

Getting to Know Your Bible

Part 1: The Old Testament

The following document is a summary of the Zoom Bible Study Sessions offered at

Allander Evangelical Church during May, June and July 2020.

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR BIBLE

The Bible is the only artefact that Christians have. Tradition and alternative expressions of Christianity have generated others, such as a crucifix, icons or sacred buildings, but the only item God has given is the Bible, as we have it, translated from the original languages (and its authentic content transmitted by verified oral accounts and approved documents), and given to us intact. It is complete and trustworthy. It is God's Word. It is a single volume.

Yet, taking a closer look, it is a library of different books which came into being at different times for various reasons and in a range of forms. They are all accounts, examples, products, and expressions of, encounters with God.

Gathered together in the Bible they provide the vital knowledge that we otherwise would not know. The Bible tells us what this world is, where human history started, why things are as they are – and so much more by way of redemption and salvation.

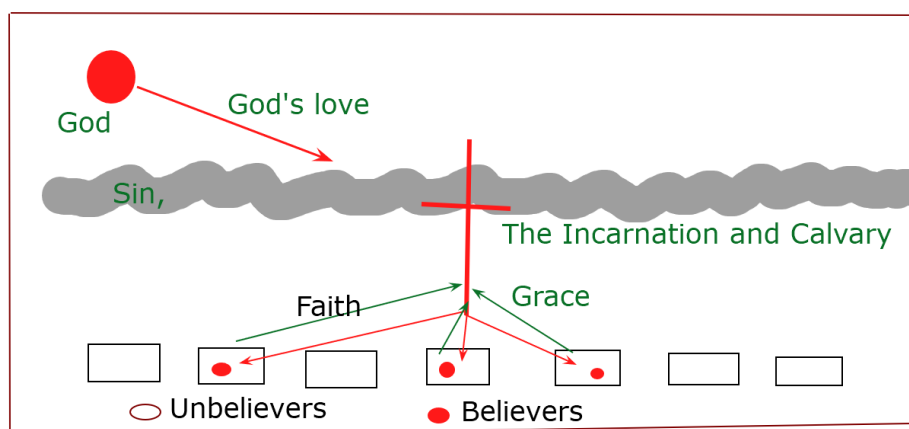
Without the Bible we can only surmise and explore the creation and its creatures. There is an awareness of a transcendent Being, - or power - however conceptualised and imagined, towards which people move and pray to when in distress. But, human confidence grows with each discovery made and grounds for self-confidence grows. And, yet, there is uncertainty as to what life is about, why (bad) things happen, why human behaviour is as it is with all its inconsistencies (suffering, inequality, etc).

It is only in the Bible that we learn of God's purpose, the tragic Fall of man, the explanation of sin and fallenness. And it is here that we also learn of God's love in making redemption possible and a future assured in what is described as "*a more excellent way*".

So, it is important that we get to know it: by reading it (all) and by appreciating what it says and how it is conveyed.

The context

That more excellent way can be depicted in this diagrammatic way:

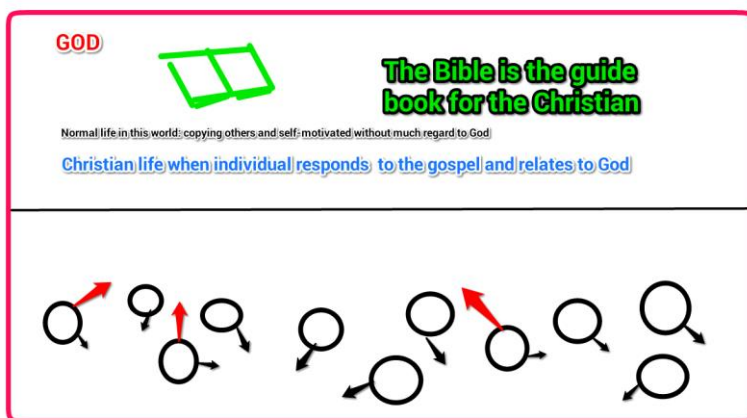


In the beginning, God created the earth and placed man and woman on it, giving them autonomy and occupation without hardship and offering sweet fellowship with Himself. However, sin appeared in the form of the serpent's temptation: man disobeyed the parameters God had set and with that the fellowship with God was marred, just like a cloud hiding the sun, man was left in self-centred, limited-capacity, darkness. That is the natural state everyone is born into and the nature that they inherit. Mankind is lost. Human life, left to itself, is doomed.

Yet, God is a God of love and sought a way to redeem humanity. That was accomplished when Jesus became man, took on Himself the sin of the world including the burden of 'my' sin, died, and rose again triumphant, immune to the toxic element of sin. The Bible declares that wonderful message in the well-known John 3: 16: *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."*

Trusting in that message leads to being born again, receiving the risen Christ into the heart and being transformed from being natural and self-centred to being God directed and empowered by the Holy Spirit. That means being a Christian.

Before becoming a Christian he / she is just an ordinary person living in the same world as anyone else and influenced by the same factors that govern normal behaviour. Most of this is self-centred although sometimes tempered with a bit of goodwill.



But, when someone becomes a Christian, there is a difference. A Christian is someone who has heard the gospel of God's love and has responded by: turning away from the world in repentance, accepted personal forgiveness from sins through the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross and accepted Christ into their lives: *Christ in you* - that is why they are called Christians.

In that sense they are almost *"dual personalities"*: living a natural life *"according to the course of this world"* and at the same time a supernatural – or un-natural - one as *"citizens of heaven"* when they respond to God and seek His help and His pleasure as they live their lives.

Having started, there is a need to go on. The Bible which provided the gospel that explained how to receive forgiveness and be born again, is also the source of guidance on how to live that new life by the power of the Spirit, according to the purpose of God in a way that pleases Him and fulfils His intentions for us.

This little booklet is an attempt to help us become familiar with the Bible, to know how it is structured, how it came to us and the significance of each section and how it is arranged.

THE BIBLE

What is it?

The Bible is not a text book but a Guide Book. It is a single volume, but made up of 66 different books written by different authors (some of them totally unaware that they were actually producing Holy Scripture) in diverse circumstances for different reasons and in a variety of ways, from prose to poetry. What is recorded is a series of accounts, experiences, expressions or incidents which represent encounters with God; and providentially preserved so that they may offer us guidance in progressing in our knowledge of God.

To begin with it is a single volume. All that God wants to say is contained in the Bible as we have it. Providence has overseen its composition and endorsed its content. It is one Book.

