

How to start reading the Bible

St Bartholomew's Church, Sydenham, 28 October 2008

Session 2: A brief overview of history in the Old Testament

History in the OT is always God centred: judgments of leaders are made, not on the basis of economics or military position, but on whether they are doing the will of God. (Omri and his son Ahab were strong leaders with good local alliances by marriage, but Ahab is denounced by Elijah as "a troubler of Israel".) The theme is often that when Israel obeys God's laws it will prosper, when it disobeys God will punish by bringing war or famine etc. Nearly always all actions - good or bad - are attributed to God's commands: that is why it so often seems that God is telling the Israelites to do some terrible things. Israel, even under the kings, regarded itself (as orthodox Jews do today) as a theocracy - a nation ruled by God.

1. The Pentateuch - Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy

Although written down much later, the history in these books gives the early history of the Jewish nation, starting at the Creation, the flood and Noah (*Gen. chaps 1-11*) and ending with the exodus led by Moses into the promised land.

It was regarded as the basis of all further action and dealings with God, and is frequently cited in both OT and NT.

See, e.g., Psalms 105 and 106

1.1 Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (the Patriarchs)

Approx. 2000 -1300 BC

Abraham - called by God to travel from Ur to a "land that God would show him", to found a nation ruled by one God. Although without children, he is promised a son; Isaac is eventually born to Sarah, and circumcised - the beginning of the covenant with God. (*Gen. chaps 12-23*)

Isaac - grew up in the shadow of his father and round the skirts of his mother. Abraham sends his servant back to the land of his fathers to find a wife for Isaac as he does not want him to marry amongst the Caananites who worship idols. Isaac's wife Rebekah bears him twin sons, who struggle in her womb to be born, the first-born being Esau (the hairy one) and the second Jacob (the smooth one). Esau hunts the wild animals whilst Jacob tends the flocks of sheep and goats.

Jacob - favoured by his mother and a tricky one. He persuades Esau to sell

his birthright as first born, by giving him food when he comes in hungry from the fields. When his father is dying Jacob tricks him into believing he is Esau and so receives the blessing for the first born. (*Gen. chap 27*) Because this is God-given (through Jacob) it cannot be rescinded and Esau only receives the blessing of the second son. Jacob, aided by his mother, then runs away to his uncle Laban for whom he works as a shepherd. On the way he has a vision of God, with angels ascending and descending to heaven: God blesses him and says He will make him a great nation.

Jacob falls in love with Laban's daughter Rachel for whom he works for seven years, but at the marriage ceremony Laban gives him his less favoured daughter Leah. A compromise is reached by Jacob marrying Rachel also a week later and going on to serve a further seven years without wages. Leah is fruitful and produces four sons: Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah, whilst Rachel has none, so she gives her maidservant to Jacob (a common practice) and by her he has two sons, Dan and Naphtali. Then Leah gives her servant to Jacob and two further sons are born - Gad and Asher. Leah then has two further sons, Issachar and Zebulun, and a daughter Dinah. Then "God remembered Rachel" and she gave birth to Joseph (*Gen 30. 22*).

Jacob then decides to return home with his wives and children, and after some trickery on the part of both himself and Laban over the cattle he receives as wages, he comes back to meet his brother Esau. Jacob settles at Bethel where he builds an altar and commands his household to worship the one true God. (*Gen. 35*) Rachel then gives birth to her last child, Benjamin, and dies. Jacob set a pillar over her tomb and the place became a sacred site. Jacob has another encounter with God, where he wrestles with Him, and God names him Israel. This, of course, will become name of the of the nation that he heads and his sons will become the heads of the twelve tribes. (*See Gen. 35. 16-27.*)

Joseph - favoured by his father and disliked by his brothers. Because of this and because Joseph (rather foolishly!) tells his brothers of the dreams he has about them bowing down to him, the brothers decide to kill Joseph, but persuaded by Reuben they sell him into slavery in Egypt and tell Jacob he is dead. Joseph does well in Egypt until his master's wife tries to seduce him and then accuses him of attempted rape. In prison, Joseph interprets the dreams of Pharaoh's butler and baker. When the butler is restored to his position, he recommends Joseph to Pharaoh to interpret *his* dreams. This Joseph does, predicting seven years of good harvests and seven years of famine, and suggests what to do about it. Joseph is put on charge of the whole operation and becomes next only to Pharaoh in importance. When the famine starts to

bite in the surrounding lands Joseph's brothers come to Egypt for corn but do not recognise Joseph. He eventually persuades them to bring Benjamin with them, and by a trick accuses him of stealing a silver cup and says they must leave him there to become his slave. Judah pleads that this will break his father's heart and asks to be kept instead. Joseph realises that his brothers have changed and tells them who he is and invites Jacob, the brothers and all their households to settle in Egypt. (Happy ever after!)

