

Israel's History from Josiah to the Exile

Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy is an extremely important book. It is a major compilation of the Law but, more important still, it gives the Law a framework of explanation, related to the character of God and the calling of Israel.

Although Deuteronomy takes the form of a long address to the people of Israel, made by Moses on the eve of his death, the style of the book is very distinctive and similar to that of other literature from the 7th. Century B.C. and the thrust of the book is directed at evils which arose under the monarchy (eg.13:1-5; 17:14-20).

All the indications are that the "Book of the Law" discovered in the Temple in 621 B.C. in the course of Josiah's reforms was in fact part or all of the present book of Deuteronomy:

- It was short enough to be read two or three times in a single day - by Hilkiah to Shaphan (2 Kings 22:8), by Shaphan to the King (2 Kings 22:10) and finally at a covenant ceremony (2 Kings 23:2) although this may have taken place on a separate day.
- It emphasised the covenant made between the Lord and Israel when he led them out of Egypt (2 Kings 23:2; Deuteronomy 29:1,9).
- Josiah and his officials were terrified when they heard it (2 Kings 22:11-13), as they would have been if the book included passages like Deuteronomy 28:15-end.
- It resulted in the centralisation of all worship at Jerusalem for the first time, in accordance with Deuteronomy 12:8-14. The evidence suggests that the centralisation of worship at a single shrine was unknown in early times. Then, a sacrifice was usually an occasion for a feast because once an animal had been killed it could not easily be preserved and conversely, every feast was a religious occasion because it was preceded by a sacrifice (see 1 Samuel 9:11-13; 16:1-5). Deuteronomy 12:15 gives permission for "secular" slaughter away from the central shrine.

- The Passover was celebrated in Jerusalem, in accordance with Deuteronomy 16:5-6 (2 Kings 23:21-23).
- Pagan worship, mediums and spiritists were suppressed (2 Kings 23:24; Deuteronomy 18:9-14).

Its close links with the messages of Amos and Hosea suggest that the teaching of Deuteronomy originated in the northern kingdom. There is the same scepticism about the value of kings and emphasis instead on listening to and obeying the prophets, and the same desire for obedience to the Lord from the heart. The book was probably brought to Judah in prophetic or Levitical circles, who continued to work on it until it was found in the Temple. But was it "discovered" or was it planted? Was Hilkiah the high priest waiting for an opportunity to bring the book to the king's attention?

Day 183. Psalm 64; 2 Kings 22:1 - 23:30; Jeremiah 11

Josiah's Reform

Psalm 64

A prayer for protection against the plots of an enemy.

2 Kings 22:1 - 23:30

As Josiah came to the throne, the great Assyrian empire was waning in strength, giving him the chance to renounce his allegiance and make Judah independent again. With political independence went the removal of objects of Assyrian worship from the Temple and in the course of this renovation a book was discovered, the "Book of the Law" (22:8) or "Book of the Covenant" (23:2). Its discovery gave the reform programme a new direction and a new urgency. All pagan places of worship were desecrated, not only in Judah but in the former kingdom of Israel as well. Even Jeroboam's shrine of Bethel was desecrated and destroyed (the shrine at Dan of 1 Kings 12:29-30 had long since passed into the hands of Aram).

Josiah went even further than destruction of pagan shrines. In a new and radical departure from tradition, even the worship of the Lord was forbidden outside Jerusalem and the country priests forbidden to practice (23:8-9; see Deuteronomy 12:8-14). By centring all sacrificial worship in Jerusalem Josiah may have hoped that loyal priests could keep control well enough to prevent the abuses which had been rife for generations previously. For his zeal in promoting a purified worship Josiah won the commendation of the prophetic historian as the only king who had served the Lord "with all his heart, soul and strength" (23:25; see Deuteronomy 6:5).

Despite the reforms, the Lord did not change his mind about the eventual punishment of Judah, only promising that Josiah himself would not live to see it (22:15-end). In fact, Josiah met his death in battle against the old enemy, Egypt. He calculated that if Egypt was successful in coming to the aid of Assyria one or other would take Judah under their control again, and in fact, this is what happened after his defeat and death (23:33-35). But it was Babylon, against whom Egypt and Assyria were combining, which brought about the final downfall of Judah and Jerusalem.

Jeremiah 11

Jeremiah was still a young man when the Book of the Law was discovered in 621 so it was to Huldah, the established prophetess, that the king sent rather than the young priest from the village of Anathoth (2 Kings 22:14). Nevertheless, Jeremiah was a strong supporter of Josiah's reforms, preaching in favour of "this covenant" throughout Jerusalem (11:1-8).

But despite the zeal of Josiah, the Lord refused to spare the city from the punishment he had threatened (11:9-11; 2 Kings 23:26-27). As a prophet, one of Jeremiah's tasks was to intercede for his people, but the Lord strongly forbade him to do so (11:14-15). As the years went on and the situation grew progressively worse, the Lord's refusal to hear Jeremiah's prayers caused him great anguish. But his message was to be that there was no hope: judgement was certain and prayer could no longer avail.

Anathoth was a settlement of priests (1:1). Its inhabitants would have been among those who were forbidden to practise as a result of Josiah's reform. Not surprisingly, they were angered when Jeremiah became a spokesman for the reform (11:18-end). It was an early example of the vehement opposition that faced Jeremiah throughout his career.

Day 184. Psalm 67; Deuteronomy 5 - 7

The Great Commandment

Psalm 67

When God blesses his people all nations on earth will worship him.

Deuteronomy 5

After reminding them of their history, in chapters 1 - 4, Moses summons all Israel to hear the Law. In doing so, he stresses that it is to be perpetually valid. The covenant God made with the first generation which left Egypt is to apply to all generations (5:3). Thus the 7th. Century compilers of Deuteronomy apply Israel's ancient tradition of Law to their own contemporaries. In the chapters to come, they will be interpreting, developing, explaining and commending it with passionate zeal.

In contrast to Exodus 20:11, the reason for the commandment to rest on the Sabbath is the release of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt (5:15). This reminder is characteristic of Deuteronomy (see 6:21-23; 8:14; 10:19; 15:15; 16:12; 24:18,22). The memory of their freedom from slavery is to supply Israel with the motive for grateful obedience.

In 5:23-end the position of Moses as mediator between God and Israel is clearly set out. They are to keep all his words because they are God's words. The same applies to the prophets in later times (18:15-18).

Deuteronomy 6

The "Shema" (Hebrew for "hear") lies at the heart of the Law and was singled out by Jesus as one of the two great commandments (6:4-8; Mark 12:28-30). What God looks for is not outward obedience but the devotion of the heart. Every Israelite is to have God's Law constantly in mind and pass it down from generation to generation. Law and history combine to give Israel a sense of distinct national identity and set them apart from the other inhabitants of the land of Canaan.

Deuteronomy 7

Chapter 7 takes as its theme the first of the Ten Commandments: "You shall have no other gods before me." In his love, God chose Israel as an act of

grace to be his own special people (7:7-8). As God's chosen people, Israel was to be holy, set apart for God to demonstrate in their way of life both his love and his righteousness. Throughout Deuteronomy, the Law is seen not as a series of burdensome commands, but as a way of life and blessing. It is a way of life which if followed will bring Israel outstanding blessing and mark them out as God's specially chosen people.

Because of their special calling, the people of Israel were to regard the other nations as a snare and to have no dealings with them. These nations were to experience the judgement from which the Lord was saving Israel. The nations of Canaan suffered because of their proximity to God's holy people but the whole world will suffer if the offer of God's saving love through Israel is refused.

Day 185. Psalm 113; Deuteronomy 8 – 11

The Lessons of the Wilderness

Psalm 113

Praise to God, who cares for the poor and needy, from the whole of creation: the phrase "from the rising of the sun to its setting" means "from the furthest east to the furthest west".

Deuteronomy 8 - 11

These four chapters comprise four sermons on living under the Law:

- A sermon on the discipline of dependence (chapter 8), warning Israel not to take God's blessing for granted.
- A sermon on the righteousness of God, who is a devouring fire (chapter 9), so that the Israelites do not forget their own sin and dependence on his mercy.
- A call to a distinctive lifestyle based on the commandments (chapter 10) and a reminder that the Lord has chosen Israel from among all nations (10:14-15) to demonstrate his character by their obedience to the Law.
- An observation on the conditions of life in Israel (chapter 11). Unlike Egypt, where the fertility of the soil depended on the Nile floods, in the Promised Land it will depend on the rain. The Israelites should therefore teach their children obedience because if they forget the Lord he may withhold his blessing.

There is a great difference of perspective between the person in need and the one with plenty. For a rich person, money has less value than for the poor; the rich are used to having all the necessities of life without worrying about them and enjoying a wide range of choice in most areas of their lives. It is difficult for them properly to appreciate the situation of the person struggling to make ends meet.

In these chapters Moses warns against the change of perspective that will take place when Israel becomes rich. The Lord is bringing them into a rich land where they will enjoy every good thing. The danger is that they will forget the lessons of the past, the discipline of the desert (8:2-5). They will

forget their origins as slaves delivered from Egypt (8:14). They will forget the Lord's mercy on them despite their continual disobedience (9:7-24). And they may forget that the Lord is God of rich and poor alike, shows no partiality and expects his people to care for the needy (10:17-19). Instead, they may begin to think that the wealth of the Promised Land is theirs by right, and to congratulate themselves on their righteousness in having deserved it (9:4-7). They may begin to fall for the attractions of pagan worship and the culture of the native people (11:16).

These are the dangers, of complacency, self-congratulation and compromise, to which rich Christians may easily fall prey. When we do, we forget the grace of God and serving him becomes a burden instead of a joy. We may also fail to pass on our heritage of faith to our children, leaving them with no sense of their need for God's mercy. We need to take to heart Moses' message to Israel, to remember the sins from which he has delivered us, the blessings he has given us and the tendency of our hearts to go astray. We need to "accept the word planted in us" (James 1:21), obey it and bear fruit of the kind God looks for.

Day 186. Psalm 19; Deuteronomy 12 – 14

The Demand for Exclusiveness

Psalm 19

The blessings of keeping God's Law.

Deuteronomy 12:1-28

Like the prophets Amos and Hosea, the writers of Deuteronomy knew from experience that even when the worship at the local shrines was offered to the Lord, the practices associated with it and the understanding of God's nature that went with them were derived more from pagan sources than from Israelite tradition. Their solution was to centralise worship in one place, where it could be overseen by faithful priests who would ensure the purity of worship and teaching.

The single central shrine was to be the place where the Lord would make "his Name" dwell, a place where he would be especially available to his people. This concept is fully expressed in Solomon's dedication prayer (1 Kings 8:22-53), in which his new Temple at Jerusalem was to be a place where heaven and earth were joined, the place where worship was acceptable and prayers heard.

