

GOD'S BIG PICTURE, Part 4

Israel: decline & prophetic hope



Israel's National Decline and Exile

After Solomon's death Israel was divided into two kingdoms as a judgement from God because of Solomon's unfaithfulness:

	Northern Kingdom	Southern Kingdom
Name	Israel (sometimes referred to as Ephraim)	Judah
Tribes	10 tribes	Judah and Benjamin
Capital	Shechem, then Tirzah, and finally Samaria	Jerusalem
Kings	19 from 9 different dynasties – all evil (especially Ahab and his wife Jezebel)	19, all from David's dynasty – some evil, others good (especially the boy king Josiah)
Centre of worship	Idols set up by the first king, Jeroboam, to prevent people going to Jerusalem where they may be tempted to be loyal to David's dynasty	The Jerusalem Temple (although some kings neglected the Temple and one even had the doors nailed shut). People also sacrificed to foreign gods in "high places".
Ended	722 BC with exile to Assyria	586 with exile to Babylon
Fate of people and land	Some were faithful and fled to Judah at the schism or later. Most were assimilated into Assyria. The land was given to foreigners who later began to worship Yahweh and became the Samaritans.	Some remained in the land; others were taken to Babylon. Some later returned under Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah; others did not. The land became the Persian province of Judah and later the Roman province of Judea.

The exile of Israel to Assyria and of Judah to Babylon was a judgement from God for their unfaithfulness to the covenant (see II Kings 17:1-23; Jeremiah 22:8-9). This was in keeping with God's words to Moses that the people would only be allowed to stay in the land as long as they remained faithful to God (Deuteronomy 28:1,15,64).

The Faithful Remnant in Israel

Throughout the period of the history of Israel an important principle of the faithful remnant develops. Although the majority of the people at times were unfaithful to God and neglected or rejected His covenant, there was always a small number of people who were faithful to God. This faithful remnant can be traced throughout the history of Israel:

- Joseph alone of the 12 sons of Jacob (Genesis 45:7)
- Moses alone when Aaron led the people in idolatrous worship of the golden calf (Exodus 32:31-32)
- Joshua and Caleb alone among the 12 spies and, ultimately, the whole nation (Numbers 14:30)
- David alone facing Goliath when Saul's army were terrified (I Samuel 17:11,32)
- Elijah and 7000 others in Ahab's Israel when the nation was following Baal (I Kings 19:18)
- The remnant in Judah in the time of King Hezekiah who survived the ravages of Assyria (II Kings 19:29-34)
- During the Exile – Daniel and his friends in Babylon (Daniel); Esther in Persia (Esther)
- The people who returned from the exile in Babylon under Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah (Ezra 9:8,13-15; Nehemiah 1:2)

The exile purified the nation from idolatry, and when they returned to the land they rebuilt the Temple and renewed the covenant with a new devotion to the Law. Although the Jews were not always faithful to God after that time (as we see in the time of Christ), they never returned to idolatry. The problems became division over what it meant to worship God truly (hence the separation into different factions – Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and Zealots) and the temptation to be overly influenced by Greek culture.

The Prophets

The first person described in Scripture as a prophet is Abraham (Genesis 20:7), although the role of the prophet as a spokesperson of God to His people began with Moses. He was the definitive prophet in whose pattern future prophets would follow (see Deuteronomy 18:15-22; 34:10). The next Israelite prophet named in the OT is Samuel, whose ministry was concerned with the beginning of the kingship. Initially the prophets were primarily advisors to the kings (for example Nathan in David's time), but later they began to speak to the whole nation and to represent the faithful remnant in Israel, calling the people to return to the Covenant (in the period of Elijah and Elisha). Later still, as the divided kingdoms began to descend towards exile, the prophets began to speak more about God's judgement to write down the oracles God gave them (these are recorded in the OT books from Isaiah to Malachi).

There are several major themes in the writings of the prophets:

- (i) **Warnings to the Israelites that they must repent or face judgment by God** – these messages came mainly before the Exile of Israel or Judah. The books of Joel, Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Habakkuk contain many warnings to God's people.
- (ii) **Warnings to the enemies of Israel and Judah** – four of the prophetic books are mainly concerned with enemies of God's people: Obadiah (against Edom), Jonah (who went to the Assyrian capital Nineveh to call people to repentance), Nahum (against Assyria) and Zephaniah (against all nations). There are also messages against other nations in other prophetic books (e.g. Jeremiah 46-51).
- (iii) **Predictions about a coming Saviour for God's people (called the Messiah)** – These prophecies are scattered throughout many of the prophetic books, and many prophecies about the Messiah are also found in Psalms. The Messianic prophecies are of particular interest in the unfolding revelation of Scripture. They include two major types of prophecy:
 - a) *The Conquering King* – a King in the line of David who would defeat God's enemies and establish an eternal throne from which He would reign over Israel from Jerusalem and his kingdom would include the nations (e.g. Psalm 110; Isaiah 11). These prophecies are the ultimate fulfilment of God's promise to David that a king from his line would reign forever.
 - b) *The Suffering Servant* – a faithful servant of God who would suffer at the hands of God's enemies but whose suffering would be a sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins (e.g. Psalm 22; Isaiah 53). The Servant, unlike national Israel, would be faithful to the covenant by fulfilling the Law in a perfect life and by becoming the ultimate sacrifice for sins.
- (iv) **Promises about God's future perfect kingdom**– these prophecies (e.g. Amos 9:11-15) are often connected with the promise of the coming Messiah. They look forward to a time when God's faithful remnant from Israel would be joined by people from all nations of the earth in God's Kingdom. This Kingdom would be glorious – with creation restored to its original perfection.
- (v) **Encouragement to rebuild the Temple and purify their worship of God** – the major theme of the prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi after the return from exile.
- (vi) **The "New Covenant"** – the prophets anticipated of a "New Covenant" under which God would relate to people in a new way through the Spirit. This idea is clearest in Jeremiah 31, where the phrase "New Covenant" is used, but is also found throughout Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel where they speak of the Spirit relating to people in a new way (e.g. Isaiah 42:6; 49:8; 54:10; 55:3; 59:21; 61:8; Jeremiah 32:38-40; 50:4-5; Ezekiel 11:16-20; 16:60-63; 34:25-31; 36:22-38; 37:24-28).

One point of contention is over how the prophecies concerning national Israel (which represent the ultimate fulfilment of God's promises to Abraham) will be fulfilled. Covenant Theologians believe these prophecies find a spiritual fulfilment in the Church, while Dispensationalists believe they still remain to be fulfilled in national Israel in the future. It is difficult, in my view, to see how these prophecies have any meaning at all if they are transferred spiritually to the church. In addition, Romans 11 seems to speak of a future for national Israel, although whether this is simply a greater turning to Him by Jewish people in the future or a special period of blessing for them in a future millennial kingdom I cannot say with absolute certainty. I believe it is best to say that the possibility is left open for a literal fulfilment of the national promises to Israel, but that God may fulfil his word in ways that are unseen by us at this time.

Wisdom and Poetic Literature

This is the third great strand in the Old Testament literature (in addition to law / history and prophecy). The books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs are wisdom and poetry. Their significance is that they relate to the inner life of the individual believer during the period of Israel's history. They provide a beautiful balance between the historic realities of God's dealing with the nation and the prophetic hope of God's future actions, as they bring us to the very heart of what a relationship of faith in God looks like in every aspect of life including work, rejoicing, worship, suffering, depression, sexual relationships, marriage and parenthood. These are intensely personal and thoroughly practical books. Their major concern is with how God's wisdom relates to the everyday challenges of life. From this perspective their relevance to the modern believer is often more immediately obvious than other parts of the Old Testament (hence the popularity of Psalms among Christians), but we must still be careful about applying them directly to our situation as we are not Israelites. For example, David's concern that God may remove His Spirit from him (Psalm 51:11) refers to the anointing of the Spirit for his role as King, and cannot be applied directly to the believer today as if we can lose the Holy Spirit.

Strands in Old Testament Literature

Each of the three great strands to the literature of the OT concerning Israel, finds their ultimate fulfilment in Christ:

	Books	Predominant Theme	Fulfilment in Christ	Aspect of faith
History	Genesis to Esther	The progressive unfolding of God's promises through Abraham, Moses and David. Israel's failure to be faithful to the covenant but God's faithfulness to the believing remnant	Christ is the fulfilment of all the covenant promises – He is the ultimate High Priest and the ultimate King in David's line	Past – saved from the penalty of sin because of what God has done in history.
Wisdom / Poetry	Job to Song of Songs	The realities of faith as a believing Israelite in every aspect of life – relationships, work and worship	Christ is the Wisdom of God – He lived a perfect life and will live His life through those who are in Him	Present – being saved from the power of sin in the here and now. We must experience this present relationship with God.
Prophecy	Isaiah to Malachi	Judgement for sin and the hope of a glorious messianic future with a New Covenant	Christ is the ultimate Prophet – He is God's word and fulfils the messianic hope	Future – we will be saved from the presence of sin when Christ returns in glory.