That one Book is in two sections: the Old and the New Testaments. While the OT deals with the story of God's people through the ages before Christ, from the call of Abraham (and what went on before) to the end of the OT, where the people were waiting on the promised "Sun of Righteousness" in Malachi, the NT tells of the coming of that Messiah, his reception and its effect on believers right up to the revelation of the things that shall be thereafter.

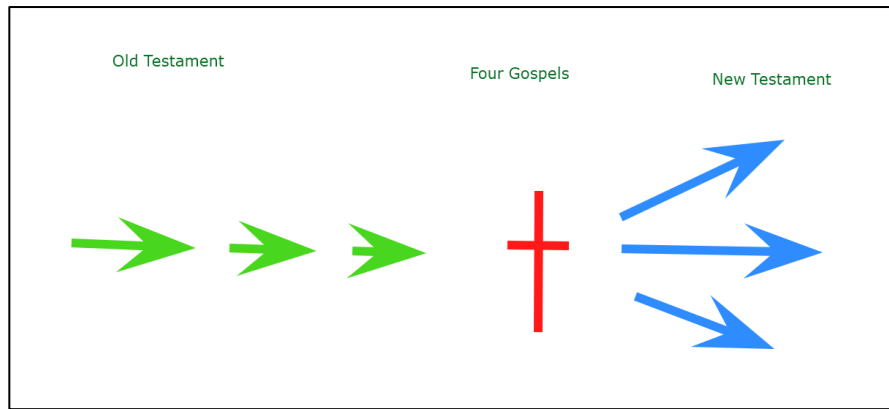
These two Testaments are divided into 66 books. Thirty Nine of them comprise the Old Testament, telling the story of God's chosen people throughout the ages. The remaining 27 form the New Testament.

It could be said about the Israelites (the people of God in the Old Testament) that they had a noble calling, had the wonderful knowledge of "*They shall be to me a people and I will be their God*" and yet veered away from that distinctiveness of that vocation and disappointed God. Even had they the will to be what they should be they did not have the power. That is the Old Testament. Yet, the gospel is complete. The New Testament provides the answer: the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as the Redeemer who brings new life to those who believe.

So, a way of presenting that is to suggest that the composition of this Bible depicts a number short of the perfect 40. That deficit, however, is made up of the second vital testament – the New Testament with its story of the Christ, His life, death and resurrection and the effect of that life on those who believed on Him and were transformed to be worldwide witnesses. Expressed in this way

<u>Old Testament</u>	+	<u>New Testament</u>
39	+	1

Another way of looking at it is to think of it in 3 parts. Put very simply, the Bible can be presented as a series of arrows pointing to a significant event and then pointing from it. The OT is a series of stories of people who became aware of their divine calling and purpose. Yet, they wandered from that ideal and were warned about the dire consequences of such apostasy. All the time a Messiah was promised, One who would enable them to be what they should be and establish them truly as the people of God. The OT is therefore a series of these 'arrows' pointing forward to the coming of Christ.



That coming is presented in the first part of the NT: the Four Gospels. The life of Christ is so important that four people – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – each present their own story. That is the great event: the coming, the life, the death and resurrection of Jesus as the Saviour of the world. Or, as John put it, *“these things are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ and that, believing, you might have life in his name”*.

The rest of the NT shows the effect from *‘believing that Jesus is the Christ’* with the stories in the book of Acts of the spread of that good news and its transforming power. That is followed by the epistles where the early Christians were instructed, warned and encouraged how to live that new life. And, it concludes with the book of Revelation showing them the end with victory in spite of all opposition to their being Christians.

The OT is the example of what God’s purpose is and provides us with various aspects of what the ideal is. The 4 Gospels are the heart of the matter: presenting Jesus as the Saviour whom we should believe and accept into our lives. And the (rest of the) NT is the detailed teaching of what it means to be a Christian and live it out in an alien world.

Before we move on to the OT in greater detail perhaps it would be worth asking:

How did we get it?

The Bible is not a formal text book specially designed as a manual with appropriate chapters for topics. It is the distillation of life experience preserved to pass on to others.

As such, the Bible was lived before it was written and needs to be lived before it is fully understood. It is a natural product that has evolved over the years to become what we now have as “The Holy Bible” and accepted by Christians as the authority and inspiration for their Christian life. It is a collection of writings over time, recording various aspects of people’s experience of God. Over the centuries, from the very beginning, men and women encountered God in various situations. These incidents were relayed, sometimes by those involved, sometimes by others who witnessed them, in an oral tradition passed down from one generation to another. Being spoken in this way their authenticity – and accuracy - was preserved. Eventually, these oral accounts were written down on clay tablets or manuscripts and preserved by being copied and stored in safe places. Over time, collections were made of these documents and material selected by common consent based on conviction that these accounts / stories / sayings etc were important

and valuable. Subsequently that selection of what was regarded as unique and special was approved by church councils and endorsed. What we have now are translations of those original collections.

That can be summarised as:

- The source: Over the centuries individuals experienced God in their lives in different ways in various situations.
- The Record: These experiences were related either by the people concerned or by others and passed on orally from generation to generation before someone wrote them down on manuscript or tablet.
- The selection: Over time these became to be regarded as important records and acknowledged as genuine records of the spiritual experience of those who followed God. Informal at first, later more official by Councils, but always a common consensus.
- The final form: Recognised in this way they were preserved in manuscript form, copied faithfully over the centuries and are now contained in our Bibles

How should we read it?

In simple terms, the Bible is a book which needs to be read: all of it, in sequence and over and over again. There is no way of knowing what it says without reading it. As we read it, it becomes more familiar. At first reading it may not be too clear: hold that lightly and read it again and again. In a wonderful way each time it throws more light. Of course, in addition to grasping the whole, it is also helpful to study parts of it more closely, but only against the backdrop of the whole.

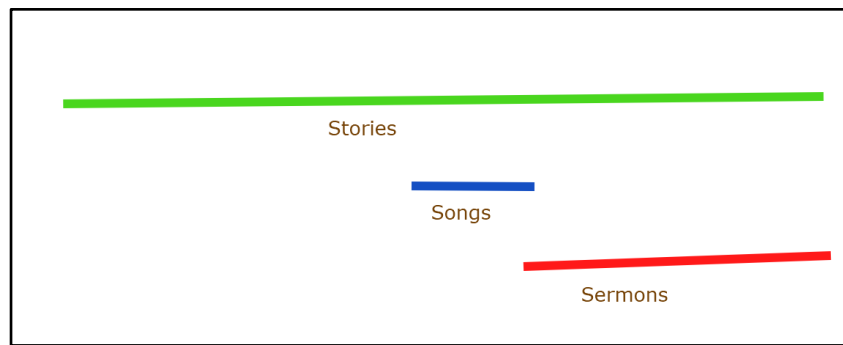
We now go on to the Old Testament

THE OLD TESTAMENT

As the OT is read continuously in sequence it becomes obvious that there are three different types of books: historical books depicting the story of the nation, poetry books that give expression to people's feelings in different circumstances, and prophetic books declaring "*thus saith the Lord*". They can be depicted in this way:

The Old Testament		
Stories	Genesis to Esther	How they lived
Songs	Job to Song of Solomon	How they felt
Sermons	Isaiah to Malachi	How they failed

Moreover, these three sections overlap chronologically:



Let's take these three sections in turn.