In earlier times any slaughter of an animal was a sacred occasion. Meat would quickly go off and when an animal was killed it had to be eaten quickly, so the slaughter of an ox was the occasion for a feast when whole families and villages shared a meal. Moreover, the shedding of blood was a sacred thing, which had to be done with due reverence for God, the giver of life. However, if there were to be only one place of worship for the entire nation, it would make such communal occasions totally impracticable. Accordingly, the Deuteronomists took the further radical step of separating ordinary feasting from worship, allowing each to take place without the other: worship at the one central shrine, feasting anywhere, so long as no blood was eaten, in accordance with the most ancient taboo still recognised by the New Testament Church (Genesis 9:3-4; Acts 15:20).

Deuteronomy 12:29 - 13:end

The prohibition of worship anywhere but in the one authorised place was meant to separate Israel from paganism. The regulations of chapter 13 build on this: anyone, be it prophet or even family member, who entices people away from the Lord is to be executed. Even signs and wonders are not to count in favour of the person who advocates apostasy. Jesus himself warned that miracles would not save those who were false disciples (Matthew 7:21-23). Even close family ties were not to be more important than faithfulness to the Lord (13:6-9; Matthew 10:34-37).

Since God had promised to bless the whole community if they were faithful and obedient, to promote apostasy would mean destroying the community's well-being. The whole community, therefore, was to take responsibility for resisting it.

Deuteronomy 14:1-21

The precise reasons for these specific food taboos are lost in the mists of time, and may have been unknown even to the Deuteronomists. For them, the important point was separation. Israel was a specially chosen people and their separation from the other nations was to be expressed in the laws governing food.

Deuteronomy 14:22-end

The abolition of worship anywhere but in one place would be bound to cause a great deal of unemployment among the priests who ministered at the local shrines. Deuteronomy renames these priests "Levites". They were to live among the Israelites without any specific inheritance and their maintenance was to be the responsibility of the whole community. They were to be included in celebrations at the central place of worship (12:12) and in local feasting (12:19) and every three years the tithe set aside for the Lord was to be given wholly to them (14:28-29). The rest of the time, giving the tithe was to be an occasion for both worship and celebration.

Day 187. Psalm 65; Deuteronomy 15 - 18

Kings, Priests and Prophets

Psalm 65

The Lord's worshippers are blessed with spiritual refreshment and material plenty.

Deuteronomy 15:1 - 16:17

The economic regulations sketched out in Deuteronomy are very different from the economics with which we are familiar. In modern western culture economics has to do with the distribution of scarce resources; the underlying assumption is that the total wants of society will always be greater than the resources available. In contrast, Deuteronomy portrays the economics of "enough". The economy is undergirded by God's blessing; as long as Israel continues obedient to the Lord there will always be plenty for everyone. So if someone falls on hard times, the rich are to help him up again (15:7-8). In fact, they can afford to be generous to their own cost, knowing that God will bless them for it (15:10). If a poor man borrows money to tide him over, he must be released from the debt in the seventh year (15:1-3). If a man or woman is sold into slavery to avoid destitution, they too must be given the option of release (15:12).

The seventh year is an extension of the Sabbath day on which all economic activity ceases and everyone can rest from their labour knowing that God will provide for their needs. The festivals, too, provide a time of rest and rejoicing, and a time to remember the rescue from Egypt (16:11-12). The sacrifices required (15:19-20) also remind every Israelite farmer of his dependence on God's blessing.

Deuteronomy 16:18 - 18:end

Deuteronomy puts the regulation of society in the hands of judges, priests, Levites, kings and prophets but leaves the relations between them unclear. The key role is to be played by the judges (16:18-20), who are to ensure that local life is governed by strict justice.

In the context of Josiah's reform, the Levites were in fact the priests who had been ejected from the local shrines. They were encouraged to move to

the single central shrine, where they might act either as superior judges or inferior priests. Those living in the towns and villages provide a court of appeal in cases where the local judge cannot decide (17:8-13).

Deuteronomy is decidedly sceptical about kings, seeing no benefits and considerable dangers in having one, and giving him no defined role. If there is to be a king, he is to be governed by the Law taught to him by the Levites and not to think himself better than anyone else. In particular he is to avoid the dangers of wealth and foreign alliances, into which Solomon so spectacularly fell (17:16-17; 1 Kings 10:26-11:6).

On the other hand, Deuteronomy elevates the role of the prophet: the prophet and not the king, the priest or the judge, is to be God's spokesman, the successor of Moses himself (18:15-18). And because prophecy is so important, false prophecy is to be severely punished (18:20).

Day 188. Psalm 127; Deuteronomy 19 - 22

Murder; War; Marriage

Psalm 127

However hard one may work, it is God's blessing that brings prosperity. Children are the sign of his blessing and are in his gift.

Deuteronomy 19

A chapter about perversion of justice. By providing cities of refuge the community ensures that as far as possible those guilty of manslaughter are protected from the avenger, a member of the family of the person killed who had the duty to avenge the killing.

Deuteronomy 20

All life belongs to God who gave it, so warfare, in which people are to be killed, is holy and must be conducted according to God's rules. As long as these are kept, victory is assured. However many the enemy, the Lord will fight for his people (20:1-4). Israel is to be merciful toward their opponents wherever possible (20:10-11); to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants (20:13); to treat captured women with humanity (21:10-14); to have regard for the environment, which always suffers in war time (20:19-20); but to be uncompromising towards the Lord's enemies (20:16-18).

In the economic laws, because God guarantees prosperity, exploitation and overwork are forbidden. In the same way, because God guarantees victory, warfare is not to be a total commitment; there is room to acknowledge the importance of other callings, including work and marriage (20:5-7), and even to provide leeway to the fainthearted (20:8).

Deuteronomy 21:1 - 22:12

Behind these regulations is a sense of what is right which is emphatically not based on the rights of individuals, but on community responsibility before God.

Murder cannot be treated lightly (21:1-9). Before God it carries objective guilt, which must be atoned for. If the guilt of murder is not treated as a serious responsibility the morale of the community may be undermined.

The family is the basic building block of society. A son who has not learned proper respect for his parents, if let loose on society, spreads the cancer of disrespect for authority (21:18-21). According to this regulation, the prodigal son of Jesus' parable deserved death.

By his crucifixion, Jesus died under God's curse (21:22-23; Galatians 3:13).

Deuteronomy 22:13-end

Israel was a patriarchal society in which women depended on men for their protection. These laws are to ensure that women, who cannot defend themselves, are treated justly.

Day 189. Psalm 128; Deuteronomy 23 - 26

Enjoying God's Blessing

Psalm 128

To fear the Lord and obey him is the way to blessing for both individual and community. The prayer includes the "shalom" or prosperity of Jerusalem; to live in harmonious community enables each family to enjoy God's blessing.

Deuteronomy 23 - 26

These chapters contain a series of regulations to ensure that Israelite society does not fall prey to the domination of money, by placing a requirement of generosity towards one another as fellow human beings above the money rights of owner or creditor.

Thus, for example, fellow Israelites are not to demand interest of one another (23:19-20) since the payment of interest changes the loan from a gesture of brotherly support into a commercial transaction; creditors are not to use their power over those in their debt to oppress them and deny them basic human dignity (24:6,10-13); employers are to have regard to the rights of their employees (24:14-15); owners are not to exclude others from the enjoyment of their property (23:24-25) nor to attempt to maximise their profits; rather, they are to accept a lower yield for themselves in order to leave something for the poor (24:19-22). Even the animals used for farm labour are to be allowed to enjoy some of the harvest (25:4).

These rules help to guard the "shalom", the harmony of the community and to ensure that the prosperity of some is not gained at the expense of others. Where money values take precedence over human values, where people are treated as "human resources" and relationships defined by economic status, "shalom" is lost. Towards those outside the Israelite community, however, things are very different. The abhorrence of Canaanite worship in Deuteronomy is linked with an extreme nationalism. There is no sense in which "shalom" is to apply in relationships with other nations (23:3-8,20; 25:17-19).

Two essential features of "shalom" are an attitude of dependence upon God throughout the community and concern for the poor and the powerless.

Chapter 26 provides prayers to be used at the presentation of the first-fruits and tithes to remind each Israelite of their dependence on God's provision and their duty to the poor. Finally, "shalom" can only flower when the values undergirding it are written in the hearts of everyone in the community. So Israel must keep God's laws with all their heart and soul (26:16; 6:4-9).

The laws conclude with a summary of the terms of the covenant: Israel is to obey all God's laws; they are to be his treasured possession, and he will bless them and give them honour and fame.

**Day 190. Psalm 7; 2 Kings 23:31 - 24:7;
Jeremiah 7:1 - 8:3; Jeremiah 26**

The Temple Sermon

Psalm 7

A prayer to God the righteous judge to defend his servant.

2 Kings 23:31 - 24:7

Pharaoh Neco of Egypt had just defeated Josiah (23:29-30) and extended his sphere of influence over Judah once again. He deposed Jehoahaz and set up Jehoiakim as a puppet king. Unfortunately for Jehoiakim, the dominance of Egypt did not last long. Nebuchadrezzar's power continued to grow and soon the king who owed his throne to the Egyptians found himself having to reckon with a much more powerful enemy.

Jeremiah 7:1 - 8:3

Most prophetic oracles give little indication of when or where they were spoken, but in the case of Jeremiah's Temple sermon both timing and place are significant. Temple worship was obviously continuing to flourish, but so was the worship of a variety of false gods, the "Queen of Heaven", probably a title for Astarte, the consort of Baal (7:18); Molech, who demanded the slaughter of children (7:31); and the sun, moon and stars (8:2). Despite this, Jerusalem and its leaders placed false confidence in the presence of the Temple. According to Deuteronomy, this was the place where the Lord chose to put his Name; he would surely protect it and the people who worshipped there.

But Jeremiah exposes the falsity of such ideas. Before Jerusalem, Shiloh had been the site of the tabernacle and the ark but this did not save it from destruction at the hands of the Philistines (1 Samuel 4). If they claimed to live by Deuteronomy, they should obey its decrees, the Ten Commandments (7:9) and the injunction to care for the alien, the fatherless and the widow (7:6). The fate of Israel (7:15) should be a dire warning to Judah not to follow in her footsteps. Although Jeremiah's warnings were framed conditionally, in fact there was no hope of repentance; sentence on Jerusalem had already been passed (7:3,16; 7:30-8:3; see 6:27-30).

Jeremiah 26

Another account of the Temple sermon places it in the context of the political divisions in Judah. On the one hand are the priests and prophets, the Temple establishment, supporters of any policy which promoted the importance of the Temple. On the other are a group of powerfully placed officials, most of whom would have served Josiah, many opposed to Jehoiakim's pro-Egyptian policy. This group included some of the same men, such as Ahikam son of Shaphan, who had been present at the first reading of Deuteronomy and had supported the reforms (26:24; see 2 Kings 22:8-14). However, not every opponent of the king had the protection Jeremiah enjoyed (26:20-23).

