve or afflict the sons of man", from Lamentations 3: 32; and the secular phrase that something is "worth its weight in gold", which comes from Lamentations 4: 2. This little book can be read in five minutes and it constantly surprises the reader with its message.

A second little-known biblical liturgical work is the book of Esther. Like Lamentations this book was also written to be read in synagogue worship on a Jewish holiday. Esther is attached to the Jewish Festival of Purim, which normally comes in February or March in our calendar. It is a charming and purely secular story in which no Jewish religious practice is mentioned and the name of God is never used. I recall meeting a musician from

New York, while we were both walking the Milford Track on the beautiful South Island of New Zealand, whose ambition it was to turn the story of Esther into a modern opera. I hope he does so, for it lends itself to that medium with great power.

The story line of the book of Esther is fascinating. A Persian king named Ahasuerus, who ruled a kingdom that stretched from Ethiopia to India, was drinking with some royal guests and some of the leading citizens in the city of Susa. He decided to invite his queen Vashti into the feast so that these guests could stare with envy at her beauty. Vashti, however, refused to come, which created an embarrassing moment. If the king's wife could defy her husband, then any wife could defy any husband and the power of patriarchy would be over. All women must give honour to their husbands, the text said, for this is "the law of the Medes and the Persians". So in response to the Queen's disobedience, the order was sent across the land that "every man shall be king of his home". Queen Vashti was banished and a contest set up to pick the most beautiful virgin in the land to be the new queen. The choice fell on Esther, the niece of a Jewish man named Mordecai. It appears that her Jewish identity was unknown to the king. Later two of the king's eunuchs conspired to remove the king from the throne, but their scheme was discovered by Mordecai and reported to the king, who had the eunuchs hanged and who then placed the good deed done by Mordecai in informing the king of this danger in the "Book of Memorable Deeds". Meanwhile, the king reorganised his administration and appointed a man named Haman to be over all his affairs. Haman, drunk with his new authority, required the populace to bow down before him. They all did so, except for one man, Mordecai the Jew, who bowed his head to no human being. This infuriated Haman and he initiated a plan to hang Mordecai and to destroy all the Jews in the realm. When notice of this intention became public, Mordecai asked his daughter Esther to intercede with the king on behalf of her people. She did so even though it identified her as a Jew and placed her in mortal danger by demanding the king's attention.

Still smitten by her charms, the king allowed this intrusion on his royal dignity and asked to hear her request. She invited him to come with Haman alone to a dinner she would prepare and at which she would make her petition known. They came, but she now said she would not make her request known until a second dinner that again only Haman and the king would attend. Haman was quite pleased to be included in these dinners along with the king and the queen and he began to fantasise about his increasing power. He built a gallows on which to hang Mordecai, his major nemesis. Before they attended the second dinner, the king has a restless night and in his sleeplessness read from the "Book of Memorable Deeds" where Mordecai's act in saving the king was recorded. The next day he inquired of Haman what should be done for a man the king wanted to honour. Haman, assuming that he was to be the honoree, spelled out a list of public acts to be bestowed upon this fortunate man. The king agreed and directed Haman to do all of the things he had outlined to Mordecai the Jew. To his chagrin, Haman had to carry out this order on the one he considered his bitterest enemy. Things get even worse for Haman when he accompanied the king to the second dinner with Queen Esther to hear her petition. She asked that the law designed to annihilate the Jews be rescinded and that Haman, the author of this law, be executed. The king did as Esther had requested. The Jewish people were saved and Haman was hanged on the same gallows that he had erected for Mordecai. This escape from peril was then ordered to be celebrated annually on the Feast of Purim, so that the Jews could recall the time when Queen Esther saved them from annihilation.

It is an exciting story, but it hardly qualifies as the "Word of God", especially when the Jews, now freed from annihilation, responded by slaying five hundred of their tormentors, including the ten sons of Haman. There is so much in the Bible that is lively and insightful to read, once we crack the pious framework and remove the outrageous claims to authority that have been placed into and around these ancient words. Human beings almost inevitably and intuitively seek the truth of God and it comes through many sources of which the Bible is one. The truth of God, however, cannot be captured in propositional form, for it is always bigger than the human mind can embrace. Our perception of truth evolves as human consciousness expands. We claim no finite book as the literal source of truth without becoming idolaters.