The Story

As already mentioned, reading through the OT, beginning at Genesis 1, takes us through the wonderful story of creation, the Fall, human endeavour, divine intervention and finally human folly in building the Tower of Babel and the frustration and failure that followed.

Immediately after that is the story of God's chosen people starting with the call of Abraham and the wonderful promises and covenant God made with him to establish a People in a Land. Through various episodes – and not a few set-backs – Abraham does become a father figure for a big family ending up as the children of Israel.

With sibling intrigues, that family arrived in Egypt (and out of the Promised Land) first as welcome visitors and then, with a change of regime, slaves. Through Moses they were rescued from there by the blood of the Passover Lamb, given God's requirements: the Law and the Tabernacle, and charged with being distinct. Forty years later, after many failures they were ready under Joshua to enter the land only to find that it was occupied by the other nations who had invaded the land in their absence. So Joshua had to fight for re-possession and, though only partially won, settled under judges in great fear until they requested a *"king to be like all nations"*.

God graciously granted them their request and Saul was ordained only to prove an abject failure until replaced by David, a *"man after God's own heart"*. David proved his worth. He defeated the nations, regained the whole territory, displayed gracious qualities and, above all sought to provide a permanent dwelling place for God right at the centre of the land. That task, however, was entrusted to Solomon utilising the plans and materials prepared by David. But, Solomon was proud and having spent 7 years on the Temple exploited the good will for another 13 years to build a house for himself and his many wives. No wonder that, following his death, the nation divided, the one section of ten tribes going north, where they became Samaria and lost the way until taken captive by the Assyrians, never to return. The other two tribes remained faithful and, with both good and bad kings in succession, remained in the land, and generally succumbed to idolatry and compromise. After being warned, they, too, were taken into captivity by the Babylonians for 70 years. On their return they sought to re-establish the nation and rebuild its temple, but soon tired. The story finishes with two groups: on the one hand apostates who argued with God and on the

other a small remnant who *“feared the Lord”* and spoke often to each other. To them the promise was given of the coming of the *‘Sun of righteousness with healing in his wings’*.

The Songs

The poetry section of the OT comprises only five books: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon - just a few books and covering a limited time period. The singing comes at a time when the nation was at its peak politically. David had ensured that all the enemies had been driven out of the land, the ark settled in Jerusalem and God given His rightful place at the heart of the nation. No wonder he was described as *‘a man after God’s own heart’*. Apart from ensuring that the nation had possession and peace, his burning desire was to see a permanent dwelling place for God in Jerusalem. Reasoning that it was not right that he should live in a grand house and the ark of the Lord reside in a tent he shared his vision of building a Temple – a permanent Tabernacle - with Nathan the prophet and received tentative approval. But, no. God spoke clearly to say that David was not to build the Temple.

That task would be entrusted to Solomon but to show his commitment, David spent the remainder of his life in preparing for it, gathering materials and negotiating contracts.

Prior to this, Job represents another category of experience (which is also present in the Psalms), namely, suffering and agony. The experiences through which Job passed were horrendous. For no apparent reason (at least he did not know but we do from the prologue to the book) Job was undergoing torment. Yet in that anguish he expressed both a concern to meet with God and a sound faith that *“I know that my redeemer lives”*.

Both of these types of experiences, good ones and bad ones, are valid expressions of praise to God and come at a time when there is a response to the cry: *“Oh that men would praise the Lord for His goodness and His wonderful works to the children of men”*.

With Solomon, the nature of that expression changed: knowledge stepped in with Proverbs. They were true interpretations of God’s principles for living or, as someone put it *“knowing where to put your feet in the dance of life”*, but became a matter of the head rather than the heart. The emphasis now is on *‘what I know about God’* rather than *‘what God has done for me’*. There is a detached perfectionism, an emphasis on performance as opposed to genuine and spontaneous trust. Another significant detail in the change of stance between Solomon and his father David is that, in building the Temple, Solomon utilised the willing contributions and efforts of his people for 7 years and then exploited that same goodwill to build a palace for himself and his wives which took 13 years to build. No wonder that with him, decline started to set in and characterises the next thousand years. That is when the prophets come in.

The Sermons

Prophets represent God speaking directly to His people. Some, like Moses and Samuel, appear long before David. Their role was to lead and guide, to monitor progress by keeping in close touch with God and conveying this to the people. While that occasionally meant rebuke it was more often than not, encouragement and guidance. Later, prophets appear, some unknown, such as the *‘man of God’*, who

