

**Cray, St Barnabas
Ash Wednesday 2008**

The Old Testament – An Introduction

1. What is the Old Testament?

The Old Testament is a complex collection of different types of material.

First, it is written in not one but two languages, Hebrew and Aramaic.

Secondly, it contains material in a variety of different literary forms (or 'genres' to use the technical term).

- There are prose narratives telling the story of the Jewish people and of individuals within it, as in the case of the narratives contained in the books of Judges and Ruth.
- There are sections of direct prose teaching as in Ezekiel 18 v 21:
...if a wicked man turns away from all his wickedness which he has committed and does what is lawful and right he shall surely live, he shall not die.
- There is a large amount of poetry as in passages such as Psalm 121 v 1:
I lift up my eyes to the hills.
From whence doth my help come?
My help comes from the Lord,
Who made heaven and earth.
- There are collections of proverbial sayings or aphorisms such as Proverbs 13 v 1:
A wise son listens to his father's instruction,
But a scoffer does not listen to rebuke.

Finally there are collections of laws, which come in two sorts. There are what are known as 'apodictic' laws (those which simply command or forbid things) as in the ten commandments in Exodus 20 v 2-17 and there are 'casuistic' laws (those which describe what should happen in

particular cases) as in Leviticus 13 v 1-46 which describe what is to happen if someone gets leprosy.

Thirdly, it consists of thirty-nine separate books, written by a range of different orders over a period of approximately eight hundred years, each of which has its own particular historical context and its own particular message.

In response to this complexity many different ways of classifying the material contained in the Old Testament have been devised. The one that I find most helpful, and therefore recommend to you, divides the Old Testament into four categories.

These categories are:

- The books of the Law,
- The historical books,
- The poetry and wisdom books
- The prophetic books.

A brief outline of the contents of each of these categories.

The Books of the Law

The Books of the Law (also referred to as the 'Torah' and the 'Pentateuch' consists of the five books that come at the beginning of the Bible, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. These books tell a continuous story running from the beginning of the world to about 1240 BC, a story that goes like this.

In the beginning God creates the world. The first human beings, Adam and Eve, created in God's image to rule the world on His behalf, rebel against Him and from then on the human race, with isolated exceptions such as Enoch and Noah, goes from bad to worse.

Round about two thousand years before Christ, God begins the long process of reversing the effects of the Fall by summoning a man called Abraham to migrate from Haran in what is now southern Turkey to the

land of Israel, promising him that He will give him innumerable descendants and a land for them to live in, and that through him all of humanity will be blessed. (Genesis 12 v 1-3). In spite of all their sin and folly, God ensures that this promise begins to become true in the lives of Abraham's son Isaac, his grandson Jacob, and his twelve great grandsons Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, Benjamin, Dan, Naphtali, Gad and Asher (who were the ancestors of the twelve tribes of the people of Israel) and eventually Jacob, his sons and their households migrate to Egypt under God's guidance in order to escape a famine.

Four hundred years after they migrate to Egypt, (about 1280 BC) God rescues the descendants of Abraham, who (as promised) have become a sizeable nation, the people of Israel, from slavery in Egypt in what is known as the Exodus. Under the leadership of a man called Moses, God then brings them to the brink of the land of Canaan, the land that He had promised Abraham he would give his descendants as their homeland. While they are on the way to Canaan God gives Israel a series of laws that outline how He wants them to live in this land as His chosen people.

The Historical Books

The historical books consist of the books of Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. With the exception of the first nine chapters of 1 Chronicles, which trace the genealogy of the Jewish people back to Adam, these books describe the history of the people of Israel after they enter the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua in about 1240 BC.

Their history starts well, with the God directed conquest of the land, but after the death of Joshua and his generation, the people turn from God and start worshipping the local gods. As a punishment, a variety of enemies oppress them, but when they repent and turn back to God, they are rescued by a series of Judges, men and women raised up by God to dispense justice and to deliver Israel from the power of her enemies.

After a couple of centuries the people of Israel decide they want a king like all the surrounding nations. God accedes to their request and Israel becomes a monarchy. The first king, Saul, starts well but turns from God and is killed in battle. He is succeeded by Israel's two greatest kings, David and Solomon, under whom Israel becomes a great country and

the Temple is first built in Jerusalem as God's permanent dwelling place on earth, replacing the previous portable sanctuary.