(Gen. chaps 37-49)

1.2 Moses and the Exodus

Approx. 1700-1250 BC

After many years the Israelites became numerous, living in the valley of Goshen.

After the first generation had died "a new king, who did not know Joseph came to power". (*Ex. 1. 8*) He was worried about the strength of the Israelites and made them slaves - building (possibly the pyramids) and working in the fields.

He told the Egyptian midwives to kill the boy babies, but they did not and told the officials that "the Hebrew women are vigorous and give birth before [we] arrive." (*Ex. 1. 15-18*) Moses is saved by his mother and sister and adopted by Pharaoh's daughter. When adult, he kills an Egyptian who is beating a Hebrew, and then flees as he has been seen by a fellow Hebrew. He goes to Midian and works as a shepherd for Jethro a priest of Midian, and marries his daughter Zipporah. During this time he meets God in the burning bush and is told to go and rescue his people. He asks who he is to say God is. God replies "I am who I am" and "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob", thus defining what had perhaps been thought of as three gods (the Shield of Abraham, the Fear of Isaac and the Holy one of Jacob). The LORD* gives Moses special power with his staff and gives him his brother Aaron as his mouthpiece. (*Ex. 1 to 4. 17*). Moses returns to Egypt, and after a series of plagues the Israelites are allowed to leave, purportedly to worship God in the desert but in reality to flee. (*Ex. 4. 18 to 11. 9*) The last plague is the death of the first born, and to avoid this the Israelites have to smear the lintels of their doors with blood so that they will be "passed over". They must also cook a whole lamb (shared between families where necessary), cook with bitter herbs and eat bread made without yeast, with their sandals on and their staffs in their hands (because they are in a hurry). (*Ex. chap 12*) This is the first Passover, which of course is celebrated by Jews until this day. The details are very specific and, of course, were written in this form much later.

The Israelites, led by Moses and Aaron, then proceed on their journey to the

promised land. led by God in a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. They cross the Sea of Reeds (the Red Sea) pursued by the Egyptians who drown (*Ex. 14*), grumble at Moses over the food and the water until he strikes water from a rock and brings manna from heaven (*Ex. 16 & 17. 1-7*) During this time Moses is the arbiter of their disputes, until Jethro (who has joined them) suggest that he should select capable men ("judges") to settle the minor disputes for him. This sets the pattern of the governing of Israel for the next 200 years.

During the time in the wilderness Moses is given the Ten Words (or commandments) of God (*Ex. 20*) which are engraved on stone. During the time he is receiving the Law from God, Israel under Aaron make a golden calf to worship because "as for this fellow Moses who brought us out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him" (*Ex. 32. 1*). When Moses comes down from the mountain, he famously breaks the tablets and has to write them again. Because of the Israelites' apostasy, God decrees that none of that generation (including Moses) shall enter the promised land, but will wander in the desert for 40 years.

In *Ex. 20-31* there are some very detailed instructions on living for the Israelites and the method of building the Ark of the Covenant, which was regarded as the dwelling

* In the print of some Bibles the word LORD is printed thus to signify God. place of God and was carried with great care wherever they went. These details were obviously worked out at a later date. This, however, forms the Covenant with God which mirrors the suzerainty treaties, that is one made between a great king and his vassals (other smaller nations) or subjects. Thus Israel becomes a Covenant people.

Leviticus contains further extremely detailed laws of living for nearly every circumstance (can be quite interesting reading at times), and the ongoing story is taken up in Numbers, after some chapters detailing who was descended from whom, and what they gave etc. There are also accounts of the setting apart of the Levites (descendants of Aaron who offered the sacrifices) and further details of the Passover ceremony, as well as other happenings in the wilderness.

Deuteronomy continues with further accounts and a reiteration of laws and statutes

2. Joshua and Judges

After Moses death (approx. 1240 BC) the Israelites under the Leadership of Joshua prepare to enter Canaan - the promised land, "flowing with milk and honey."

He had already been into the land as one of twelve spies sent to weigh up possibilities. Ten of these spies were very fearful, seeing cities with walls 50ft high and thirty feet deep, but Joshua and Caleb were sure that they could conquer because "if the LORD is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land." (*Num. 14. 8*) Now as leader, Joshua crosses the Jordan and attacks central Canaan, capturing the cities of Jericho and Bethel. He then goes on to the south, burning and rebuilding cities, and thirdly into the north. The Israelites capture large areas of the country, but in spite of "entering the promised land", they never entirely drove out the previous occupants. There were always cities occupied by the idol-worshipping Canaanites, and they were surrounded by the Philistines, the Ammonites and the Moabites, which would continually cause them trouble, not only because of wars but because of intermarriage and the sullyng of the true worship of God.