Day 191. Psalm 11; Jeremiah 8:4 - 10:end

The Failure of the Covenant

Psalm 11

Trust in the Lord in a time of social and political upheaval.

Jeremiah 8:4 - 9:end

In the early days of Josiah's reform, Jeremiah had preached enthusiastically in favour of Deuteronomy, urging the people of Judah to take it to heart. But he quickly realised that any changes which the king had brought about went no more than skin deep. The official interpreters of the Law themselves had failed to obey it with their heart, soul and strength. In fact, having no understanding of the Lord's heart, they twisted the Law rather than teaching it truly.

The opening oracle announces the theme of the whole section (8:4-7). Judah has been offered the chance to "return", but instead they continue to turn away and, as a result, they do not have a true knowledge of the Lord. The scribes, whose duty it was to interpret the Law, have twisted it (8:8-9). Unless it is based on the word of the Lord, "wisdom" is foolishness, likely only to lead people astray. Jeremiah parodies the proverbs of the wise which convey nothing (8:20) and asks where is true wisdom (9:12). True wisdom is based on the knowledge and fear of the Lord (9:23-24; see 1 Corinthians 1:20-31).

Prophet and priest are deceitful (8:10). The prophets had proclaimed "shalom" or "peace" and the people had been deceived (8:11,15). So the deceit of the leaders spreads to all (9:3-9). The people looked for healing also, but no healing came (8:15,22). And Jeremiah, deeply affected by the plight of his people facing the inevitability of punishment, also finds no healing for his grief (8:21-9:1; 9:10). The army of destruction is on its way from Dan, in the extreme north (8:14-16). As death approaches, Jeremiah calls for the women to raise a lamentation (9:17-21).

Jeremiah 10

This chapter is an addition to the collection of oracles in chapters 8 and 9, taking up its themes. Wisdom was international and much of Israel's

wisdom tradition was shared with other nations. But there is no wisdom in the worship of idols, only in the true God, the Creator of all things. The last few verses come from the time of the fall of Jerusalem itself: a lamentation (10:17-22) and a prayer for justice (10:23-25).

Day 192. Psalm 80; Jeremiah 12:7 - 15:9

Judgement is Inevitable

Psalm 80

Israel is pictured as the Lord's vineyard, echoing the prophecy in Isaiah 5:1-7 and Jeremiah 12:10. The refrain (80:3,7,19) calls for a renewing of the high priestly blessing (Numbers 6:25). The "man at God's right hand" (80:17) is the king; the people pray that God will be with him and restore the nation to peace and prosperity.

Jeremiah 12:7 - 13:end

A series of oracles and stories underline God's determination not to spare his people. Their sin is too great. Like the leather loincloth of 13:1-11 (in other versions a "belt"), Judah is useless. Although meant for close relationship with God, she will be rejected.

The section 13:15-end consists of four short messages, placed together so as to make a sequence. The first offers the possibility that the Lord may relent if the people pay attention, but it soon becomes apparent that there is no hope of repentance, especially from the king and queen.

Jeremiah 14:1 - 15:9

One of the duties of the prophet was to intercede for the people. As well as being the Lord's spokesman to Judah, he was also to be Judah's spokesman before the Lord. But a special feature of Jeremiah's calling was that he was forbidden to undertake the prophetic ministry of intercession (7:16; 11:14). The Lord had already determined not to show mercy; prayer was useless.

This prohibition caused Jeremiah a great deal of anguish. Knowing the fate hanging over Jerusalem, of which its inhabitants were completely unaware, caused him to weep with grief and frustration (8:21-9:2; 13:17; 14:17). He wanted above all things to intercede to avert the calamity. Thus, 14:1-9 is a lament in time of drought followed by a conventional prophetic prayer for the Lord to intervene and save. But instead of compassion, the answer from the Lord (14:10) is implacable.

Again the Lord forbids Jeremiah to pray for the people, so he asks, "What about the other prophets?" They were conveying messages of hope and

security and presumably still offering the ministry of intercession. But the Lord simply tells him not to worry about them; their judgement too will come in its time (14:11-16).

Again, Jeremiah attempts to pray for the people. In 14:17-22 he laments the coming destruction, this time offering words of repentance on behalf of the nation. Again, the Lord warns him of the futility of his prayers (15:1-9). In the past, the prayers of Moses and Samuel helped to deliver Israel from the consequences of her own sin (Exodus 32:11-14; 1 Samuel 12:19-23), but this time even Moses and Samuel could make no difference.

Day 193. Psalm 17; Jeremiah 17:19 - 20:6

The Potter's House

Psalm 17

A prayer for protection from someone beset by enemies.

Jeremiah 17:19-end

The gates of the city were the principal meeting place and place of trade. On the Sabbath, economic activity should have given way to a procession of people coming and going from the Temple. The area of the gate was the place to find an audience for the message Jeremiah had to give, in which he contrasts the various kinds of traffic. If the procession of traders on the Sabbath continues, the result will be the victory of foreign armies who will burn the gates with fire. In contrast, the procession of worship will lead to further processions of Judah's kings and officials, coming and going in peace.

Jeremiah 18

Jeremiah had been given a message of judgement from a God he knew to be merciful. All around his contemporaries contradicted it (4:10; 6:13-14; 8:10-11; 14:13; 18:18; 20:1-2). In order to be sure of the truth of what he was proclaiming, Jeremiah needed a clearer understanding of God's character. This is what the experience in the potter's house supplies. It shows God's sovereignty in both mercy and judgment. By offering Judah the chance to repent and be saved, God affirms his sovereignty in mercy. When the exile came, Jeremiah saw the divine Potter breaking the spoiled pot in order to begin again. This was the basis for the messages of hope which he later gave to the exiles.

Priests, prophets and wise men (18:18) were the three classes whom Jeremiah had criticised in his earlier messages (8:8-12). Not surprisingly, they were combined in opposition to him. Here, he reacts badly, in anger and bitterness.

Jeremiah 19:1-13

Like the Temple sermon (7:1-2) and the Sabbath sermon (17:19-20) the place of this message was very significant. Topheth was the place where children

were sacrificed to the foreign gods Baal and Molech (7:31; 19:4-6). By taking the elders and priests to a place they might have chosen to ignore, Jeremiah was dramatising his message. First the play on words in verse 7 drew attention to the jar in his hand, then the climax of his message came when he smashed the jar as a prophetic symbol of the destruction coming on Jerusalem.

Jeremiah 19:14 - 20:6

One of the jobs of Pashhur was to keep the prophets in order. Most prophets were based in the Temple and made their living by contributing to the worship there. But with their ecstatic behaviour and reputation for eccentricity it was important for the priests who presided in the Temple to make sure that they did not get out of hand. Some 150 years before, Amos had been turned away from Bethel by the priest Amaziah because his message was not acceptable (Amos 7:10-13). In punishing Jeremiah, Pashhur was within his rights and his conception of his duty.

**Day 194. Psalm 88;
Jeremiah 12:1-6; 15:10 - 17:18; 20:7-18**

Jeremiah's "Confessions"

Psalm 88

The writer cries out in despair. Although God himself seems to have turned against him (88:6-8,14), yet God is the only one who can save (88:1).

Jeremiah 12:1-6; 15:10 - 17:18; 20:7-18

As well as his prophetic oracles, Jeremiah has also left us fragments of his "spiritual journal", recording the struggles he had within himself and with the Lord as he faced up to what seemed an impossible task. When God called him, he was young and lacking in confidence (1:6). The message he was given to proclaim, that Jerusalem was to be destroyed by the Babylonians, filled him with grief and anguish (8:21-9:2; 13:17; 14:17-18). Led astray by the false prophets, few of those who heard him believed it, and until the victory of Nebuchadrezzar over Egypt in 604 B.C. even Jeremiah found it difficult at times to believe it could be true (4:10; 14:13), yet this message was the cause of vehement opposition from the powerful in Jerusalem and even from the people of his own village (11:18-20; 15:10; 18:18; 20:1-2).

To make his problems worse, the Lord had called him to set himself apart from ordinary society. He did not get married, which was very unusual for a man of his day (16:1-4), and he did not take part in any community celebrations (16:5-9) so he would have had virtually no one with whom to talk things over. Finally, despite his deep concern for the fate of Judah, he was forbidden to intercede for them and whenever he tried to do so the Lord reaffirmed his determination to execute judgement (11:14; 14:11-12; 15:1-4).

So instead of opening his heart to his friends and family, Jeremiah opened his heart to God. He told him about his anguish and confusion; he expressed his anger and argued with God. And each time, God reaffirmed his purpose and his expectation that Jeremiah continue faithful, calling him to repent of any lack of faith. (12:5-6; 15:19-21). God knew all about

Jeremiah's problems, and continued to use him despite his weaknesses and wavering.

In 12:1-6, Jeremiah questions God about the apparent injustice of a world in which the wicked prosper. The same question is expressed in Psalm 73 and Job 21. But Jeremiah's real question is, "Why will God not do something about his persecutors?" The answer is that rather than take the problem away, God will give him the strength to cope with it so long as he is faithful to his calling (12:5-6).

15:10-end follows directly the Lord's prohibition of Jeremiah's prayers and expresses the anguish of his isolation (15:15-17). But that isolation is part of God's purpose. Jeremiah is to stand with God against his own people, to put his trust in God rather than in human beings (15:19-20).

17:7-13 is a wisdom psalm reminiscent of Psalm 1, expressing the same distinction between those who trust in God and those who do not. This is followed by a prayer of penitence and trust in 17:14-18.

20:7-end follows the incident with Pashhur, when Jeremiah was put to ridicule in the stocks. The power of God's word is the cause both of Jeremiah's anguish and his vindication. Praise to God and declarations of trust in him alternate with cries of despair, showing how Jeremiah had been stretched to the limit, both spiritually and emotionally.

Day 195. Psalm 43; Jeremiah 25; 35 - 36; 45

Baruch's Scroll

Psalm 43

Oppressed by his enemies, the writer looks for a renewed sense of God's presence in worship.

Jeremiah 25

The fourth year of Jehoiakim, 605 B.C. (25:1; 36:1), was the year Nebuchadnezzar defeated Egypt at Carchemish. Now it was obvious that the main threat to Judah would come from Babylon rather than Egypt, whose king had put Jehoiakim on the throne. Chapter 25 is a summary in the light of the new situation. Judah has failed to heed the prophets' message and as a result they will go into exile. All nations will suffer the Lord's wrath at the hands of Babylon but in the end Babylon itself will be punished. The predictions of judgment on the nations are reflected in the oracles collected in chapters 46 - 51, which end with a long denunciation of Babylon. Peter writes (1 Peter 4:17-18) that judgement begins with God's people. The suffering of Israel because of their disobedience is intended as a sign to all nations of God's righteous requirements.