However, Solomon marries lots of foreign wives for diplomatic reasons and he starts to worship their gods alongside the God of Israel. As a punishment for this Israel is divided into after his death into two rival kingdoms, the larger northern kingdom of Israel with its capital at Samaria and the smaller kingdom of Judah with its capital at Jerusalem and ruled by the descendants of David.

In spite of repeated warnings from God, and attempts at reform under a few good southern kings, the two nations continually rebel against God by worshipping other gods and oppressing the poor and needy. In accordance with what God had told the people through Moses prior to their entry into the land, the result is that Israel and Judah are destroyed and their leaders and the bulk of their people are taken into exile. The Assyrians destroy Israel in 721 BC and the Babylonians destroy Judah in 586 BC.

However, that is not the end of the story. The Persians destroy the Babylonian empire in 539 BC and eventually some of the exiles from Judah return home and under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah found a new Jewish community within the Persian Empire with its capital once more at Jerusalem and with a rebuilt temple. Mindful of what has happened to their forefathers this community commits itself to living faithfully before God in obedience to His laws.

The Poetry and Wisdom Books

The books in this category are Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon.

Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are wisdom books. That is to say, they belong to a category of writings that were the ancient near eastern equivalent of philosophy, in the sense that they sought to answer questions about the meaning of human existence and how to live a good and successful life. Job looks at the problem of undeserved suffering, Ecclesiastes reflects on the apparent meaninglessness of human existence, and Proverbs sets out what is involved in living a wise life rooted in 'the fear of the Lord'.

Psalms and the Song of Solomon are books of Hebrew poetry. Psalms is a Jewish hymnbook (a kind of Hebrew Songs of Fellowship) containing 150 hymns expressing a range of responses to God ranging from praise, trust and repentance on one hand to grief, fear and anger on the other. The Song of Solomon (also called the Song of Songs) is a poem that celebrates the wonders of human love and which can also be read as a parable of the love between God and His people.

The Prophetic books

The prophetic books are divided into two sub-categories. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel and Daniel are known as the **major prophets** because they are the longest prophetic books. The twelve others, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi are known as the **minor prophets** because they are shorter.

A prophet was someone called by God to deliver His message or 'word' to an individual, a group of people, or a nation. The prophetic books in the Old Testament record the messages given by God to a series of Israelite prophets from the time in the eighth century BC when the threat from Assyria came over the horizon (Isaiah, Hosea Amos and Micah) to the time of Nehemiah in the fifth century BC (Malachi). These books often tell us something about the lives of these prophets as well.

For example, the book of Jeremiah records how Jeremiah was called by God to warn the people of Judah that God was going to punish their sins by sending them into exile in Babylon, but also to tell them that He had a future for them beyond this disaster, and the book also tells us about the sufferings Jeremiah underwent as a result of proclaiming this message.

For another example, the book of Haggai records how the prophet Haggai was sent to tell the community that had returned to Judah from exile in Babylon that would only be blessed by God when they put God first by setting to work to finish re-building the Temple in Jerusalem.

2. Who wrote the Old Testament?

We can identify some of the authors of the Old Testament. For example, we know that the bulk of the Pentateuch comes from Moses, that David wrote some of the Psalms, and that the material in the prophetic books derives from the prophets whose names they bear. However, many of

the authors of the books of the Old Testament remain unknown to us even though gallons of ink have been spilled by scholars trying to identify who they were.

The really important thing is that whoever, humanly speaking, wrote the Old Testament all of it was inspired by God (as 2 Timothy 3 v 16 makes clear) with the result that what it says, God says. To put it simply, God was its ultimate author. We can be sure this is the case because it is what Jesus thought and, being God, He obviously knew the truth about the matter. As one writer has put it:

To Christ the Old Testament was true, authoritative, inspired. To Him the God of the Old Testament was the living God, and the teaching of the Old Testament was the teaching of the living God. To Him, what Scripture said, God said. (J W Wenham Christ and the Bible)

3. Why does the Old Testament matter?

The first and most obvious reason that the Old Testament matters is simply because what it says, God says. If this is indeed the place where God Himself speaks to us then we will do well to pay attention to what it says. However, there are also two more reasons why the Old Testament matters.

- The Old Testament matters because it answers the really big questions that most human beings ask about their existence.

Why are we here? The Old Testament tells us that we are here not because of some cosmic accident but because we were created by God and are sustained and cared for by Him (see for example Genesis 1-2 and Psalm 104).

