



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 Three



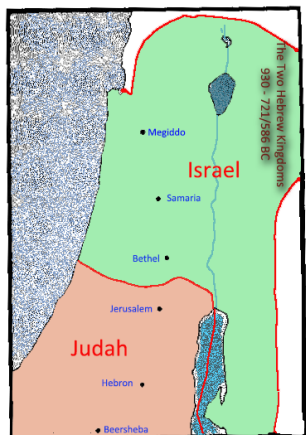
Session 3

A prophetic voice and social justice

What it means to be truly human - Prophets of challenge in the 8th century BC.

You may have debated the tensions in the Church between the maintenance of the traditions of our Church and meeting the needs of our society. Do we sustain a traditional pattern of worship, ethical and moral standards, allegedly biblical teaching and much else? Or do we seek to re-state the faith in a new framework of language, imagery, social codes and commitments?

This is not new. It is at the heart of the Old Testament struggle to understand the human situation. What is a human being? (asks the Psalmist). And we are still trying to find an answer!



The two Hebrew Kingdoms

what is humankind?

Prophets of the 8th Century and facing the challenges to Yahwism

In the writings of three prophets, we find this question being explored on the stage of the two Hebrew Kingdoms of that period. With **Amos**, **Hosea** and **Micah** came increasing signs of disquiet about the integrity of the faith of the people and the likely results this would produce.

At that time Canaanite influences were biting deeply into the faith of Yahweh. The encounter between the two cultures was causing conflicts. Yahwism was based on social interaction and was moral in nature. It focused on personal and human relationships. But the Baal cults of the Canaanites threatened to subsume Yahwism with its universalist views and placing of mankind as servants of a fertility cult.

The kingdoms had considerable political confidence and no longer felt the acute dependence on God. It was a time of prosperity and growth. The old tribal areas and loyalties were being eroded and the machinery of state developing. The economy was changing from villages to the towns. Many free people from the villages were migrating to the towns where (as now) unemployment, loss of "place" and status and resulting alienation were common.

Beyond the frontiers great powers (especially Assyria) loomed as a constant threat....



The Eight Century Prophets sought to re-assert their religion in terms of the society that was evolving. They did not deny progress. Rather they wished to affirm the standards of Yahwism – "keeping alive old ideals" (as one writer put it) "in the midst of more complex situations". They offered a fierce standard by which the people are judged and a real promise

of such judgement by Yahweh. The people have been chosen by Yahweh and have forgotten this "election". God is acting... and the people continue to ignore him. People are unrighteous and deny the demands of the Covenant of old. There is religious complacency, ethical failure and contempt for God's law.

Hosea

Amos

Micah

Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground!

(Amos 5; 7)

For Amos, the basis of God's judgement is not the commandments of the Law but something more basic, belonging to people as human beings. It is from this that our humanity arises. There is a basic recognition of our human responsibilities for each other. The inner nature of God is righteousness, rather than his holiness, and this demands right conduct from his people.

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

(Amos 5; 21-24)

This advance in understanding and insight into the nature of God led to the moral and ethical insights of these prophets.

To be truly human we are called to serve God and adopt standards of righteousness, morality and justice.

If you have time, read the whole of the book of Amos.

For discussion and reflection

We turn, therefore, to explore the tensions between "religion" and the demands of wider society.

- ◆ With reference to Amos chapter 5 (*trawl more widely should you wish*), consider the issues that Amos might have attacked were he to have been a prophet of the 20th and 21st centuries.
- ◆ Focus on one of these issues. What Christian message should be brought to bear as a result?
- ◆ In an age where poverty, injustice, inequality and exploitation (not to speak of sexual morality or immorality, war and environmental and climatic challenges) persist, what effect could prophecy really have?
- ◆ Religion and politics can and do mix. But this presents dangers and paradoxes and may (in the case of an established Church) lead to compromises and self-limitations. Was Desmond Tutu wrong to engage with secular political power in an unjust society of his time?

"When the missionaries came to Africa they had the Bible and we had the land. They said "Let us pray." We closed our eyes. When we opened them we had the Bible and they had the land."

Desmund Tutu - a modern-day prophetic voice

a thirst for justice

a thirst for justice

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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