This chapter contains the first prediction of a seventy year exile (25:12; 29:10; Daniel 9:1-2). Seventy is meant as a round figure indicating a considerable period of time, but also gives hope that the exile will end. Eventually God will forgive, and Judah be restored. When it became obvious that Jerusalem would fall to the Babylonians, Jeremiah himself began to predict the eventual return of the exiles and restoration of the nation (Jeremiah 29 - 33).

Jeremiah 35

The Rechabites were a sect who opposed the settled agricultural lifestyle of Israel in Canaan and the worship of the gods of Canaan which went with it. Jonadab, son of Rechab, was an ally of Jehu at the time of his rebellion and destruction of Baal worship (2 Kings 10:15-17). Jeremiah means to contrast the obedience of the Rechabites to their founder, even under the most difficult conditions, to the disobedience of Judah to the Lord.

Jeremiah 36

The hardheartedness of Jehoiakim and his refusal to listen to Jeremiah is in direct contrast to the attitude of his father Josiah on first hearing the scroll of the Law (2 Kings 22:11-13). Some of the officials who looked on in horror as Jehoiakim burnt the scroll of the Lord's words were the sons of those who had stood by Josiah some 15 or so years before. To burn the scroll not only showed Jehoiakim's contempt for the Word of Lord but showed that he considered it powerless. If the written words could be burnt, the spoken word of which the scroll was a record could do little. By instructing Jeremiah to rewrite the scroll and add to it, God affirmed his purpose and the power of his Word (see 1:9-10; 20:7-12; 23:29).

Jeremiah 45

The Lord's message to Baruch is a message to all those who take God's side in times of trouble. We cannot expect to escape from the effects of the dislocation of society. We are not to seek great things for ourselves, but we may trust God to protect us from the worst.

Day 196. Psalm 94; Jeremiah 22 - 23

Kings and Prophets

Psalm 94

The writer longs to see justice prevail.

Jeremiah 22:1 - 23:8

According to Deuteronomy 17:14-end the task of Israel's kings was to obey the Law and defend the poor and the powerless. If they failed to do this, there was really little point in having them. If they were unfaithful to the Lord's covenant they would bring disaster on the people. This is the background against which Jeremiah assesses the kings of Judah who reigned during his lifetime (22:1-9).

Jehoahaz, also known as Shallum (22:10-12), had succeeded his father Josiah when Josiah was killed in battle against the Egyptians, only to be taken into exile into Egypt. The real tragedy, says Jeremiah, is not that of Josiah, who died fighting the Lord's enemies, but of Jehoahaz, who, while living, will never again return to his native land.

His younger brother Jehoiakim, who replaced him, set about an ambitious programme, financed with heavy taxes and forced labour, to strengthen his position and that of the nobles who supported him (22:13-14). Jeremiah asks whether kingship is a question of status or of service. Does living in a grandly decorated palace make someone great or is it rather obeying the Law and administering justice? Both Jeremiah and Jesus answer that it is serving others, and particularly the poor and needy (22:15-16; Luke 22:24-27; Matthew 25:31-end). This is what Josiah did and what Jehoiakim conspicuously failed to do. To know the Lord (22:16) is always practical, never simply theoretical; it means obeying his commands from the heart (2 Kings 23:25).

22:20-30 contain a series of messages about Jehoiakim's son Jehoiachin (also known as Coniah). Soon after his father's death, he too was taken into exile, this time in Babylon, to be replaced by his brother Zedekiah. In 22:20-23 Jeremiah mocks the complacency of the Judean nobles who thought this could never happen. In 22:30 he prophesies that none of Jehoiachin's line will ever sit on the throne again.

So what was to become of the promise to David and Solomon that one of their descendants would always rule over God's people? Jeremiah sees the kings of his age rejected because they failed both God and his people (23:1-2), but he looks forward to a time of restoration when a king of God's choosing will reign once again. After the return from exile, in about 520 B.C. there was a brief hope that Jehoiachin's grandson Zerubbabel would be allowed by the Persians to become king (Haggai 2:20-23; Zechariah 4:6-10). But this hope went unfulfilled; Jesus is the righteous Branch who inherits the promise to David of a never-ending kingdom (Matthew 25:31,34).

Jeremiah 23:9-end

The false prophets with their messages of consolation effectively undermined Jeremiah's ministry by encouraging the king, nobles, priests and people to continue in their complacency (23:9-11). Often, he was tempted to give up and only the overwhelming sense of his call drove him to continue (20:7-10). For the people, there was indeed a problem of knowing who to believe. According to Deuteronomy, the test of a true prophet was whether his words came true or not (Deuteronomy 18:21-22). But in the case of Jeremiah's prediction of destruction at the hands of Babylon, there was no way of putting this to the test before the event. Jeremiah himself appealed to a much deeper criterion: whether the prophet had ever really "stood in God's council", to hear him make known his plans (23:18,22). Like Micaiah and Isaiah (1 Kings 22; Isaiah 6), this was Jeremiah's experience. The prophets of the Temple had only subjective experience and each other's moral support to rely on (23:25-27,30-32). They used a professional jargon to impress others with their expertise (23:33-end). But Jeremiah knew from bitter experience that he had the powerful Word of God, and that this Word would prevail (1:9-10; 20:9; 23:29).

**Day 197. Psalm 123; 2 Kings 24:8-17;
Jeremiah 24, 27 – 29**

Exile is God's Purpose

Psalm 123

Israel looks to the Lord for mercy.

2 Kings 24:8-17

The disaster which Jeremiah had foreseen eventually took place. In 597 B.C. Jerusalem was besieged and captured by the Babylonians, although King Jehoiakim, whose selfish policies had brought the disaster about, did not live to see it and his son, Jehoiachin (elsewhere called Coniah or Jeconiah), was the one taken into exile (24:15).

Jeremiah 24

Jeremiah states unequivocally that the exile has taken place according to God's purpose and that it is the deportees and not the survivors in Jerusalem who are at the centre of God's purpose. Here for the first time the promise of building and planting (1:10) is applied, but not until the tearing down and uprooting is complete. Restoration would come and the Lord reaffirm his covenant with Israel when the exiles rediscovered the thing Jeremiah had looked for in vain among the inhabitants of Jerusalem: a knowledge of the Lord from their hearts (24:7).

Jeremiah 27 - 28

Although Nebuchadrezzar had conquered Judah and the surrounding nations, he then withdrew and hopes of escaping the power of Babylon began to surface. The purpose of the envoys from Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre and Sidon (27:3) was to plan rebellion. The king was encouraged by the court prophets, who supported the revolt and foretold a quick end to Babylonian control (27:14-17; 28:1-4). Despite the partial fulfilment of Jeremiah's words, the rulers, prophets and people of Jerusalem still did not believe him (28:8-11).

According to Deuteronomy 18:20, false prophets who mislead God's people deserve death. The death of Hananiah (28:15-17) vindicated Jeremiah by proving that he had been disobedient.

Jeremiah 29

The false prophets had been promising "shalom" - peace and prosperity - to Jerusalem (4:10; 6:14; 8:14-15) but Jeremiah continued to resist this claim. Instead it was the exiles who were to have "shalom" (29:11), and they would find it in the "shalom" - the welfare - of Babylon (29:7). They were to be good citizens, take their place in the society of their new homeland and expect God to bless them there, just as in Deuteronomy he had promised to bless them in Israel. Eventually they would come to seek him with all their heart (29:7; Deuteronomy 6:5) and the "return" of their hearts, for which Jeremiah had been calling for so long, would be followed by a return from exile.

Day 198. Psalm 29; Ezekiel 1 - 3

The Call of Ezekiel

Psalm 29

The power of the Lord demonstrated in a thunderstorm. Thunder and lightning announce the presence and glory of the Lord.

Ezekiel 1

Whereas Jeremiah had stayed in Jerusalem and communicated with the exiles by letter, in 592 B.C. the Lord raised up another prophet from among the exiles themselves. The river Chebar, where Ezekiel was based, was a navigable channel of the Euphrates, south of the city of Babylon, and the task of the exiles was probably to irrigate and till an otherwise barren stretch of land. However, the presence of elders (14:1) suggests that they maintained a measure of self-government under Babylonian rule.

Everything about Ezekiel's call and ministry expresses his training as a priest. At the age of 30, had he not been carried off with the first group of exiles, he would have begun his ministry in the Temple. Instead, he was called to be a prophet. As a trainee priest, he would have been taught about, though never seen, the ark of God, where the Lord sat enthroned above the cherubim in the darkness of the Holy of Holies. His call took the form of a vision of God's throne, not confined to Jerusalem but moving, going wherever the Spirit took it and appearing to him in exile.

As a priest, he would have been well versed in the traditions of the Law and also have read the words of the prophets, including the call visions of Isaiah and Jeremiah, both of which were already written down (see notes on Isaiah 6 and Jeremiah 36). The approach of the Lord took the form of his appearance at Sinai, a storm cloud in which lightning flashes and thunder roars (Exodus 19:16). His throne above the expanse is reminiscent of the vision of Moses and the elders (Exodus 24:9-10). It was lifted up as in the vision of Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1). But whereas Isaiah began the account of his vision by saying, "I saw the Lord," Ezekiel first describes the throne and only at the climax of his vision comes to "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord". Such was the reticence of the priest about actually describing God.

Ezekiel 2 - 3

The emphasis in a priest's training would have been on the sovereignty of God and the importance of following the exact detail of the Law he had laid down. This too is reflected in Ezekiel's sense of the overpowering will of God. The Spirit which guided the movement of the throne now guides and controls his movements and his words (1:20; 2:2; 3:14-15,26-27). The Word given him, tasting like honey, is like the Law he had been trained to teach and obey (Psalm 19:10). He is to be responsible for passing it on and if he does not he will be held accountable (3:18,20). At no point is he asked if he wishes to undertake the task; he is simply told that he will be doing it and that he will encounter opposition and indifference. Like Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:18) he is not to be afraid; God himself will harden him for the task. And like Jeremiah, the burden of his mission, in which his own spirit was overpowered by God's Spirit, overwhelmed him (3:14-15; Jeremiah 20:7-12).

Some of Ezekiel's subsequent behaviour was extreme to the point of madness. Although at times he was able to speak, he seems to have experienced periods of dumbness during which he was forced to act out the messages he received. Some at least of his visions came during trance-like states. Although Israel was used to a degree of strangeness in the prophets, it seems from 3:25 that some of Ezekiel's behaviour was simply too much and that he was sometimes put under restraint.

Day 199. Psalm 44; Ezekiel 4 - 7

The Dumb Prophet

Psalm 44

In distress, Israel prays to God for restoration. The stories of his acts in the past are passed down by word of mouth (44:1) so that every Israelite knows them. In this psalm, of uncertain date, there is no note of repentance.