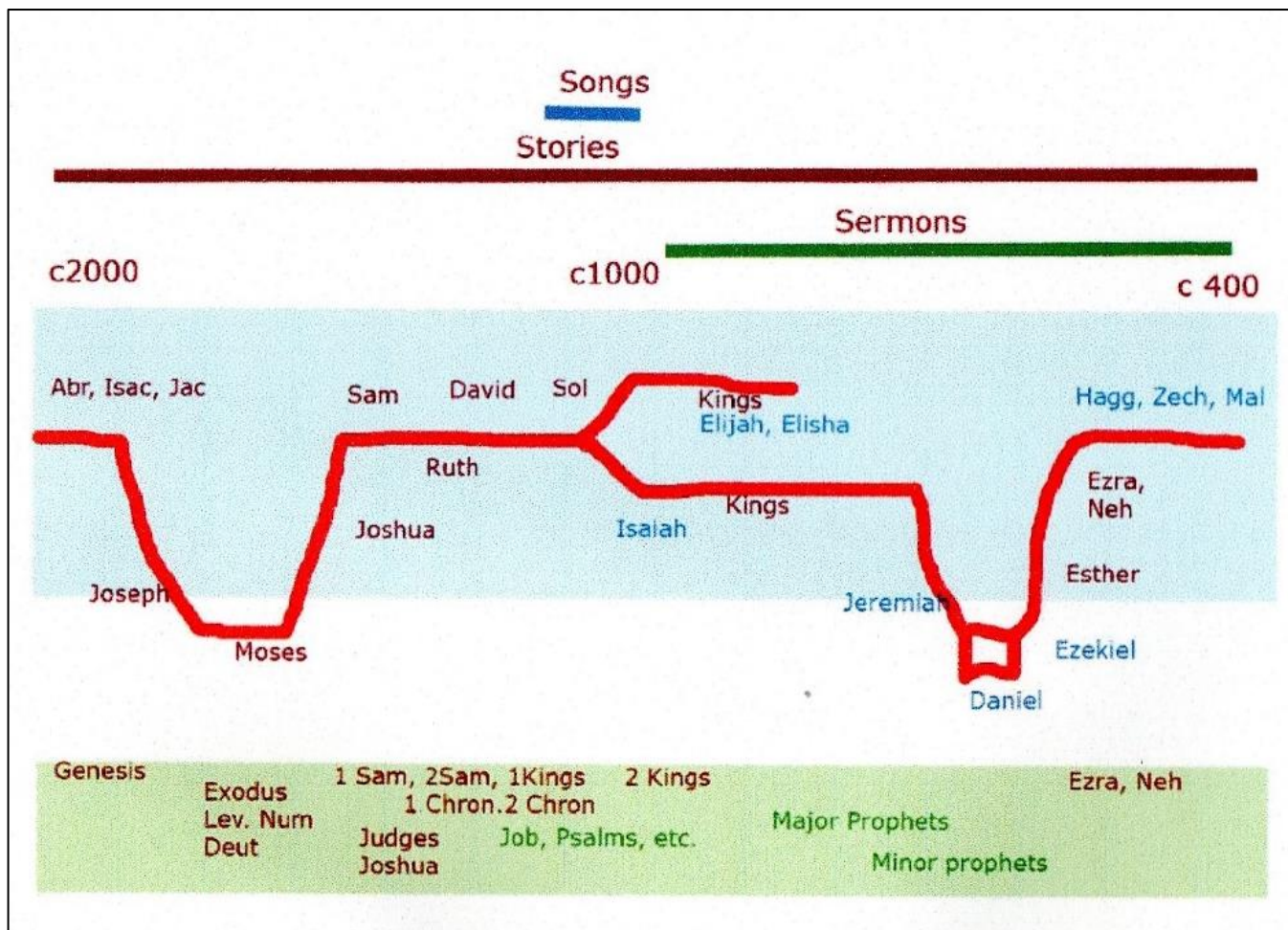
appear in the monarchy books and the more well-known Elijah and Elisha who represented much more bold declarations.

Possibly, because their message was not heeded, writing prophets appeared whose works are included in our Bible in the section we are calling Sermons. Little is known of these men as persons but their message is unmistakeable: a warning about the present state, a command to repent and *“Come let us to the Lord our God, with contrite hearts return”*. The messages were spoken into real situations. Sometimes that was gentle; at other times it was severe. Yet, in each case a clear response was expected and appropriate consequences would follow. The severest consequence was exile: annihilation in the case of Israel, captivity for Judah with a promised return.

The potential for a positive response was built in to each prophecy. God’s purpose is always redemptive: He ‘cuts down’ on order to ‘build up’.

That is seen clearly in the last prophecy: Malachi. There we have two groups. The one is rebellious ignoring all God’s goodness in the past and, now, so independent in their thinking that they constantly argue and dispute with God. For them the end is a curse. The other, much more tender, are those who *‘fear the Lord’*. Taken up with this *‘fear of the Lord’* they speak often with one another and their actions are recorded. What is more they are given a promise that, *“to you who fear my name the Sun of Righteousness will appear with healing in His wings”*

Together, these can be shown in the following diagram:



Before going on to the New Testament we will take a closer look at how the books in the OT cover the events and features.

The OT Books and their message

Having seen an overview of the structure of the OT, we now look at the books that recorded that story and its related songs and sermons.

It begins with the Pentateuch, the five Books of Moses, which can be regarded as a section on its own. It is the foundation, the basis of the rest.

Its first book deals with beginnings: creation, humanity, sin, and human endeavour, some of it commendable, much of it not, and by chapter 11 frustration. Abraham heralds a new beginning and the start of the story of *"the People of God"* as Abraham obeys and eventually becomes the father of a great nation dwelling in a land that was promised. Eventually, the whole family finds itself as an enslaved contingent in Egypt. The rest of the Pentateuch is a picture of redemption: rescue from bondage and rehabilitation for future life. Exodus provides a clear picture of redemption. The nation finds itself in a captivity with a new leader *"who knew not Joseph"*. That is exactly our position. We find ourselves through no apparent fault of our own *"fast bound in sin and nature's night"*. As with Moses and the Passover, rescue for us comes through *"Christ our Passover"* freed from Satan's grasp and setting out as pilgrims toward the Promised

Land. In that new land there is provision and sustenance miraculously given. As well as outlining the rescue Exodus deals with rehabilitation with the presentation of The Law to be obeyed and a pattern for the Tabernacle to be manufactured and used

Two other books: Leviticus and Numbers develop this aspect of rehabilitation in greater detail with an emphasis on life and living with its focus on sacrificial offerings and practical outworking in holiness, social responsibility and worshipful expression. That is complemented in Numbers by an emphasis on order and management. Availability is essential and then motivation to choose what is right and good. Joshua and Caleb illustrated this when they, though in a minority, opted for advance while the remaining ten were fearfully advocating a 'stay put' policy. If we take these two books together, complementing Exodus, we find an emphasis on a positive life that is committed and dominated by a visionary motivation. And, then, to make sure that the whole process is sound Deuteronomy comes as a second look, an appraisal and revision to evaluate what is happening from a divine perspective. They will have reached the present position because of what God has done and their obedience to his word, for *"man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God"*. Indeed *"hitherto has the Lord brought us"*. Yet, that has to be translated into practical outworking of the Law – the requirements of God, not only in worship but also in social welfare. Ultimately, it is a matter of choice between blessings and a curse. Joshua and Caleb made the right choice and had the privilege of entering the Promised Land even though it meant a battle to drive the intervening squatters out of the territory they had occupied during the Israelites' absence. Christian life is just like that. It means regaining territory previously occupied by another life and *"working out your own salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who is at work within you both to will and to act for His good pleasure"*.

That leads to the period of settlement in Canaan that is the subject matter of the historical books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles.

IN THE LAND

Joshua records a great deal of fighting which took place to regain the territory promised to Abraham but which had been taken over by 'squatters' (the neighbouring nations) in their 400 year absence. Glorious victories, like Jericho and Ai, resonate with us but by the end of Joshua's life there was *"still much land to be possessed"*. Judges rose up in different quarters from time to time to establish local victories but they, too, faded, after a while.