What is God like? The Old Testament tells that God who creates and sustains us is Yahweh (Exodus 3 v 14), the sovereign Lord who is passionate in His love and, as such, equally passionate in His justice (See Exodus 34 v 6-7).

Why is there so much evil in the world? The Old Testament tells us that this is not because this is an inherently evil world, but because something went desperately wrong at the beginning of the human race

with the result that every subsequent generation of human beings has rebelled against God.

Does history have any direction and meaning? The Old Testament tells us that history is not, as Shakespeare suggests in Macbeth 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.' Rather it is **His story**, the story of what God has done and is doing to achieve His intended purpose for His creation and to overcome the result of our rebellion against Him.

How can I talk to God? Many people are worried about how they can talk to God, but the Psalms encourage us to come honestly and boldly before God expressing exactly how we feel. We do not have to pretend or use special pious words. We can 'tell it like it is.' The Psalmists certainly do!

- Above all, the Old Testament matters because of the promises it contains.

As already explained, right at the beginning of the Old Testament story Abraham receives a solemn promise, a covenant from God promising that through his offspring all the families of the earth will receive God's blessing. In the subsequent history of Abraham's descendants we then find this original promise re-expressed and re-defined in relation to three key turning points in that history.

First, at the time of the Exodus the people of Israel are told by God at Mount Sinai that he has rescued them from Egypt that they might be a missionary people bringing His blessing to the world – 'you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Exodus 19 v 6).

...from Israel, Yahweh's priestly community, there is to flow Yahweh's instruction, a true faith for all the world, and through Israel the needs and desires of all mankind are to be brought to Yahweh. (R Davidson The Old Testament)

Secondly, at the time the monarchy was established, King David received the promise of an everlasting dynasty (2 Samuel 7) and on the basis of this promise a king of David's line is seen as the one in whom God's rule of justice and peace will be established in all the world (see Psalm 72, Isaiah 11 v 1-9, Zechariah 9 v 9-10). In addition, the Davidic

capital of Jerusalem and the temple established there by Solomon at God's behest is seen as:

...symbolising and embodying the promise that through Israel the world would receive the restoration, the reconciliation with the creator that it so badly needed. (N T Wright *New Tasks for a Renewed Church*)

For this last point see Isaiah 2v 1-4, Micah 4 v 1-3 and Isaiah 25 v 6-8.

Thirdly, the conquest of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586, the end of the Davidic monarchy and the destruction of Solomon's temple, led people to ask what God was doing and whether God still had a future for His chosen people. As Lamentations 5 v 22 asks God 'hast thou utterly rejected us?' In the face of this questioning, prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel declared that the disaster that had taken place was God's punishment for the sins of His people (Isaiah 40 v 1-2, 43 v 20-28, Jeremiah 7 v 16-20, Ezekiel 36 v 16-19), but that there was still hope for the nation and through them for the world.

In the case of Isaiah this hope is bound up with a mysterious servant figure who will fulfil Israel's vocation of being a light to the nations and will redeem them from their sins through a ministry marked by vicarious suffering (Isaiah 42 v 1-4, 49 v 1-6, 50 v 4-9, 52 v 13- 53 v 12). In the case of Jeremiah it involves God making a new and better covenant with His people to replace the one made through Moses that His people have broken (Jeremiah 31 v 31-34). In the case of Ezekiel there is a vision of a rebuilt Jerusalem and a restored temple from which the river of life flows out to create a second Eden (Ezekiel 47 v 1-12).

All these promises, the original promises made to Abraham, to the people at the Exodus and to David, and the renewed promises made at the time of the exile to Babylon remained unfulfilled during the remainder of the history of Israel recorded in the Old Testament. Israel did not become a source of universal blessing and even after the return from exile she constantly failed in her vocation to be a holy nation (see Isaiah 56-66, Haggai and Malachi). The Davidic line was not restored and so the promise that a Davidic king would exercise worldwide dominion remained unfulfilled. The nations did not come in pilgrimage to Zion as Isaiah and Micah had predicted. The figure of the suffering

servant remained a puzzling enigma and a second Eden did not follow from the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its temple under Ezra and Nehemiah.

The history of Israel thus remains incomplete and that is where **we** come in! According to the witness of the New Testament the promises that went unfulfilled in the history of Israel in Old Testament times find their fulfilment in Jesus Christ and His Church.