Ezekiel 4 - 5

Immediately after his call, Ezekiel experienced his first period of dumbness. Instead of being called to proclaim the Lord's message, he was instructed to act it out. The work of the exiles by the river Chebar would have included building and clay bricks would have been plentiful. So Ezekiel took a brick and carved into it a model of the city of Jerusalem and then added to the model a portrayal of siege works around it. With himself in the role of the Lord, he used the iron cooking pan to portray the barrier between God and his people created by their sin, the siege (and eventual destruction) of the city being the punishment for that sin. It is difficult to give the dates any precise meaning, but the overall explanation is clear: the siege of Jerusalem which is past and the one to come are God's punishment on Israel and Judah for their rebellion. During the whole time of the portrayal, Ezekiel ate siege rations, symbolically entering into the experience of the people left in Jerusalem.

Next came the portrayal of the outcome. Using his own hair, Ezekiel showed some of the people dying in the city from plague and famine, others killed in battle around the city and the rest scattered. Of the exiles, some were to be scattered, some killed and a very few saved alive, kept in the folds of Ezekiel's cloak as a sign of God's care for them. They were the remnant from whom Israel was to be restored.

The rest of chapter 5 provides a comment on Ezekiel's action. As a priest, he would have had a very strong sense not just of the gravity of sin, but of guilt as an objective burden which required atonement through sacrifice. Again and again throughout the book, he speaks of Israel's sin as a debt which must be paid and God's wrath as a feeling of anger which must be assuaged (5:13). 5:16 is an echo of Psalm 7:12-13, a psalm which celebrates

God as a Judge who punishes the wicked. This language, springing from Ezekiel's priestly background, was a graphic way of bringing home to the exiles the gravity of their sin against God and reminds us powerfully of the burden of sin which Jesus carried in his death on the cross.

Ezekiel 6 - 7

These messages, conveyed in words, fill out the picture given by the actions of the previous two chapters. Jerusalem is irreversibly doomed. Only a few will be spared, and they will recognise the destruction of the city as just punishment and turn to the Lord in repentance.

Day 200. Psalm 50; Ezekiel 8 - 11

The Temple Defiled

Psalm 50

A prophetic rebuke for those who, while bringing animals to sacrifice, fail to honour God in their hearts.

Ezekiel 8 - 11

A few years earlier, Jeremiah had written to the exiles to encourage them to believe that God would be with them in exile (Jeremiah 29:1-14). It was those remaining in Palestine whom God rejected (Jeremiah 24). In this vision, Ezekiel reinforces the same message. The people of Jerusalem may consider the exiles to be far away from the Lord (11:15), but in fact it is those in Jerusalem who are far away, while the Lord himself will be a sanctuary for the exiles and will eventually restore them (11:16-21).

In his vision, the Lord himself is Ezekiel's guide and interpreter; the man like fire (8:2), the glory of the God of Israel (8:4; 9:3) and the Lord (10:2) are all the same (see 1:26-28). First he shows Ezekiel the reasons for the rejection of Jerusalem: the wholesale adoption of idolatrous worship. The "idol that provokes to jealousy" (8:5) was the shrine of Asherah, also known as the Queen of Heaven (Jeremiah 7:18), originally set up by Manasseh (2 Kings 21:7) and presumably restored after Josiah's reform. The men with censers (8:9-11) were following an Egyptian cult; the Egyptians represented their gods in the shapes of animals and carved their images on walls. Tammuz (8:14) was the Babylonian Baal, the god who died and rose again, the giver of fertility. The 25 men worshipping the sun (8:16) were following the cult of the chief of the Babylonian gods, Marduk. These men were in one of the holiest places of the Temple directly in front of the central shrine itself, and ignoring it. For Ezekiel, they were symbolic of the attitude of all Jerusalem to the Lord.

Having shown Ezekiel the reason, the Lord now shows him the result. The idol-worshippers are to die for their sins (9:1-6); the 25 elders of 11:1 are probably the same as those of 8:16 and 9:6, so in his vision Ezekiel sees the slaughter begin and cries to God for mercy. But not only must the

unfaithful die, but the Temple itself is to be defiled (9:7) and there is to be no mercy (9:8-10).

With the judgement begun and the Temple defiled, the most significant part of the vision begins. In chapter 10 the Lord's mobile throne appears, which is to take him away from the Temple. While he is there, the glory of the Lord fills the Temple (10:4) but he will not remain much longer. The throne moves to the gateway (10:18-19), the Lord explains why he is leaving (11:7-12) and then in the climax of the vision, Ezekiel sees the Lord depart from his Temple (11:22-24). No longer will he dwell there. Instead he will be a sanctuary for the exiles for a little while, until he brings them back to a restored Jerusalem (11:16-17).

Day 201. Psalm 31; Ezekiel 12 - 15

The Problem of Unbelief

Psalm 31

The writer clings to trust in God despite the contempt of those around him, who put their confidence in idols.

Ezekiel 12 - 15

These chapters begin and end with a prophecy reaffirming God's intention to destroy Jerusalem and its people, making the survivors share the fate of those already exiled. In between, a series of messages focus on what the Lord calls rebellion, the refusal of Ezekiel's hearers to believe his words.

12:1-20 describe two conventional prophetic actions, each with an oracle attached to explain it. First Ezekiel acts out the departure of Zedekiah and his officials for exile. In fact, Zedekiah tried to escape the Babylonians and was followed and captured (2 Kings 25:4-7). Then he acts out the fear of the people of Jerusalem under siege (12:17-20). In chapter 15, Ezekiel draws on the example of the vine, which was a conventional image for the people of Israel (Psalm 80:8-18), to illustrate the uselessness of the city, once burnt and only fit for burning again.

Like the people of Jerusalem, the exiles preferred to believe that God's judgement had passed with the first siege and that they would soon be restored. They doubted his words (12:21-25) or applied them to the distant future (12:27-28). They believed instead the false prophets who offered messages of peace (13:1-16) or the purveyors of occult charms (13:17-end). Ezekiel would have read the prophecies of Jeremiah in Baruch's scroll (Jeremiah 36:10) and in 13:10 he quotes from Jeremiah 6:14.

In chapter 14 he deals with two more subtle sources of false confidence, the existence of the prophets and the righteousness of past generations. Because the prophets of the Lord were available, the people were encouraged to believe that he was still with them. 14:1 illustrates the way individuals or the elders of a town or village might come to the local prophet for an oracle. While they could still obtain a message from the Lord there was no reason to abandon the worship of other gods. So Ezekiel

resorts to the extreme measure of refusing to be consulted by anyone who is not exclusively loyal to the Lord (14:4-5).

Finally he tackles the problem of responsibility. Israel knew from her history that God had in the past been merciful because of the intercession of the righteous (Genesis 18:16-end; 45:7; Exodus 32:9-14) so they were encouraged to believe that Jerusalem would be saved because of the righteousness of past generations. In reply, Ezekiel offers the examples of three well known wise men of foreign nations. Job was an Edomite, whose story appears in Job chapters 1,2 and 42, where he was unable, despite his exemplary righteousness, to save his children. Noah was also known to other nations; the part of his story which is relevant here is the fact that despite his righteousness a curse fell on his son (Genesis 9:18-27). "Daniel" is not the hero of the book of his name, but a figure of Syrian mythology, another wise and righteous ruler who was unable to protect his children from the vengeance of the gods. Neither will Jerusalem be saved because of the righteousness of any of its former rulers. Only a few will survive, and those in exile (14:22-23).

Day 202. Psalm 45; Ezekiel 16 - 17

The Unfaithful Bride

Psalm 45

A royal wedding psalm. The king is marrying a foreign princess and the singers urge her to leave behind the memory of her former home and find her new home in her husband.

Ezekiel 16

In the years before the fall of Samaria, Hosea had likened Israel to an unfaithful wife and the individual Israelites as children of the marriage (Hosea 1 - 3). Hosea's image was taken up by Jeremiah (Jeremiah 2:2; 3:1-5) and here, in chapter 16, Ezekiel applies it specifically to Jerusalem. His aim is to confront the recently transported people of Jerusalem with their sin (16:2), so the details of the story he tells are deliberately shocking. As Ezekiel realised the terrible sin of God's people and its even more terrible consequences, he was overwhelmed (3:15) and full of anger and bitterness (3:14), and the emotions of the story reflect his own state of mind and heart. This passage has to be read not as an intellectual exercise but as an appeal to the emotions of the hearers.

Jerusalem had indeed been a Canaanite city of mixed race (16:3) when absorbed by David into the Israelite empire. The picture of Jerusalem as a foundling child, unwanted and so exposed to die echoes the name given to Hosea's daughter, "Lo-Ruhamah" or "Not Pitied" (Hosea 1:6). Only the Lord has pity or compassion (16:5) but his word brings life (16:6-7) even to such a hopeless case. Ezekiel emphasises the total dependence of Jerusalem on God's love, the solemn covenant relationship he had made with her (16:8) and the wealth with which he showered her, recalling the glories of Solomon's reign (16:9-14).

Not only has Jerusalem turned to lovers by committing idolatry but she has slaughtered the children which were hers and the Lord's, offering them as sacrifices to other gods (16:20, see Jeremiah 7:31). 16:23-34 express the grief and anger of the deserted husband whose love has been so casually spurned, feelings with which Ezekiel himself was overwhelmed. The penalty for adultery is death (16:38), a punishment which also includes

blood vengeance for the death of the slaughtered children. It is poetic justice that the sentence will be administered by the lovers themselves.

16:44-58 add a further dimension to the allegory by introducing the sisters, Sodom and Samaria. Jerusalem's people had thought themselves superior to both, but in God's eyes, they are worse. But the passage ends with a promise for the future: the covenant of Jerusalem's youth will be renewed and her sin atoned (16:59-63).

Ezekiel 17

Ezekiel comments on the political intrigues of Zedekiah with Egypt, through which he hoped to escape from Babylonian domination. The shoot of 17:4 is Jehoiachin, carried away to Babylon, the city of merchants (16:29). The seed of 17:5 is Zedekiah, not a part of the original tree and utterly dependent on the great eagle, Babylon. If this shoot spreads out its roots in a new direction it cannot thrive (17:7-8). An attempt at an alliance with Egypt can only end in disaster (17:16).

Again the parable ends with a promise of restoration. The Lord himself will plant a shoot, this time on a high and lofty mountain, where all the world can see (see 40:2). The restored Jerusalem will be a wonder of the world and a witness to the Lord's saving love.

Day 203. Psalm 1; Ezekiel 18 - 20

Judgement and Responsibility

Psalm 1

The law brings life to those who live by it.