The Christians of the world need to face the fact that the biblical books of Lamentations and Esther make that point in a very obvious way.

Next week we will conclude our study of the Old Testament with a look at the work of the Chronicler, which includes Ezra and Nehemiah.

– John Shelby Spong

## **The Origins of the Bible, Part XXVIII**

### **The Chronicler: Final Chapter of the Old Testament**

The Old Testament, as we Christians organise it, closes in the post-exile period of Jewish history. That would date its final works in the mid to late 300s BC. The biblical story thus comes to a conclusion in a very difficult period of Jewish history. They were a defeated nation returning from exile and trying to lay claim to their former country, which had now been settled by other people for several generations. Those settlers were not happy to welcome the returning Jews, nor did they recognise the Jewish claim to their land. So it was that resistance against the Jews was high and hostility toward them was intense. Survival required that the Jews erect symbols of their permanence. This meant rebuilding the protective wall around Jerusalem, rebuilding the city itself and ultimately rebuilding their Temple, which was an outward symbol of their claim to live in this land. The Temple proclaimed that this land belonged to their God, who had given it to them. Some of the less inspired minor prophets like Haggai, Nahum, Zephaniah and Obadiah, whom we treated with only a brief paragraph in this series, spoke for this nationalistic fervour. They were tribal figures in the service of a tribal religion. The four final books that I will cover to complete our study of the origins of the Old Testament are products of this period. They are I and II Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah.

Most people have no sense or image of the books of the Chronicler. Much of the material in them is also contained, sometimes verbatim, in the books of I and II Kings. Ezra and Nehemiah were originally part of the corpus of the Chronicler, so all of these books are deeply inter-related. The Chronicler, however, was not a historian in the sense that he made no effort to discover the facts of history; he was rather a theologian whose primary purpose was to retell Jewish history from his particular theological perspective. He wanted to inform the Jews of his generation of what it would be like to be properly the people of God. He did this by describing the reigns of Kings David and Solomon not as they were, but as they ought to have been. So, in the books of Chronicles, we get idealised kings who are not really human.

Nowhere is this idealised theme better noted than in the Chronicler's description of King David's final sickness, in which the king was portrayed as laying out in minute detail the plans for the building of the Temple. This was the Chronicler's way of suggesting that even the Temple was the product of David's reign rather than of Solomon's. Compare that with the story of King David's final days as told by the much earlier book of Kings. Here David is a sick and incapacitated old man, who could not govern in his weakness, so a court intrigue developed around his heir. Solomon, who was hardly the firstborn son of King David, became the eventual winner of this struggle. His claim to the throne was modest to say the least. He was the second child of the adulterous relationship between King David and Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, whom David had had murdered. David had many older and more nobly born sons who might have succeeded him. The most obvious candidate was Adonijah, who was backed by both Abiathar the priest and Joab, David's military chief of staff. Solomon, however, aided by his mother, who had obviously become as close to a queen as David ever had, joined with Zadok, the priest, Nathan the prophet and Benaiah, a military leader, to pull off the coup that had Solomon crowned king with David's blessing even prior to David's death, dashing the hopes of all potential challengers.

It was also suggested in the book of Kings that as he neared death King David was suffering from chills that could not be overcome even with many blankets. So his attendants decided on a new strategy. They would conduct a "Miss Israel" contest to determine the most beautiful woman in the land. The winner's prize would be to lie with the sick king to warm his chilled body with her own. When Abishag the Shunammite was chosen, she immediately entered Jewish folklore and was said to have been the inspiration for the romantic material in the biblical book known as "The Song of Songs" or the "Song of Solomon". I submit that this is a rather different end of life story from contemplating the dimensions of the yet to be built Temple.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are also the work of the Chronicler. In one of the later returns from captivity the group was led by Ezra the priest and Nehemiah the governor. One learns more, however, about Ezra by reading the book of Nehemiah than one learns about Nehemiah. Two things, however, occur in these last two books of the Bible that shape later history. The first is that a story is told (see Nehemiah Chapter 8) about how a new and expanded law, or Torah, was brought to Ezra the priest to read to the assembly of the people. After this reading, the people covenanted with God to obey this law and to enjoin its precepts on the common life of the newly established Jewish nation. Many scholars believe that this is the only biblical reference to the

