



River Were Benefice

Grappling with the Old Testament

A Lent Study Programme for 2023

being challenged today
by the voices from
our shared history

Lent 2023

Resource and aid to reflection

Part Five



Session 5

Openness or exclusivism? Living in a secular age

O God our Fortress? O God, the One who calls us out?

One of the continuing issues facing the Christian faith concerns the tensions between our need for distinctiveness and the desire to take our place at the heart of contemporary society. We talk of a post-Christian and a post-Modernist society. We seek to follow a holy path and yet do not accept that we should draw up the drawbridge, drop the portcullis and turn our back on all that do not believe as we do.

But are we at risk of so diluting our Christian identity that there will be little to distinguish us from the wider society of which we are a part? And if so, does this matter?

Being the people of God.

Consider the depressing period immediately after the Edict of Cyrus releasing exiles back to their homelands. The regime was generous – peoples free to worship and organise as they wished under Persian sovereignty.

As we shall see, there was no glorious return. The majority of the Jews in exile chose to stay in Babylon.

Babylon – the Empire fell to the Persians under Cyrus (539 BCE)
Exiles were allowed their freedom under an edict of 538 BCE.
Under royal authority the community could return to Judah – most chose to delay or never to return!

Babylon was to remain a major Jewish cultural and spiritual centre for centuries with a substantial Jewish community resident in Iraq until relatively recently.

Our sources of historical information for this period are Ezra chapters 1 – 6 (part of the Chronicler's History), and the books of the prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi.

By decree, Cyrus had allowed the return (*Ezra 6; 3-5*) but there was no great motivation to do so. Virtually all of the original exiles were now dead. Many of the younger exiles may not have felt an urge to go to the unknown Palestine despite being presented as some form of ideal.

Far better the security and comfort you know than the discomfort and uncertainty of an idea. Hence the importance of the First return (*Ezra chapters 1 – 3*) is probably much exaggerated. We should treat this account with caution.

Nonetheless some exiles did return to Jerusalem to find a desolate and impoverished remnant of their once-glorious capital. These depressing and uninspiring conditions meant that the rebuilding of the Temple, after one abortive attempt, was long delayed, starting finally in c520 BC and only being completed during the time of Haggai and Zechariah in the next century. The locals on the land nearby wanted to join in but seem to have been rebuffed (*Ezra 4; 1 – 5*)

There was further trouble with the neighbours to the North. The origins of the Samaritan split probably come from this clash with those living in Samaria to the North. Their claim to Jewish heritage was not accepted by those returning from exile.

The returning exiles seem to have feared the potentially corrupting influences of surrounding peoples. They thought of themselves as the guardians of the pure religion of Yahweh.

The Persian Empire's open policies towards subject nations may have given rise to some political hopes but, in the end it was to be the Temple which betokened the new community rather than any political autonomy. The Temple was finally built with authority from the Persians. The line of David was not restored.

“It was the Temple built under the inspiration of... false hopes, which outlasted them, and prevented the community in Judah from falling to pieces by providing a focus for the religious life of the people.”

A. W. Heathcote, in “From Exile to Herod the Great”
© James Clarke & Co. Page 47

Between the completion of the Temple and c460 BC. (the time of Malachi) we have little evidence of conditions in Jerusalem. We may assume that the inflation and hard times of Haggai's day (*Haggai 1; 1-11*) were not easily overcome. In addition, the fact of the strong Persian monarchy would mean that religious life tended towards complacency, half-heartedness, indifference and despondency. Would they never regain their nationhood?

In the book of Malachi we meet a sorry situation. Temple worship appears slovenly and half-hearted (*Malachi 1; 6-14 and 3; 6-12*) and the priests are neglecting their rôle as teachers (*Malachi 2; 1-9*). Jewish wives have been divorced in favour of foreign marriages (*Malachi 2; 10-16*) - a burning issue for Ezra (see below). Overall there seems to have been a cynical, almost atheistic attitude prevailing;

You have said harsh things about me, says the LORD. And yet you say, “What have we said against you?” You have said, “It is useless to serve God; what is the good of keeping his commands or of walking mournfully before the LORD Sabaoth? In fact we now call the proud blessed; evildoers prosper: they put God to the test, yet come to no harm!”’

Malachi both rebukes and appeals to the community, condemning their neglect of proper worship and of observance of the Law. An interesting insight into the evident emphasis on these two aspects of Jewish religion by that time

You have said harsh things about me, says the LORD. And yet you say, “What have we said against you?” 14 You have said, “It is useless to serve God; what is the good of keeping his commands or of walking mournfully before the LORD Sabaoth? 15 In fact we now call the proud blessed; evildoers prosper: they put God to the test, yet come to no harm!”’

Malachi 3:13-15
Revised New Jerusalem Bible Translation

Thus the Jewish religion was shaping itself in clear ways in this post-exilic period. Three main characteristics seem to have taken hold (*as shown on the diagram on the next next page*)

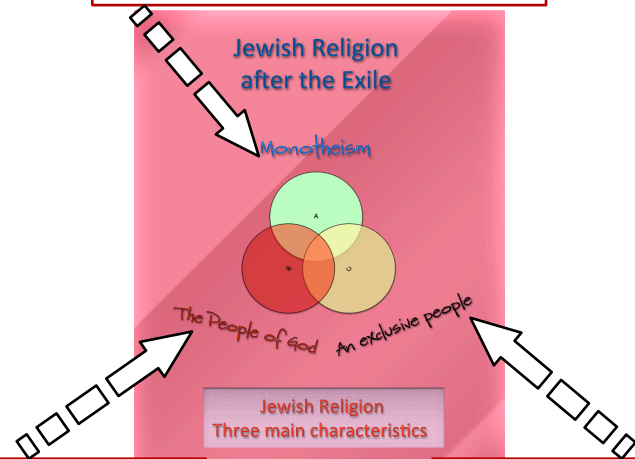
Nehemiah & Ezra

In the fifth and fourth centuries BC two major figures shape the developing future of Judaea. The period of Nehemiah and then Ezra (their dating is confused in the Chronicler's History) drove society strongly towards exclusivism and a strong sense of self-identity.