Ezekiel 18

In chapter 14, Ezekiel replied to some who thought that because previous kings of Jerusalem had been righteous, the city would be spared. Here he replies to others who think that their exile has come about because of the sins of past generations. It is "the fathers" who are responsible and "the children" who reap the consequences (18:2). Ezekiel insists that it is the sins of the present generation, just as much as past generations which are responsible for its fate.

18:5-9 give an interesting picture of the "righteous man." His righteousness covers faithfulness to the Lord, sexual morality, business morality and personal character; all are necessary.

We should be careful not to place a "Christian" interpretation on the words, "He shall live." This priestly pronouncement did not promise "eternal life" beyond the grave, but the gift of "shalom": well-being and prosperity in the present life.

We should also be careful not to interpret this passage from the standpoint of contemporary individualism. The main point of the chapter is to affirm the corporate responsibility of the present generation, though the message does point to a growing awareness of individual responsibility before God and individual reward and punishment.

Ezekiel 19

The point of the lament is that Judah will have no more kings. Jehoahaz was taken away to Egypt and Jehoiachin to Babylon and now Israel the vineyard has no branches strong enough to provide a ruler's sceptre.

Ezekiel 20

The Lord had given his Law to Israel as a gracious gift, so that they could live by them and enjoy peace, prosperity and a full life. Although they were

never wholehearted in their obedience, he was patient with them over and over again. One of the consequences of serving idols was to have to live by bad laws, including the sacrifice of their first-born children, something from which the Lord had delivered them (20:25-26). Yet they had failed to make the connection and return to the Lord.

Repeatedly, Ezekiel the priest draws attention to the way Judah's conduct defiled God's holy name and emphasises that it is primarily for the sake of his good name that the Lord is acting (20:9,14,22,44). The coming exile will be a time of judgement through which Israel will be purged of their sins and learn to be loyal to the Lord. And Ezekiel holds out the prospect of an eventual return to the land and to true worship (20:40-44).

Day 204. Psalm 97; Ezekiel 21 - 23

The Sharp Sword

Psalm 97

The coming of the Lord in judgement.

Ezekiel 21

The sword of judgement, poised over Jerusalem, begins to descend. To the exiles, the news of the destruction of the city would be a devastating blow, so Ezekiel prepares them for it, not only with the prophecy but by acting out the terrible effect the news will have with his groaning (21:6-7).

The acted scene of Nebuchadrezzar's advance (21:18-23) is meant to leave the watchers in no doubt of the fate of the city. There is a moment of acute tension as the king arrives at the fork in the road where he consults the omens. The audience would have held their breath wondering whether the blow was to fall on Ammon or on Jerusalem. Then comes the devastating conclusion: the lot falls on Jerusalem; there is no escape.

Ezekiel 22

Another collection of oracles emphasising the impossibility of reclaiming Jerusalem from her sins. In an image drawn from Jeremiah 6:27-30, Ezekiel says that all its inhabitants are dross, the waste left over after silver is smelted out (22:17-22). Their sins cover the full range: religious (22:4,26), sexual (22:10-11) economic (22:12,29) and political (22:6-7,27) and involve all classes of those with power: the princes, priests, officials, prophets and "people of the land", probably the wealthier country landowners (22:25-29). No one is left who actively seeks the Lord to intercede for the city (22:30).

Ezekiel 23

A second parable expressed in sexual terms, with language even more shocking and explicit than chapter 16. There are a number of differences from chapter 16, the most important being that there is no mention of God's love in bringing up the two sisters, providing for them or marrying them. They are just two adulterous women who have brought on themselves the punishment for adultery: death. The names of the sisters are linked to the main point of the parable: the way both Israel and Judah were unfaithful to

the Lord by worshipping the idols of the surrounding nations. "Oholah" probably means "she has her tent" and Oholibamah", "my tent is in her." "Tent" was a favourite priestly term for the Lord's sanctuary. The names also serve to link Judah closely with Israel. No longer can the Judeans look down on their sister Israel, who forsook the Temple in Jerusalem and have been punished for it by the Assyrians. The same fate is now coming upon them at the hands of the Babylonians, and for the same reasons.

Day 205. Psalm 5; Ezekiel 24; Jeremiah 21, 34, 37

The Siege Begins

Psalm 5

The prayer of a man beset by enemies.

Ezekiel 24

It was now some four and half years since Ezekiel had received his call (1:2, 24:1) and the siege of Jerusalem which he had been predicting began. With his periods of dumbness, his overwhelming feelings of anger and bitterness and his strange behaviour, the message he had been given had transformed his life. Now that identification was to go even further, for even his wife's death was to become a part of the message. Her death was to be a sign to the exiles of the imminent destruction of their beloved city. As Ezekiel was forbidden to go through any of the customary mourning rituals, the exiles would have to hear the news and carry on with their lives. Ezekiel was following in the footsteps of his fellow-prophets, such as Hosea and Jeremiah, whose lives became wholly wrapped up with the message they were called to give (Hosea 1:2-3; 3:1-5; Jeremiah 16:1-9).

Jeremiah 21

Back in Jerusalem, Jeremiah is giving the same message from the Lord as Ezekiel: there is no hope and the city is bound to fall.

Jeremiah 34:1-7

The Lord had promised that he would bring down Jerusalem before all nations (Ezekiel 5:8,14), and Nebuchadrezzar had brought soldiers from all the nations in his empire to the siege (34:1). Although Jeremiah promised Zedekiah a peaceful death, if he did not resist, Zedekiah did not heed the prophecy.

Jeremiah 34:8-end

The law about the freedom of slaves comes from Deuteronomy 15:12-18. Apparently, Zedekiah's officials had decided to put this law into practice, perhaps to curry favour with the Lord when the siege began. 34:18-19 describe the covenant ceremony, when a calf was cut in two and the parties

walked between the pieces. In the description of God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15:9-17 the same ritual is used. However, the Babylonians then raised the siege to fight against Egypt (34:21; 37:5) and, thinking they were saved, the nobles promptly broke the covenant and reclaimed their slaves. This kind of lip-service to God's Law was exactly what Jeremiah had been denouncing for the previous 30 years.

Jeremiah 37

Jeremiah had urged the inhabitants of the city to give themselves up to the Babylonians, so it is not surprising that Irijah thought he was about to do so. From this point, Jeremiah was kept in prison, until the siege was over.

Day 206. Psalm 34; Jeremiah 38, 32 - 33

The Promise of Return

Psalm 34

The Lord is close to those who love him, even in trouble.

Jeremiah 38

Weak and vacillating, swayed first by one and then by another, Zedekiah lost the salvation offered to him. Knowing the will of God, Jeremiah concluded that surrender was the only chance of saving the city and the lives of those within it. But Zedekiah weighed the princes and officials against the weakness of Jeremiah the prisoner and preferred to hold on to the world he knew, even when it was about to be destroyed. Zedekiah offers a graphic picture of all those today who are governed by the immediate concerns of a life which will eventually come to an end and a world that will be destroyed, and so fail to take advantage of the guaranteed future offered to them in Jesus Christ.

In contrast, Ebed-Melech, who risked the anger of the officials to do what was right, saved his life (39:15-18).

Jeremiah 32 - 33

With defeat and exile now certain, a new element came into Jeremiah's preaching, the promise of return (see also 29:10-14), and Hanamel's visit offered him the chance of a prophetic action of immense symbolism to reinforce the message. The field at Anathoth would at that time have been utterly valueless, since it was occupied by the Babylonians and was probably being used to supply their army. Yet Jeremiah insisted on paying the full price for it and having the sale properly witnessed and deeds drawn up. The transaction was an act of pure faith. Only after it was completed and as a result of his prayer was the interpretation of his prophetic action given. It was a sign that the time was coming when Israel would return to rebuild the city and property would again be bought and sold. When that time came, Jeremiah's purchase would stand as a sign that the Lord had brought everything to pass.

With the eyes of faith, Jeremiah looked beyond the present situation, believing that the God who had made an everlasting covenant with his people would not be unfaithful. In Deuteronomy, the Lord had promised peace and prosperity as long as Israel obeyed him with all their heart. So Jeremiah predicted that God himself would bring about the change of heart needed for his promise to be fulfilled (32:36-43). He knew that God had promised to David that one of his sons would always rule over his people (2 Samuel 7:11-16) and to Moses that there would always be a line of Levitical priests (Numbers 25:10-13). So he predicted the restoration of both David's dynasty and the priesthood (33:14-22).

Day 207. Psalm 85; Jeremiah 30 - 31

The Promise of Restoration

Psalm 85

A prayer of God's people for forgiveness and restoration.

Jeremiah 30 - 31

Whereas the false prophets like Hananiah (28:1-4) had looked back to the past for the restoration of the nation as it was before, Jeremiah looked forward to the future to the new thing which God would do through the exile. One thing, however, remained the same: the Lord's everlasting love for his Israel, his dear son (31:3,9,20). God would be true to his purpose and would not allow Israel to vanish as a nation (30:11; 31:35-37).

Some things will be restored as before. Israel will again be united: throughout these chapters Jeremiah addresses "Israel", "Jacob" and even "Ephraim", the old nation of Israel now long defunct. It is both Israel and Judah who will return from captivity (30:3). When they return, Jerusalem will become the capital and centre of pilgrimage for the united nation once again (31:6). A king of David's line will rule over the whole nation (30:9). He will be one of their own people and devoted to the Lord as Deuteronomy insists (30:21; Deuteronomy 17:15). Once again there will be prosperity, crops will grow and animals graze on the hills, village celebrations take place and offerings be made to the Temple so that the priests enjoy abundance (30:18-20; 31:3-6,10-14).

A number of prophecies deliberately reverse the message Jeremiah had given in previous years. Previously, Judah had looked for healing and found none (8:15,22; 9:1); now healing is to be found (30:12-17). At the time of exile, mothers wept for their children; now they will see them returning (31:15-17). Previously the Lord intended to overthrow and destroy (1:10); now he is to build and plant (31:27-28). The pot which was spoiled in the potter's hands (18:5-11) is to be remade.

Throughout the promises of restoration there are echoes of Hosea, whose vision of God's yearning love for his people so inspired Jeremiah. Israel is the Lord's dear son (31:20; Hosea 11:1-4); Jeremiah even uses the name "Ephraim" characteristic of Hosea. Above all, it is in the desert that Israel

finds favour (31:2; Hosea 2:14-15), and when Israel returns they will come back weeping and chastened (30:4-7; 31:9; Hosea 3:5).

But although Jeremiah foresaw the restoration of so much of the nation's life as it had been before, he was, nevertheless, thinking of a new era. Taking up the proverb which Ezekiel also addressed (31:29-30; Ezekiel 18:1-2), Jeremiah accepted it. The sons *would* suffer for the father's sins; there would be a generation which would have to live in exile; but the return was to be a new start when everyone would be judged for his own sin.