The land was theoretically divided between the tribes (*see Map 1*), the tribe of Joseph being split into two half tribes - Ephraim and Manasseh; but Joshua also formed an alliance with the other descendants of Jacob who had either remained in Canaan or who had returned earlier (nothing much is said about these groups). Together they covenant to put away other gods and serve the LORD* , and obey all His laws.

(*See Josh. 24*, which is worth reading as a summary of events.)

The time of the **Judges** runs roughly from 1225-1030 BC. The Judges were charismatic leaders of the tribes, military leaders as much as arbiters, who expelled foreign invaders (of which there were plenty); there was never a heredity system, the judges were chosen for their abilities. Some of the best known are Deborah (the only woman) and Barak, Gideon, Jephthah and Samson.

The Philistines were particularly invasive coming from the south on their swift moving camels and taking all the crops. The Israelites had learnt about crop growing from the Canaanites (they had been a nomadic herd- and flock-keeping people), and often they fought the invaders together. This led to a mixture of religions, as the Canaanites worshipped Baal, the Lord of the land, and various fertility rites got included in the worship of God. With all these problems and no central leadership the tribes were at times fighting one another and moral life was becoming degraded as "every man did was right in his own eyes". (*Judges 21. 25*) The time was therefore right for the rise of the monarchy.

3. Samuel, Kings and Chronicles

Approx. 1100-500BC

By this time the Philistines had made large inroads into Israelite territory (one reason being that they had iron which the Israelites did not). The Israelites therefore asked Samuel, one of the leading judges, to find them a king. Samuel had tried to introduce heredity by appointing his sons, but "they did not walk in his ways" (1 Sam. 8. 1), and the people wanted a strong leader. Samuel pointed out that a king would want soldiers, servants and taxes but the people were adamant and, guided by the LORD Samuel agreed. He anointed Saul "an impressive young man without equal among the Israelites" (1 Sam. 9. 2) Saul was a fine warrior and, with his son, Jonathon, held back the East from the Ammonites and the west from the Philistines and established a more settled kingdom (*See Map 2*).

Unfortunately Saul in his old age became mad and tried to kill David, an up and coming young man in his service who had married Saul's daughter. David flees from Saul to the cave of Adullam, where the discontented of Saul's subjects join him. A series of battles ensues, in which David joins forces with the Philistines, and finally both Saul and Jonathon are killed (*See 2 Sam. 1. 23* for David's lament). David is anointed king over Judah (*2 Sam. 2*), which is basically the land occupied by the tribes of Judah, Simeon and Benjamin. The wars between David and the House of Saul "lasted a long time [seven years].

David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul grew weaker and weaker" (*2 Sam. 3. 1*) After this he was crowned king of Israel (i. e. all the northern tribes) and Judah: this, in fact, had been foreseen by Samuel, who had selected David from Jesse's sons and anointed him (*1 Sam. 16. 13*). David, having learnt a lot from the Philistines (including the usage of iron) now proceeded to conquer them and extend the boundaries on all sides (*See Map 2*).

He conquered Jerusalem and brought the centre of government and worship there.

This was not popular with the northern part of the kingdom, who had always worshipped at Bethel and in the hill sites (*see Jn 4. 19*) and felt that the tribe of Judah (from whom David came) was getting too big for its boots! It was also

felt that religion was becoming too centralised in Jerusalem.

David chose Solomon (Bathsheba's son) to succeed him, but this was controversial as another group supported his son Adonijah, who was at that time the eldest son. There had already been problems of succession as another son, Absalom, had rebelled against his father and been killed (*2 Sam. 18*). Solomon is of course renowned for his wisdom, which he asked of God, and he built the great temple in Jerusalem which had been the heart's desire of his father David.

He made scores of treaties with the surrounding nations, mainly by marrying the daughters of the kings. This extended his influence widely (*see Map 2*),

but in order to pay for his court, his palaces and his wives he taxed the people greatly, which of course was not liked.