- The universal blessing promised through Abraham is fulfilled through the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) and the way that the Gentiles are made righteous through faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 4 v 13-17, Galatians 3 v 6-14).
- The vocation to be a holy and priestly nation is taken on by the Church (1 Peter 2 v 9-10).
- Christ Himself is the fulfilment of the promised concerning the Davidic line (Matthew 2 v 1-12, Luke 1 v 32-33, Revelation 5 v 5) and is the suffering servant described by Isaiah (Matthew 12 v 18-21, Mark 10 v 45, Acts 8 v 32-35, 1 Peter 2 v 21-25).
- The new covenant promised by Jeremiah is instituted through the death of Christ and commemorated in the sacrament of Holy Communion (Hebrews 8 v 1-13, 1 Corinthians 11 v 25-26).
- The hope of the pilgrimage of the nations to Zion and Ezekiel's vision of a second Eden find their fulfilment in St John's description of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21 v 24-26, 22 v1-3) which is identified with the Church, the bride of Christ (Revelation 21 v 9-10).

So why does the New Testament matter? Ultimately because it is not just their story (the history of Israel) or His story (the story of God's dealings with Israel), but **our** story, an open ended story into which we are invited to enter and play our part.

4. Difficulties with the Old Testament

To conclude this overview of the Old Testament I want to look briefly at the three main difficulties that people have with the Old Testament.

These difficulties are: the relevance of the Old Testament laws for us as Christians today, the character of God as depicted in the Old Testament and the cries for revenge contained in the Psalms.

The Old Testament laws

When considering the Old Testament laws, the first thing we have to realise is that, even though there are more than six hundred of them, they do not, and never did, provide a detailed blueprint for every aspect of human behaviour. What they are is a general picture of the sort of behaviour required of God's people. Secondly, we have to realise that many of the laws have been superseded, either because of changing social conditions, or because of the change between the Old Covenant between God and Israel and the New Covenant with the Christian Church. The relevance of the Old Testament laws for us today is that they give us general principles concerning what it means to live as God's holy people that we then have to apply in our own social situations as those who live under the New Covenant.

These principles can be summarised as follows. We are to be a distinctively holy people, worshipping God alone, coming to God through the means that He has provided, dedicating one day a week to God, not taking innocent life, maintaining sexual purity within the context of marriage, avoiding theft and covetousness, speaking truthfully, caring for our neighbours, particularly those who are poor or otherwise in need, and looking after of the world God has created. That is the agenda God has given to us as much as to Israel.

The character of God

Many people have difficulties with the character of God in the Old Testament because He is depicted as angry (Isaiah 34 v 2) and jealous (Exodus 20 v 5) and inflicts death and destruction on a vast scale. In response what we have to understand is that, counterintuitive though this may seem, all these are aspects of God's goodness and love. That is because God's 'anger' and 'jealousy' are His opposition to all that is contrary to His good and loving purposes for Israel, for humanity as a whole and ultimately for all of creation, and the death and destruction that He inflicts are His righteous judgements, which are the forms that this opposition takes in history. If God did not oppose all that was contrary to His purposes he would in truth be neither good nor loving, but

simply uncaring and morally indifferent and we would be abandoned to our fate.

As the great Swiss theologian Karl Barth put it:

If God does not meet us in his jealous zeal and wrath – exactly as He meets Israel according to the witness of the Old Testament, exactly as He meets it later in the crucifixion of his own Son – then he does not meet us at all, and in spite of all our reservations about divine love, man is in actual fact left to himself. (K. Barth Church Dogmatics II.1)

The calls for revenge in the Psalms

It is these same considerations that enable us to make sense of the at first sight shocking calls for divine vengeance that we encounter in texts such as Psalm 94 v 1-2

O Lord, thou God of vengeance,
thou God of vengeance shine forth!
Rise up, O judge of the earth;
render to the proud their deserts!

If these are seen as calls for personal vengeance they are not prayers that can be taken over directly by us since we are called pray for our enemies (Matthew 5 v 44, Luke 6:28). However, if they are seen as cries for God to act with justice in the world and overcome all opposition to His rule, even if this means His acting in judgement on the wicked, then they are prayers that we could and should make our own. Indeed, they are prayers that we do implicitly make our own when we pray 'thy kingdom come' since, as the New Testament makes clear, the coming of God's kingdom will mean God's final judgement on all who choose finally and persistently not to accept God as their Lord and to reject His good and loving purposes for them.

M B Davie 6.2.08