All this would be possible because the Lord would make a new covenant to replace the old one which failed (31:31-34). The old covenant asked for obedience from the heart (Deuteronomy 6:4-6) but failed to deliver it. Even the teachers of the Law were able to twist it to their own ends (8:8-9), and when people did obey, it was apparently to try to win God's favour (34:8-11). Only if the people of Israel were to love and obey the Lord from their hearts could his promises to them be fulfilled.

Jeremiah looked forward to a time when this was exactly what would happen, because God himself would make it happen. He himself would put the Law in their hearts; everyone would have the knowledge of God, which had been so conspicuously lacking in Jeremiah's generation (31:34; 2:8; 4:22; 22:15-17); and Israel's sins would be forgiven.

Day 208. 2 Kings 24:18 - 25:end; Jeremiah 39:1 - 41:10; Psalm 74

The Fall of Jerusalem

2 Kings 24:18 - 25:end (Jeremiah 52)

King Zedekiah had ignored Jeremiah's warning (Jeremiah 34:1-5). Instead of surrendering to the Babylonians he had resisted to the end and as a result not only did he not end his life in peace, but having taken the city the Babylonian army wreaked their revenge for the long siege. The Temple, the palace and the other main buildings were burned, the walls broken down, the Temple vessels either destroyed or carried off, the priests executed. From the Babylonian point of view, all this was to make sure that Jerusalem could no longer be a centre of resistance to their rule. From the point of view of Judah's history, this was the judgement which God had threatened and the prophets had warned about, warnings which successive rulers had failed to heed.

The last few verses (25:27-30) are a later postscript. The recognition and elevation of Jehoiachin, the true Davidic king of Israel was taken as a sign of hope.

Even later, this passage was added to the end of the book of Jeremiah as a postscript. The account of Gedaliah's murder was left out, as it is described more fully in chapter 41. In its place is a record of the number of exiles from the final overthrow of Jerusalem (52:28-30), another sign that the Jews continued as a self-conscious community, looking to Israel as their home.

Jeremiah 39:1 - 41:10

Jeremiah had consistently advocated a pro-Babylonian policy and the generals had orders to make sure he was safe. Gedaliah's father, Ahikam, had protected Jeremiah during the reign of Jehoiakim (Jeremiah 26:24) and his grandfather Shaphan had been Josiah's secretary and had read the Book of the Law found in the Temple to him (2 Kings 22:8-10). Presumably, since he was now made governor, he had been an advocate of surrender or accommodation with Babylon.

The Jews who returned from neighbouring countries (40:11) had probably fled there to escape the Babylonian army. In the first summer, they enjoyed

a good living on what was left in the land (40:12). But neighbouring rulers also had their eyes on the virtually defenceless rump state. Ishmael, a relative of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, who had been displaced by the appointment of Gedaliah (41:1) was acting as an agent of the king of Ammon (40:14).

Psalm 74

The mention of eighty men from the north coming to Jerusalem in Jeremiah 41:5 shows that even in ruins the Temple was still being used for worship. Psalm 74 is a prayer of the Jews still left in Judah, lamenting the destruction of the city. It expresses the sense of abandonment of those left behind, and God had indeed said, through Jeremiah and Ezekiel, that he would be with the exiles rather than with Jerusalem. The psalm does not include repentance, but it does express trust in God based on his former acts of creation and salvation.

Day 209. Psalm 139; Jeremiah 41:11 - 44:end

The Judeans Rebellious to the End

Psalm 139

At every point in the day, wherever we go, God is close to us. He knows our inmost thoughts and understands our future. This knowledge fills the psalmist with hatred of evil and makes him want above all to live a righteous life in God's sight.

Jeremiah 41:11 - 44:end

Having rescued the captive Judeans from Ishmael, Johanan set off to go to Egypt, afraid of the revenge of the Babylonians, whose designated governor, Gedaliah, had been murdered (41:17-18). The departure of part of the Jewish community to Egypt gave the exiles in Babylon a problem, especially when they returned and began to rebuild the community in Palestine once again: Were these Egyptian Jews to be accepted as part of that community or not? This story, the memory of how Jeremiah had been treated and his prophetic advice ignored, gives an unequivocal answer: Except for a few fugitives who return to Jerusalem, (44:14,28) the Egyptian settlers are not included in God's plans for the restored community.

In 42:1-2 the leaders consult the prophet, as the elders of any of the towns and villages might have done before the exile, and just as might have been the case then, they had to wait some time for their answer (42:7). The long prediction of disaster on those who go to Egypt (42:13-18) reflects the fact that the group was already well on its way. Jeremiah's message was asking them to trust the Babylonians, something he had consistently advocated and all except Gedaliah had consistently refused to do. But included in the message is the promise of God "to build and to plant" the community if they stayed in the land, just as he had previously promised to do for the exiles (24:4-6).

Not only were the Judeans unfaithful by going to Egypt in the face of Jeremiah's advice, but having reached Egypt and settled there they remained unfaithful, continuing the worship of Asherah, the "Queen of Heaven", and apparently adopting the worship of Egyptian gods as well (44:8). Although Jeremiah predicted the overthrow of the Egyptian cities at

the hands of Nebuchadrezzar, in fact his attack on Egypt was not as successful as this and the cities escaped.

Despite their unfaithfulness, Jeremiah remained loyal to the people to whom God had sent him. He could have gone to Babylon (40:4), or stayed behind in Judah rather than go to Egypt, but he had always seen his life as bound up with the people, however rebellious they might be (8:21 - 9:1). Even in Egypt he went on prophesying; tradition has it that he was martyred there.

Day 210. Psalm 99; Jeremiah 46 - 48

The Lord's Sovereignty over the Nations

Psalm 99

A celebration of the Lord's kingship over all nations.

Jeremiah 46 - 48

The prophets believed that Israel's God was Lord of the whole world, including all the nations who worshipped other gods. It was he who controlled their destiny and because they failed to acknowledge him they must inevitably come to judgement at some time or another. The pride in which they ignored the true God would one day be turned to shame (46:7-8,12,24; 48:2,11,20,26,42). The same confidence is seen earlier in Isaiah of Jerusalem (Isaiah 10:5-19) and is most fully expressed by Isaiah of Babylon (Isaiah 40 - 55). Jeremiah warned consistently that Nebuchadrezzar was God's instrument in punishing Judah; this meant that God was in control of all the political movements of the time, including great empires and powerful kings (46:18; 48:15). If the fate of Judah at the hands of Babylon is God's work, the same can be said also for Egypt, Philistia and Moab.

Collected here are a series of prophetic oracles, used in worship at the great festivals and affirming the Lord's sovereignty over the nations. Some come from Jeremiah and others from his followers.

46:1-12 reflects on Pharaoh Neco's defeat at Carchemish. Just as for Judah (8:22) there is no healing for Egypt's wounds (46:11). In fact, Nebuchadrezzar's attack on Egypt itself in 600 B.C. (46:13) did not result in total defeat and exile, but was seen nevertheless as punishment on Egypt's gods (46:25). 46:27-28 are quoted from 30:10-11 to give hope to the Jewish community which had fled to Egypt.

The note about Pharaoh's attack on the Philistines (47:1) comes from the editor and does not really fit the oracle. The attack is from the north and includes all the seafaring peoples including Tyre and Sidon (47:4). It reaffirms the Lord's sovereignty over these peoples.

Chapter 48 is a collection of several oracles and fragments about Moab and includes several quotations from other sources, including much of Isaiah 15 - 16 in 48:29-39. Little is known about the fate of Moab but by the time of Nehemiah around 450 B.C. Moab's neighbour Ammon was associated with the Arabs from the south (Nehemiah 4:7-8), suggesting that these two may have squeezed Moab out.

Day 211. Psalm 137; Obadiah; Jeremiah 49

Judgement on Edom

Psalm 137

In sorrow the exiles in Babylon ask for God's judgement on their enemies. Edom had rejoiced at the destruction of Jerusalem, and this resulted in lasting enmity between the two nations. The Babylonian conquerors had committed the kind of atrocities usual in warfare of that day, killing children to make sure they could not grow into adult enemies. Again, the exiles look for retribution.

Obadiah

When Judah was carried into exile, the surrounding nations took advantage of their plight to take over its territory and even to help the invader. Apparently, Edom played a leading role (Obadiah 12-14), and it was against Edom that the fury of the exiles and early post-exilic community was chiefly directed (Psalm 137:7; Isaiah 34, 63:1-6; Jeremiah 49:7-22; Ezekiel 35). The people of Edom were renowned for their wisdom (Obadiah 8; Jeremiah 49:7), for their vineyards (Obadiah 5; Jeremiah 49:9) and their capital city, Petra, which was carved out of the natural rock, was one of the wonders of the ancient world (Obadiah 3; Jeremiah 49:16).

Obadiah places his prediction of Edom's fall in the context of the coming Day of the Lord (Obadiah 15). This he sees as a day of strict justice upon the enemies of God's people. As they have treated God's people, so God will treat them. Jerusalem will be established again and become the source of judgment for all who oppose her (Obadiah 17-18). Not only will the empty land be repopulated, but her inhabitants will govern Edom itself (Obadiah 19-21).

By the time of Malachi, in the middle of the fifth century, Edom had indeed become a wasteland, so that Malachi could use it as proof of the Lord's love for Israel rather than his brother (Malachi 1:2-3), but it was the Arab tribes rather than Israel which had taken over its territory.

Jeremiah 49

This chapter continues the series of oracles which begin in chapter 46 and declare the Lord's sovereignty over all nations.

Day 212. Psalm 82; Jeremiah 50 - 51

Vengeance on Babylon

Psalm 82

A call to God to judge the nations and their gods.

Jeremiah 50 - 51

According to the tradition, Jeremiah himself spoke a number of oracles foretelling the destruction of Babylon, giving them to Seraiah to be read aloud in the city (51:59-end). Since he also wrote to the exiles telling them to be prepared to return to Jerusalem after 70 years (29:10), this is not unlikely. Collecting his messages on a scroll and having them read out was a device he had used before (36:1-8) and so was the kind of dramatic prophetic action which followed the reading (19:10-11). While Nebuchadnezzar tightened his hold on Jerusalem, Jeremiah committed the scroll with its message of hope to Seraiah, who was the brother of his scribe Baruch (51:59; 32:12), giving him instructions as to what to do with it.

It is unlikely that any of the messages collected in chapters 50 and 51 go back to Jeremiah; his words probably ended up at the bottom of the Euphrates! They belong to the tradition in which his oracles were preserved and the stories of his life written down. They would have been composed to be used in worship in Jerusalem during the period of the exile, as the Jews there, remembering his words, looked forward to the coming fall of Babylon.