The Books of Samuel, however, herald better prospects when Samuel (prayed for by his mother Hannah when "there was no vision" and "the word of the Lord was rare" in those days) provided spiritual leadership. While the arrangement was functioning well during his life the people were apprehensive as to what would happen when he was gone, so petitioned for *"a king, so that we be like all nations"*. Such rejection of spiritual leadership in favour of copying the practices of the surrounding nations was grievous to both Samuel and to God, but God acceded to their request and so Saul was chosen. He was a mighty man as far as appearances go but failed when it came to the test, notably in his fear of Goliath as well as other bungs during his reign. He was rejected by God and replaced by a young shepherd boy called David – described as a man after God's own heart. David proved his worth and rid the land of all the intruding nations, established

Jerusalem, and brought the Ark of the Covenant back to the city. His desire was to build a permanent home for God in a Temple but was denied that privilege. Solomon would accomplish that but David prepared for it throughout the rest of his life.

Looking back at this period it was a time of leadership.

The period following this golden era from Solomon to the Exile can be described as a period of Stewardship where the responsibility was to maintain and sustain spiritual life in accordance with God's declared purpose. Sadly, that didn't materialise for the kings from Solomon onwards abandoned their allegiance to God and embarked on idolatry, compromise, injustice and superficial worship. That is recorded in 1 and 2 Kings.

Much of that ground is covered by 1 and 2 Chronicles, but with significant differences. Genealogies are included tracing the faithful lines up to that point. People and incidents, like Saul and the killing of Goliath are omitted and the only kings mentioned are the 'good' ones who instituted reform. It also extends beyond the captivity and mentions the decree of Cyrus bringing the nation back from exile to a new beginning. Chronicles represent an evaluation highlighting what is important as far as God's purposes are concerned.

These three can be summarised in the following table:

<u>Books</u>	<u>Feature</u>	<u>People</u>
1, 2 Samuel	Leadership	Samuel, Saul, David
1, 2 Kings	Stewardship	Solomon, Kings, Prophets
1, 2 Chronicles	Evaluation	David, Solomon, Kings

They also have lessons for us. God's purpose is to establish his people – the church – as a testimony of a better life. The key to that is Leadership where dedication, motivation and commitment are important. The period after that is a matter of stewardship, of looking after and maintaining, even enhancing the work of God as reflected in the Lord's Prayer that *"Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"*. But, all our work is, and will be, evaluated by God. As the popular saying puts it: "only what's done for God will last".

Captivity, when it came, proved that they had not discharged their responsibilities and need to be punished and taught a fundamental lesson when all they had held dear was stripped away from them.

Prophets

It is against this background that the prophets operate. The first four are called Major Prophets simply because their books are larger than the 12 Minor Prophets who function at the same time.

Taking the Minor Prophets first, we note that they come in clusters leading up to, and stopping short after, a judgemental visitation from God. They can be represented in this way:

Amos

Joel 721

Hosea

Jonah, Nahum

Habakkuk, Nahum 586

Micah, Zephaniah

Haggai

Zechariah c500

Malachi 400

That shows that God's intervention is deliberate and that he expects a positive response, or else! Amos, Joel and Hosea, in different ways warn the people about their way of life and threaten them with punitive action if they disobey. Even at the dedication of the new Temple built by Solomon the promise of blessing are conditional. There should be total dedication to God and no social injustice.

By the time we get to the next batch of prophets punishment is inevitable so the emphasis is on the process. The prophets themselves appear to be in confusion delivering their messages because what God is saying doesn't appear to make sense or be consistent with his way of operating. Habakkuk cannot understand that God will use a heathen monarch. Jonah is unsympathetic to delivering a redemptive message to Nineveh. Obadiah finds himself addressing Edom. It is a matter of accepting God's ways and trusting him as Habakkuk does when he says, "*though the fig tree does not bud etc yet I will rejoice in the Lord*".

Micah and Zephaniah spell this process out from a different perspective. God's action is both purposeful and positive. In Micah it is a matter of squeezing or thrashing the raw material so that both the good and the dross emerges. In Zephaniah there is a clean sweep but the valuable and pure can be retained. It is for them to abandon the 'way of all flesh' and deliberately turn to seek the Lord. In that way good issue emerges. Gold is refined and dross is consumed. That redeemed, residual, element is often referred to as a remnant comprising those who deliberately '*seek the Lord*'.

In Captivity, they realise what had been lost and that had had an effect on them. When they returned, they set about rebuilding the city and raising the altar and temple. By the time of Haggai and Zechariah fatigue had set in so Haggai prompts them to 'get up and go' while Zechariah provides apocalyptic insight so that they can understand, as well as be motivated, by contemplating on what will emerge.

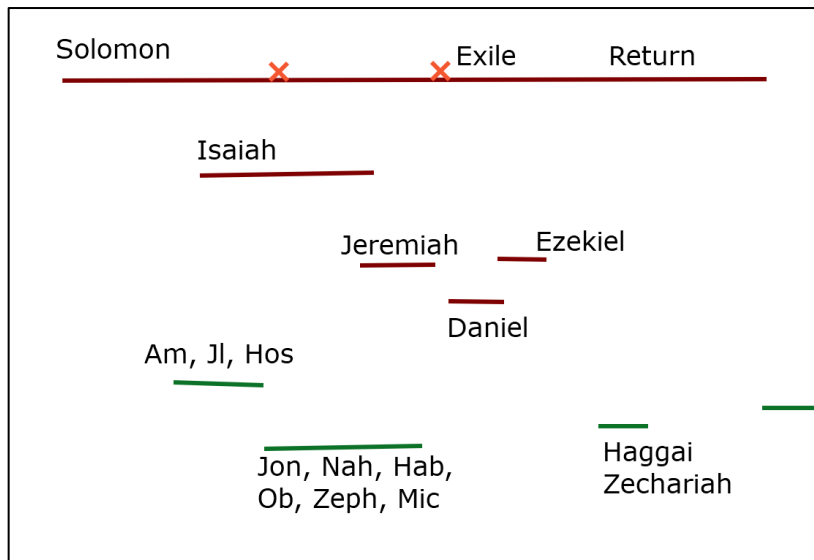
Sadly human nature is "prone to wander" and by Malachi, a 100 years later, they have become independent of, rather than dependent on, God, despite His care over them across the centuries. They now argue and treat God with disdain. However, a 'remnant' do not fall into that category. They 'fear the Lord' and 'speak one to another'. Their action is recorded and a future deliverance promised when "the Sun of Righteousness will appear with healing in his wings".