completion of the Torah (Genesis to Deuteronomy, also called "the books of Moses") that was done during the Babylonian Exile and was subsequently incorporated into Jewish life as the most holy of all Jewish writings. You may recall that when we began this series on the origins of the Bible, we identified at least four major strands that made up the Torah. The earliest was a work now called the Yahwist document, because it called God by the name of Yahweh. The author was a court historian, probably during the reign of King Solomon (ca. 960-920 BC), who was charged with writing the sacred history of the Jewish people. He did so extolling the institutions that gained prominence at the time of King David. Those institutions were four in number: the royal line of David, the city of Jerusalem, the Temple, and the office of the high priest. These four institutions were the strength of the Jewish people and this first strand of their sacred scriptures told the story of the origin of these institutions and the favour with which God looked upon them.

The second strand was known as the Elohist document because it called God by the name of Elohim, or El. It was the product of the 9<sup>th</sup> Century (ca. 850 BC) in the Northern Kingdom. This narrative was written to justify the rebellion of the Northern Kingdom after its secession from Judah, Jerusalem, the Royal House of David, the Temple and its priesthood. When the Northern Kingdom was destroyed by the Assyrians in 721 BC, someone brought this version of Jewish sacred writing to Jerusalem and in time the Yahwist and the Elohist versions were woven together, with the original Yahwist version of the earliest history of the Jewish nation dominant. The third strand of the Torah was the work of the Deuteronomic writers, who created not only the book of Deuteronomy, which was added to the growing text, but who also edited the entire sacred corpus in the light of the Deuteronomic insights. This revision occurred around the year 625 BC. Finally, there was what we call "the Priestly Version", a product of the exile itself, including the years of the return, in which all of the rules governing both liturgy and ethics were recorded. The book of Leviticus is a typical piece of the material composed by the priestly writers. It covers every jot and tittle of Jewish life. Whenever the Torah was changed, the people had to authenticate the new version in a liturgical setting. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah thus record the moment in post-exilic Jewish history when that final version of the Torah reached acceptance. Most scholars believe that the Torah has been relatively the same from that day to this.

The final note that needs to be lifted up from this last strand of material to be incorporated into the Hebrew Scriptures was the rising presence of ethnic isolation. The Jewish people were torn between two realities. First, they believed that they were God's chosen people. Second, they were a defeated, exiled nation. That was a strange way for God to treat the chosen people. The Jews thus spent much time trying to understand this dilemma. What had they done wrong? Why was God punishing them so severely? How had they failed? Who were the culprits? After much discussion, a consensus emerged and was reflected in the book of Ezra. It suggested that many Jewish people had corrupted their ethnic purity by intermarrying with Gentiles. This, the pundits argued, had corrupted the faith and practice of the Jews by allowing foreign practices in their life and worship that had angered God. The punishment of the people for this violation of their call to ethnic purity was defeat and exile. To avoid a catastrophe like this from ever happening again, Ezra, the priest, propounded a doctrine of racial purity and ordered the non-Jewish partners of Jewish citizens and any half-breed children that were produced by these unholy unions to be banished from the land. The new Judah was to be for Jews only! Ethnic cleansing began in the land of the Jews. People had to defend their bloodlines up to fourteen generations as vigilantes roamed the land. Prejudice against non-Jews became rampant. Before these passions had run their course, as all religious zealotry always does, it had produced two pieces of protest literature that were also included in the Bible. One was the book of Jonah, in which God ordered the prophet to preach to the unclean Gentiles. When Jonah refused on the basis of his understanding of ethnic purity and its assumption that all Gentiles are unworthy even to hear "the word of God", he had to endure the adventures, including the great fish, which made the book of Jonah so exciting. The second was the book of Ruth, a whimsical story about a Moabite woman who served her Jewish mother-in-law well and finally married a man named Boaz, who turned out to be David's great-grandfather. The purpose of this book was thus to state that King David had a Moabite grandmother and was thus by Ezra's rules unclean.

We have now completed our survey of the Hebrew Scriptures, the first part of our Christian Bible. In September, we will begin our journey through the New Testament. I hope you will stay tuned.

– John Shelby Spong