Nehemiah

By 445 BC, when Nehemiah first went to Jerusalem, the city felt less secure. It came under the Persian governorship of Samaria with little military protection or defence. Social and economic conditions echoed this state (Malachi and others bear witness to this). Religious indifference, fear of attack and poor material conditions faced Nehemiah.

Monotheism – that there is only one God: this had come clearly and unambiguously into Jewish thinking. It is explicit from the writings of Second Isaiah (Is 40 - 55) writing at the end of the Exile and implicit in the Deuteronomic History. God is universal.



The Jewish people as the People of God. The Jews came to believe that God had prepared a glorious destiny for them.

An Exclusive People. Those that returned from exile made a distinction between themselves and those who were resident in Judah and Samaria.

Nehemiah, with official authority, causes the walls of Jerusalem to be rebuilt (probably the first walls since those destroyed in 587 BC). He then repopulated the city – a tenth of the population was drafted for this purpose.

Next Nehemiah tackled the abuses within the community. He even denied himself taxes to which he was entitled in order to relieve the debts of the poorest.

He was concerned with religious purity and practice. During his second mission to Jerusalem (c431 BC) he attacked perceived impurities or abuses;

1. Rôle of the Levites
2. Sabbath discipline
3. Exclusion of foreigners from Israel and a ban on future mixed marriages – a cause of much foreign influence.

The arrival of Ezra marked the climax of these developments. He came to Jerusalem in (probably – dating is disputed) 398/7 BC. If this date is correct, he came independently and long after Nehemiah. The account of Ezra's commission and work is found in Ezra chapter 7.

Ezra had been appointed in the capacity of some form of Royal Commissioner for religious affairs.

Ezra

His position related to the Law, which he possessed and was to promulgate to the people in formal assembly (*Nehemiah chapters 8-10*). It is interesting that the Hebrew had to be translated into Aramaic so that the assembly of the people could understand what was being promulgated. Times had moved on!

This Law (whatever it was) became the rule for the whole community – it was binding and enforceable with Royal (Persian) authority.

The quest for religious purity continued; Ezra being appalled at mixed marriages and causing existing mixed marriages to be ended (*Ezra 10; 3 & 16-17*).

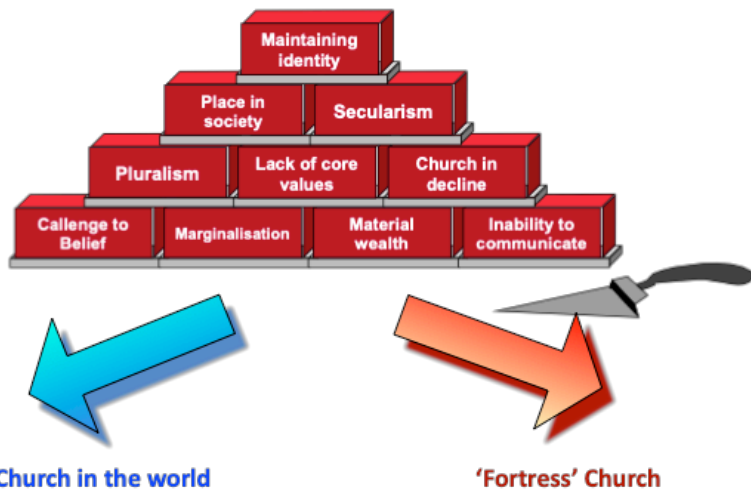
As a result, and seen in their context, these actions...

1. Aimed to maintain religious purity and the raising of racial and national barriers were a means to that end in the struggle for religious survival in a weak nation.
2. Were in response to a real danger – that of assimilation. The community was small and insignificant; insecure and subject to powerful and corrupting alien pressures.
3. May not have been as absolute as it first seems. For example, Ezra 7; 13 and 25 may possibly imply that outsiders who accepted the obligations of Law were acceptable as members of the community.

The cumulative achievements of this period was to leave a people with a broader understanding of the nature of the People of God. It offered much in the struggle for religious survival and growth. This people, not enjoying any political autonomy, could see themselves as the true Community observing God's Law.

Grappling with the Old Testament

'Push and Pull'
Factors forcing change to Church today



For discussion and reflection

- What similarities, if any, may be seen between the threats to the Jewish religion during the period after the Exile and that of Christianity in our 21st century society?
- In what ways does or should the Church (in its various forms) attempt to maintain its distinctiveness as Christian within society?
- What are the implications for the church's ministry for some of these ways in which it may maintain its distinctiveness?

Further reading

The following is not an exhaustive or comprehensive list. It may help the reader to begin to find more to read and discover.

SCM Study Guide to the Old Testament by John Holdsworth. © John Holdsworth 2005. Published by SCM - Canterbury Press. ISBN 978 0 334 02985 4

A History of the Bible (The Book and its Faiths) by Prof. John Barton (Especially Part One). © John Barton 2019. Published by Penguin Books. ISBN 978 0 141 97850 5.

Reading the Old Testament, An Introduction by Lawrence Boadt © 1984 Paulist Press. ISBN 0 8091 2631 1

How to Read the Old Testament by Etienne Charpentier. Translation © 1981 John Bowden. Published in English by SCM Press 1982. ISBN 0 334 02057 3.

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