These Minor Prophecies are short, sharp, messages demanding a definite answer / response. The Major Prophets take more time to set out the case and explain the procedures more carefully.

MAJOR PROPHETS

The Major Prophets coincide with the Minor Prophets but deal more carefully with greater detail and sometimes extending over a longer period. It is probable that there were several shorter prophecies spoken at different times and in varying contexts but collated to comprise a full book.

Their timing is shown in the chart below.



There are four of them, beginning with Isaiah with his warning to the nation that their sinfulness and disdain for God would lead to punishment. When that came they would be safe under the redemptive hand of God as they would go through the process of His cleansing work, provided they believed. The two emphases has led some critics to suggest two authors from different time periods but we believe it was God's providence showing an appraisal of the present and then a projection into the future.

Jeremiah comes much later when it was obvious that the nation was not interested in following the ways of God. Jeremiah's message was "take it on the chin" and accept the humbling experience of God's redemptive work. He is very specific and detailed in his prophecy and also laces it with indicators of hope and a future.

In time terms, Daniel follows next with a personal experience containing prophecies each of which shows God's protection in a personal, public, and even cosmic sphere as represented by concentric circles spreading outwards.

Ezekiel then follows with a new beginning, but not before announcing the demolition of the present structure, again to be protected, and then remnants gathered from the debris. Pictured as a valley-full of dry bones, prophecy depicts the Spirit breathing new life into these bones heralding a future existence. That changes to a temple and regional responsibility. Each of these prophets is dealt with in greater detail below.

ISAIAH

In general terms, Isaiah is in two distinct sections with marked difference in content, style and presentation, so much so that critics have suggested dual authorship removing any supernatural foresight in the writing.

The two sections are 39 and 27 chapters each, reflecting the 39 books of the OT and the 27 of the New. Breaking it down further the second half has 3 sections of 9 chapters each with the middle chapter being 53: the Suffering Servant.

Another way of presenting the coherent book is to suggest that it is like a diving board with the first 'half' on solid ground and the second extending out suspended over the water requiring faith to "walk the plank". That could be changed to a medical scan with the patient being wheeled into a cavern for appropriate medication. That is what Isaiah is about: entering into, by faith, a redemptive experience.

Looking at the book in greater detail we have a first section of 12 chapters, beginning with a scene depicting a very disappointed God countenancing His people's neglect and disdain and yet engaged in a whole range of meaningless public worship. As a result the invitation is given to engage in an interview: *"Come, let us reason together, saith the Lord, though your sins be as scarlet they shall be as snow; though red like crimson, they shall be white as wool."*

Key to it all is Isaiah's vision of an exalted, holy, God who cleanses the prophet first and then commissions Isaiah to go and proclaim that message. The difference is that between death and life with the second half of this mini section heralding new life in the form of "a son is given", "seeing a great light" and experiencing Immanuel as well as the glorious picture of The Branch – new beginnings from cut-down, moribund, stumps.

If that is regarded as an infant plant then the next mini-section (13 – 24) is against the nations reminding them that God's judgement is against them and protecting his people from their marauding efforts.

However, the danger is not just external threat: it is inner weakness. Despite encouragements to go forward they inevitably fail and compromise. That is exemplified in Hezekiah's foolish act of succumbing to pride and showing the Babylonian envoys all his wealth.

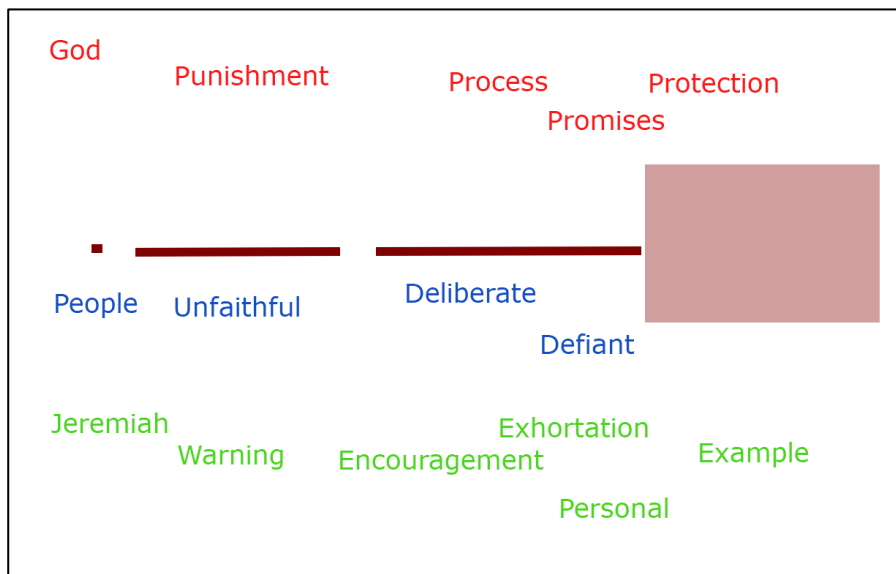
Clearly, they cannot succeed themselves by their own strength, so God steps in in the second half, the future-prophetic part, of this book. God will do it.

It is marked by three stages. The first is the knowledge that God is God. *Behold your God* is the watchword, Creator and potential redeemer. What is more they are precious to him and are under his care. Next, they need to listen, look, pay attention to His provision which is so graphically expressed in the work of the Suffering Servant in 53.

Finally, for that to be effective and for God *"to see the travail of His soul and be satisfied"* it needs to be appropriated: they need to avail themselves of it: they need to believe. That is expressed in 55 where they are invited to buy without money, to seek the Lord while he may be found and to let his word accomplish in their hearts and lives what he purposes.

Working that out is not easy nor will it be an offer taken up by everyone. Those who do constitute the 'remnant' the small group of believers. In the end they will have occasion, when enjoying the outcome of their redemption to look down on the carcasses of those who, because of their unbelief, are fatally punished. God's redemptive work will be done but, sadly, some love darkness rather than light; they want to 'keep their life' and thereby lose it; whereas those who trust in the Lord's redemptive work will know eternal salvation and triumph.

JEREMIAH



Some time has elapsed between Jeremiah and Isaiah although the Minor Prophets show that decline and deterioration were constant features. By Jeremiah's day the situation had become very serious so God acted in a very definite way. Jeremiah was called in a very specific way, having been earmarked by God, to go and proclaim His message to the people.

The emphasis at the beginning of that prophecy is an expression of disappointment on God's behalf that the nation had abandoned God, forgetting the betrothal pledges. So, Jeremiah charges the people with two sins: forsaking God, the fountain of life and hewing out for themselves broken cisterns that hold no water.