After Solomon's death the trouble came, because the elders of the people met to chose the next king. Rehoboam was a young son of Solomon, but when they asked him about his policies he, consulting his young friends, said that he would make the burden heavier than his father (1Kings 12. 1-24). The northerners therefore refused to have him, and chose Jeroboam, an official of Solomon's court who had already made an abortive try for the crown. (The northerners had never had much time for heredity and settled ways, preferring the belief that God chooses where He will.) However, the northern kingdom of Israel did not prosper: kings were murdered, religion became very impure, immorality and court intrigue were rife. The kingdom of Israel lasted from 931-722 BC, and of the six kings who ruled in the last 20 years, only one died naturally. We shall consider the problems in more detail when we look at the prophets. Hoshea was the last king of Israel, who tried to rebel against the Assyrians in vain. The cream of Israel's people were deported in 721BC and scattered throughout the Assyrian empire, and other colonists brought in to what would now become Samaria. Although originally the Jewish people kept their religion and language, intermarriage and a joining of languages made them one people - the hated Samaritans in the NT, a people whose religion and ways of life were, according to the southern Jews, thoroughly suspect.

With the division of the kingdom, Judah (in the south) became a small but very stable country. They had a dynastic (heredity) rule for over 300 years.

It was less cosmopolitan than Israel as it had very little "through traffic", not being on the route to anywhere in particular. However, although at peace itself, there was often strife between Israel and Judah, until the time of Uzziah (also known as Azariah, 767-740 BC) who extended the borders on three sides and forced the Philistines into a narrow strip by the sea (the Gaza strip).

However, there was injustice, tyranny and ungodliness, and in 701BC, Sennacherib of Assyria sent forces against king Hezekiah and put Jerusalem under siege (2Kings 18 & 19). Judah continued to be invaded by surrounding nations, until in 597BC Nebuchadnezzar invaded and took ten thousand citizens into slavery in Babylon (the first exile). These were the leading people, but ten years later he destroyed all the buildings, palaces and even the temple in Jerusalem and took into exile all but the dregs of the original citizens (the second exile).

3.1 Judah in exile

Although the Hebrews/ Israelites [they are rarely referred to as "Judeans", although that was there country] had always declared they worshipped the one true God, they had always felt that his dwelling place was in Israel/Judah, particularly in the temple in Jerusalem. He had also always been the God of the hills, and when they had to live in the plains of Babylon they wondered how they could worship God in such a flat country with no temple. (*See Palms 120 and 137*). However encouraged by the prophet Jeremiah and the reasonable rule of Nebuchadnezzar they settled down, and it was at this time some new ideas of God and ways of worship came into being, e.g. the formation of places of worship for congregations of not less than ten families (the synagogues of the NT). Because so many had been deported and they lived in a comparatively small area, the Jews were able to keep up their religion and form many of the regulations that we find in the NT. Because of this they looked down on the Jews of the diaspora (the scattered ones) and held that they were the keepers of true worship. However they was always looking for the return to Jerusalem and a leader who would bring them back in triumph along the "king's highway" [*Is. 35. 8-10* - more of that in our session on the Prophets], although when the time came many found themselves too comfortable to move.

4. Ezra and Nehemiah - Return from exile

In 539BC, Babylon submitted to Persian rule, and some exiles were allowed to return to Judah and, under the encouragement of the scribe Ezra, started rebuilding the temple. Progress, however, was sporadic, and in 445BC Nehemiah, who held an important post under the Persian ruler Cyrus, requested this enlightened monarch for permission to return to Jerusalem to build up the walls and make the city strong against invasion. With his strong encouragement and determined resistance against the efforts of the Horonites and the Ammonites to stop the work, the walls were built and the temple much improved. A great reading of the law took place at which all the people rededicated themselves to the LORD. (*Neh. 1-4*)

After this, neither Israel nor Judah were ruled by their own kings, but became a prey to the rule of invading empires - Persia, Greece and Rome, apart from a short time of revolt under the Maccabees brothers (written about in the Apocrypha). The kings of the NT were all puppet kings under Roman domination.

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Ruth

A short book, worth reading as it is all "story": one commentary calls it "one

of the most charming idylls in all literature". Set in the time of the Judges, it is a story of devotion and kinship, and surprisingly features a Moabitess as its "heroine". Maybe it was written to show David's ancestry in a good light - see Ruth 4. 18-22.

Esther

A story of the time of the exile under the Persians, c.500BC. Esther saves her people by originally concealing her nationality when there is a type of "beauty contest" to select a replacement for the recently divorced queen of king Ahaseurus, and presenting their cause to the king. God is not mentioned throughout the book, although His actions in providence are implicit. The Jewish festival of Purim still celebrates these events.

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In Session 2 we shall read:

Gen. 44. 14 - 45.7

2 Kings 18. 5-8; 17. 17-37; 19. 14-17

Neh. 1. 1-4; 2. 1-20