From that there is a progression of denouncements of unfaithfulness, idol worship, wilful behaviour and ignoring any resources available to them. They broke the covenant and wilfully ignored all God's words so much so that Jeremiah was told not to pray for them. They have reached the point of no return. There was no alternative awaiting them.

What is interesting is the way different parties behaved in the light of the impending captivity.

That can be represented by looking at the separate parties. We start with:

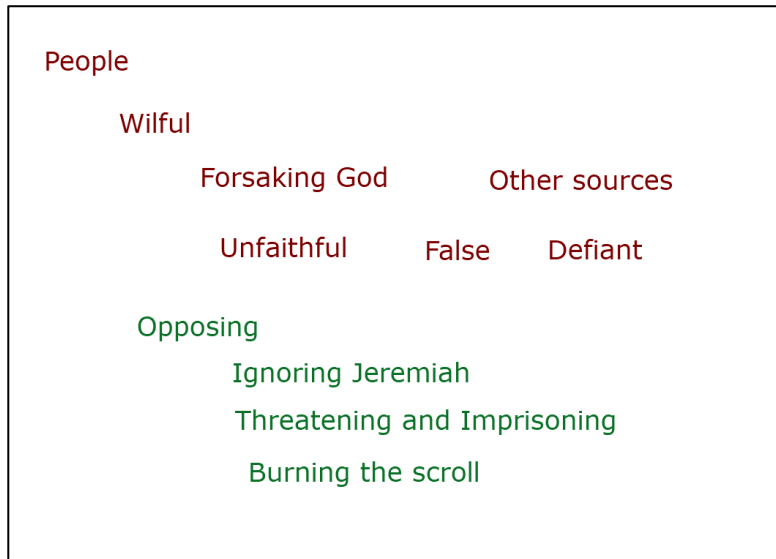
The People

Not surprisingly, their waywardness was characterised by wilfulness, exercised in complete disregard of God and His demands on their life. They followed idols, set their own standards, refused the words of God through

Jeremiah. They resisted any idea of their being able to be overcome by other powers and eventually seriously resisted going into Captivity.

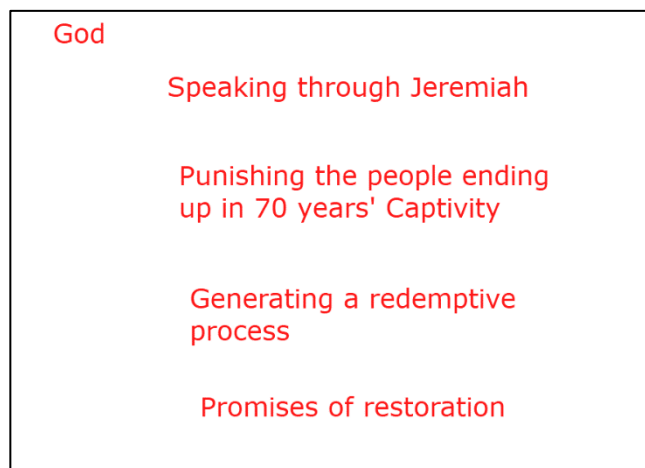
Along with that refusal was their vehement opposition to Jeremiah and the declaring of God's requirements. Jeremiah they put in prison, bound him and even destroyed his words written down by Baruch.

In detail it can be shown:



In contrast, God rose above it all. He spoke through Jeremiah in the way He does: entrusts people to do His bidding. His main involvement in this book is to punish the people because of their sinfulness. That punishment is spelled out in great detail from giving the reasons for it to detailing the agency and the location and the duration.

However that punishment is deliberate and purposeful. It is in fact a process, a redemptive, corrective, process. It is described as a process of refining: the punishment is being used to teach them a lesson and the establishing of a new covenant. The prophecies of doom are peppered with promises of restoration.



The key figure in the book, of course, is Jeremiah. His ministry can be depicted as follows.



Jeremiah is involved deeply in the whole process. Though God's spokesman he is very much part of the process and feels every aspect deeply. His call and subsequent commitment are impressive.

His main work is prophetic ministry first of all to warn the people about the nature of their apostasy and its consequences. When that seems to fall on deaf ears he is told not to pray for them because they have reached the point of no return. With that in mind he paints pictures of doom in terms of the linen belt that was wasted, the vessel marred in the potter's house or the clay jar broken to pieces. That is what awaits them: punishment at the hands of a loving God but using secular powers to carry out his purposes to the extent that he spells out in precise detail why, who, what and when.

Yet, it is at the hands of a redemptive God. This punishment is for a reason and a purpose. To drive that home there are a number of positive indicators: the tree reaches out and finds water which refreshes it, even in drought, and contributes to fruit bearing (something that pleases God). There is talk of a Branch arising out of Jesse as Isaiah had prophesied, the coming of a Messiah. For the exiles who go into captivity there is a letter indicating God's benevolent intentions towards them and even Jeremiah sets an example by buying a field to show that there will be a hereafter.

In all of this he, like Habakkuk, is perplexed as to how God can be so devastating that, in Lamentations he mourns the loss of his people but realises that it is God who is deliberately doing it. In his musings he comes to appreciate that that God is faithful, His mercies new every morning and that will give him solace and a motivation to seek the Lord. As it happens he looks forward to restoration and "renew our days as of old".

It is with that undergirding truth of a powerful, protecting, God that we move on to the story and prophecies of Daniel.

DANIEL

The book of Daniel is quite different from the other Major Prophets. It is a collection of stories of Daniel's exploits, along with his friends, and his experience of being given divine revelation of what lay ahead ranging from the power of kingdoms to the victory of the Ancient of Days and His people.

The first 6 chapters each recite a story of the way God protected his servants in captivity when they stood firm and loyal to God. Who can forget the incidents of the fiery furnace and the lions' den? Equally, the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar's vision show that worldly power is limited.

But, Daniel takes us beyond that into the realm of being shown what is happening in the heavenlies, that awful devastation will take place that almost threatens the survival of God's people as an entity. Things will get worse as cosmic powers battle it out. But, that power is finite. God will triumph.

The book can be represented as a series of concentric circles surrounding the believer. The first level is that of personal protection; the next is a ring fence where secular empires are concerned: their 'day' is limited. Thirdly, we enter into the spiritual realm with pictures of powers depicted by animals waging warfare against each other and, particularly, against the people of God. Yet, although they cause awful devastation, even to the extent of sacrilege in God's house, they fail in the end and God reigns in glorious victory. These are the circles that protect God's people.

However the second half, chapters 7 – 12, take us away from self-centred concerns to seeing the purpose of God being worked out from eternity to eternity. IT echoes the Roman epistle emphasis from "All things work together for good" (for us) to the awareness that we are called "*according to the purpose of God*" and, later, told to not "*be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of our mind*". That is the emphasis of the Lord's Prayer when it says: Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven". As Daniel comes to see that he enters into intercession, working along with God, as it were. His prayers are heeded. Gabriel comes to his aid and Michael joins in the fight. Such an experience could make Daniel 'puffed up', leading to boasting about his understanding. But, the opposite happens. Not only is Daniel floored by the responsibility but he is denied any opportunity of boasting. On the contrary he is told to "Go your way" and maintain his testimony in that motivating knowledge. Later on, Paul, understanding what the will of the Lord is, could say that "the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty through God" knowing that Christ had "spoiled principalities and powers making a show of them openly".

If Daniel shows how to behave in captivity, that redemptive experience, then Ezekiel is the one who faces the more difficult task of how to come out.

EZEKIEL

Ezekiel is concerned with restoration but not without explaining why it was necessary and what is entailed in renewal and regeneration.

Perhaps the book can best be understood by thinking of it in terms of the work of a building inspector who has to condemn a building and then supervise its reconstruction to become a glorious establishment. Its structure and content can be set out in this way:

The Book of Ezekiel

- 1 – 3 **The Watchman**
 - Vision
 - Commission
- 4 – 24 **Demolition order**
 - Announcement
 - Investigation
 - Decision
- 25 – 32 **Site security**
- 33 – 39 **Salvage operation**
- 40 – 48 **Rebuilding**

Ezekiel is that building inspector. It begins with his commissioning, based on a vision and a brief to convey God's message to an apostate people and, to begin with, condemn the building that they are. To do that he has to discharge his responsibility, eat and digest the scroll and its content and be prepared to face the rigours of conveying an unpalatable message to a resistant people.

Chapters 4 – 24 set out what can be regarded as the Demolition Order. The announcement is made in 4 -7 and , when challenged, backed up by a close investigation in 8 – 19 which demonstrates that there is rampant idolatry, unfaithfulness to God (depicted as prostitution), hypocrisy and failure to learn from history. While these

messages are often conveyed through graphic enactions their thrust is clear: Israel, pre-captivity, is in a rotten state and deserves God's punishment. The fall of Jerusalem coincides with the death of Ezekiel's wife.

While the nation is in disarray through captivity it can be envisaged as a bundle of debris. Neighbouring nations, motivated by greed and sense of triumph over Israel's downfall, are seen to gather round but are warned that their pride comes before a fall. They will be destroyed and prevented from scavenging from God's people.

When it comes to regeneration Ezekiel is recommissioned but warned of his responsibility and the twin facts of God's redemptive nature and the people's likely resistance to such grace.

Reconstruction follows, first by rescuing the people using the analogies of sheep being rescued, hearts being transformed and bones being inspired to become living beings in familiar pictures in 34, 35 and 37; while the opposing powers of Edom and Gog / Magog are doomed to destruction.

These 'salvaged' materials are then incorporated into a building comprising separate parts, assembled together, operating in a distinctive way and blessed – illustrated by the well-known picture of a river flowing from the temple growing deeper and positively affecting its surroundings.

Finally, the land is allocated to each tribe to be responsible for being good stewards in the new territory and establishing the testimony so that the city can be justifiably called: The Lord is there.

HAGGAI & ZECHARIAH

As many a prisoner has found out the hard way, coming out of prison and establishing an improved way can be very difficult. That is the position following Ezekiel's vision of a glorious future. And the task facing Haggai and Zechariah is leading the people in the right way after their period in Captivity.

Historically, the decree to return to Jerusalem was issued by Cyrus in response to which Zerubbabel and Joshua came to Jerusalem and built an altar as a preliminary to rebuilding the Temple. However adversaries opposed them resulting in the king issuing a command to stop. During that hiatus the people grew lethargic and self-centred concentrating on their own homes while the temple lay in ruins.

That is where Haggai comes in.

He begins with a challenge to consider their ways, and respond to the question: is it right for you to dwell in ceiled houses while this house of the Lord lies waste. All their previous endeavours had been fruitless because of such neglect. So, they are told to go up to the mountain to fetch wood to start rebuilding.

When they obeyed they were encouraged by being assured that God was with them. Forgetting those things that are behind, as it were, they are told to be strong for, despite their past history, God would bless them from this day onwards. Zerubbabel will be a key figure in that progress.

While this is happening, Zechariah also prophesies but in a different mode and full of complex imagery and apocalyptic overtones. Taken in two sections the first 8 chapters show a progression where God will bring His people back to Jerusalem where they will be his people and adopt him as their God in a resplendent Jerusalem, rid of its enemies and radiant with God's splendour. That Jerusalem will be glorious.

But its triumph will mean going through further tribulations and inconsistencies with faithless shepherds and sinful grief. But, God will triumph and the resultant victory will see Jerusalem as the Holy City from which rivers of blessing will flow.

That is a glorious prospect. But, will that materialise? We'll see from our next and final prophet: Malachi.

But, before leaving these two 'twin' prophets it is interesting to compare their style and significance. Haggai is a very practical prophet with direct commands that need to be obeyed and put into immediate practice. Zechariah, on the other hand, is more mystical, taking an overview across a wider canvas and focusing on insight and understanding of God's purpose. Appropriate response is motivated by both the need for immediate action and for 'having the mind of Christ' seeing things from God's point of view and being motivated by vision as we "understand what the will of the Lord is".

MALACHI

By the time we get to Malachi, nearly 100 years have passed, more than plenty of time to set the new order in place. While we have no record of what happened in the meantime, it is clear that there was much activity taking place. But was it the right activity? The first two chapters of Malachi suggest that it is not, for there is no honour for God, the people who should be fearing God argue with him, see no wrong in offering defiled sacrifices or compromising with other gods. Good leadership is not there. They do not realise how far away

from God they are. So, further warnings are issued, laced with redemptive pleas. God's messenger would come again as a refiner's fire to purify – if only they would respond. If not, then they would likely end with a curse.

It would appear as if the temple needed cleansing, the *'house of prayer'* becoming a *'den of thieves'*. Yet, there was a small remnant of *'those who feared the Lord and thought on His name'*. Their committed devotion was noticed, even recorded in a 'book of remembrance' and a promise given that to them *'the Sun of righteousness'* would appear with healing in His wings. It all hinged on their choice based on an appropriate response. An unbelieving response would lead to a 'curse' while a faithful one would mean blessing, a blessing that is the subject of the next part of our study: the New Testament and its presentation of the Lord Jesus.

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