Babylon's "day" was about to come (50:4,20,27), the day when the Lord would take revenge on her for the destruction of the Temple (50:28; 51:36,44,49,52,56). God is the sovereign Creator, more powerful than all gods (51:15-19); as he judged Assyria the destroyer of Israel, so he will now judge Babylon (50:18) and the people of Judah will return forgiven to their own land (50:4-5,19-20,33-34; 51:6,10).

The prophets and poets who composed these oracles clearly expected Babylon's fall to come as a result of violent overthrow. Some were bold enough to name the Medes as the agent of her defeat (51:11,27-28). In fact, it was the Persian king Cyrus who defeated first the Medes and then Babylon, taking the city peacefully when its elders surrendered to him. It took

several hundred years before the site of the city became desolate and a haunt of jackals as it now is (50:39-40).

Day 213. Psalm 102:12-22; Ezekiel 25 - 28

The Downfall of Tyre

Psalm 102:12-22

A prayer of the desolate community in Jerusalem, confident that the Lord will restore their fortunes one day.

Ezekiel 25

Ezekiel shared the anger of those in Judah at the way the surrounding nations had rejoiced over the fall of Jerusalem, and Edom had even used the opportunity to take revenge (25:12; Obadiah 12-14).

Ezekiel 26 - 28

A series of prophecies against the great trading city of Tyre, uttered during the last days of the siege of Jerusalem (26:1; 2 Kings 25:2). Clearly Ezekiel expected Tyre to become Nebuchadrezzar's next target. In chapter 27 he pictures her as a magnificent ship decked out and ready to sail, and incidentally gives a picture of the wide circle of her trading contacts - Tarshish is Spain, Javan is Greece, Tubal and Meshech are part of Cappadocia in Turkey, Beth Togarmah is Armenia, Sheba and Raamah are in southern Arabia and the places of 27:23 are all parts of Mesopotamia.

The reason Tyre was to fall was her political and technological pride (28:1-5; for "Daniel" or "Dan'el" see notes on Ezekiel 14). Like the citizens of Babel who wanted to make a name for themselves through their achievements (Genesis 11:4), Tyre gloried in her power and reputation, which was based on "secret knowledge", the skills of her merchants in managing the money economy. This led to the pride in which they saw themselves as a cut above other nations, on the level with the gods.

In 28:12-19 Ezekiel uses a version of the Eden story, similar yet different from the one we have in Genesis 2 and 3. Here, Eden is situated on the holy mountain of God, surrounded by fiery stones rather than four great rivers (28:16). The biblical version of this story includes the themes of forbidden knowledge by which the first couple hoped to become like God (Genesis 3:4-6). Our own experience tells us how easy it is for the possession of money and skill in handling it to become a source of pride. The laws

governing the Israelite economy in both Deuteronomy and Leviticus aimed to keep its people close to the real sources of wealth such as land and work, and specifically forbade lending at interest. Ezekiel would see Tyre as falling under God's judgement because they freed themselves from dependence on the primary sources of well-being and became rich through trade.

Despite Ezekiel's confidence, Nebuchadrezzar did not destroy Tyre, but finally gave up after a long siege (29:17-18). In fact, history does not accurately follow the judgements of God. It is a closed book, whose secrets will not be revealed until the last judgment (Habakkuk 2:2-4; 2 Peter 2:9, 3:8-9; Revelation 22:10-12).

Day 214. Psalm 73; Ezekiel 29 - 32

The Fall of Egypt

Psalm 73

In their pride and prosperity wicked men can upset the faith of God's people, but their fate is to be swept away in judgement.

Ezekiel 29 - 32

Apart from the brief note in 29:17-end, the dates of Ezekiel's oracles against Egypt coincide closely with the siege of Jerusalem (29:1; 30:20; 31:1; 32:1,17). Zedekiah had intrigued with Egypt against Babylon and his disloyalty had brought down the wrath of Babylon. So far Egypt had escaped, but Ezekiel wanted to reassure his listeners that Egypt would soon face her share of the general destruction. Egypt sits like a great monster in the Nile, catching the smaller fish in his jaws and on his scales, but he will be hooked out of the Nile and left in the desert to rot (29:3-5).

In chapter 31, Ezekiel pictures Egypt as a magnificent tree and even sings the praises of its magnificence, just as he had with the great ship of Tyre in chapter 27. But like the great ship, the great tree is soon to be brought down. The birds and beasts, the smaller nations that once lived in its shade (31:6), will get on just as well without it (31:13). The life of these smaller nations will continue, whether independently or ruled by one great empire or another.

The image of the tree draws on a myth that was widespread in the Middle East of the great world tree with its top in the heavens (31:3,5) and its roots nourished by the great sea below the earth (31:4,7). In chapter 32, Ezekiel draws on another cosmic image, the battle with the great sea-monster, whose body was cut up to create the earth. In Babylonian mythology, the victor in this struggle was the god Marduk, and in some Israelite songs the deed is transferred to the Lord (Psalm 74:12-14, 89:10; Isaiah 51:9). This prophecy comes soon after the fall of Jerusalem and the arrival of the fugitives to join their fellow-countrymen in exile (32:1). Ezekiel encourages them with the message that Nebuchadrezzar's victorious progress through the Near East which has engulfed Jerusalem is only part of a cosmic wave of judgement directed by the Lord.

In 32:17-end Pharaoh joins the other once-proud rulers of the earth in Sheol, where there is no longer any pride of status. For all these rulers, pride came before destruction, just as it will for the wealthy and powerful of today who ignore God and oppress others.

Day 215. Psalm 23; Ezekiel 33 - 35

Ezekiel Predicts a Return from Exile

Psalm 23

The Lord, the good Shepherd.

Ezekiel 33

In Jerusalem as the siege progressed, Jeremiah, imprisoned in the court of the guard, had been predicting both the inevitability of its fall and a coming time of salvation and restoration when the exiles would return to the land and enjoy God's forgiveness and blessing. Among the exiles, Ezekiel had also insisted on the certainty of Jerusalem's coming defeat. But when the news of the city's destruction reached them, he was free to take up the promises earlier made in 11:16-20 and 16:53-end.

Chapter 33 forms an introduction to the prophecies in which Ezekiel predicts the return of the exiles and the re-establishment of life in Israel. It begins with a reminder of the prophet's call from 3:16-21 and then of his central message, the need for repentance from chapter 18. The priestly tradition had always held the judgement and mercy of God together; it was God's nature both to punish the wicked and pardon the penitent (Exodus 34:4-7). Whereas in the early days of his call Ezekiel had emphasised the wrath of God (5:13), now that Jerusalem was in ruins he began to remind his people of God's mercy and called them to repent (33:10-11). But it was too early for the exiles, shocked at the news of the city's fall, to take in the prophet's message (33:30-33).

Ezekiel 34

Jerusalem had fallen because of the sins of its rulers, such as Jehoiakim who burdened his people with taxes and forced labour in order to enrich himself (Jeremiah 22:13-17). As a result the sheep were scattered in exile. But the Lord himself was promising to gather them and provide pasture for them (34:11-14). On their return, he promised to deal with social injustice, the tyranny of the wealthy and strong over the weak (34:20-22). Like Jeremiah (Jeremiah 23:5-6), Ezekiel also saw the return of the Davidic dynasty, although not necessarily as kings. The prince in David's line would be the Lord's servant (34:23-24) and rule as his agent.

Finally, Ezekiel promised a "covenant of peace" or "shalom" (34:25). He did not speak of a new covenant; as a priest he would have seen the old covenant as perpetually in force. But he looked forward to the restoration of the covenant, bringing with it the "shalom" pictured in the priestly tradition, especially in Leviticus 19 - 26, a section known as the "Holiness Code". There would be seasonable weather, fertile soil, social justice and security against enemies (34:26-28; Leviticus 26:3-6). And just as before, God would be Israel's God and they his people (34:30-31; Exodus 19:5-6; Psalm 100:3).

The return from exile did not work out in the way Ezekiel foresaw. Only a relatively small number of exiles returned, the rule of the descendants of David was not restored and social injustice continued. By the time of Jesus, the Jews were still looking forward to the return and restoration Ezekiel and the other prophets had spoken of. And Jesus saw his mission as being to bring about the fulfilment of the prophet's words. He saw the people as "sheep without a shepherd" (34:5; Matthew 9:36); he promised "rest for the weary" (34:15; Matthew 11:28-30); he healed the sick and bound up the injured (34:4; Matthew 8:16-17; Luke 4:16-21), criticised those who oppressed God's people (Matthew 23:4) and searched for the lost (34:4; Matthew 18:12-14; Luke 15:3-7). He promised to judge between the sheep and the goats (34:17; Matthew 25:32). He was himself the Lord's servant (34:23-24; Matthew 12:15-21), the Good Shepherd who had come to gather the sheep (John 10:11,14-16).

Ezekiel 35

Ezekiel joins with Jeremiah and Obadiah in their prophetic denunciations of Edom.

Day 216. Psalm 98; Ezekiel 36 - 37

God's Covenant Renewed

Psalm 98

The Lord reveals his salvation and his judgement to all peoples.

Ezekiel 36

In the aftermath of Jerusalem's fall, the city and its surrounding countryside lay devastated and depopulated, vulnerable to attacks from the surrounding nations. With the Temple defiled, Ezekiel would have seen the city and its people as unclean. But in chapter 36 he looks forward to the return of the exiles and the repopulation of the villages and towns lying desolate after the devastation of Nebuchadnezzar's advance.

The exile was God's judgement on the uncleanness of his people, who defiled his name by disobeying his laws (36:16-19). But the shame of his people in exile itself continued to defile it (36:20-22) so for the sake of his good name (and for no other reason) the Lord would restore his people to their land. To ensure that his name remained holy (36:23-24) his people would have to become holy. So God promises to cleanse them from the ritual impurity of their sins (36:25) and give them a change of character, a new heart and his own Spirit, to enable them this time to keep the laws he would give them (36:26-27). Then the covenant will be renewed: once more Israel will live in the land as God's people (36:28) and he will ensure peace and prosperity for them (36:29-30).

Ezekiel's vision of God's people cleansed and restored to the land is a parallel to Jeremiah's hope for forgiveness and a new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Ezekiel 37:1-14

The vision of the valley of dry bones recalls the story of the creation of the first man in Genesis 2. There, God creates a man by making his body out of clay and breathing into him the breath of life (Genesis 2:7). The same word, *ruach*, can mean "breath," "wind," or "spirit," so in prophesying to the winds to send breath into the dry bones, now formed into human bodies, Ezekiel is recalling the breathing of God's spirit into his creation.

The dry bones symbolised the hopes of the exiles, which with the final destruction of Jerusalem had utterly died. Ezekiel himself cannot say whether the bones will ever live again (37:3). But God is the creator and life-giver. By his Spirit, he can make his people live again. Sometimes we need to come to a position in which all human hope is gone in order to trust in God the life-giver and God of resurrection (Romans 4:16-25; 2 Corinthians 1:8-10).

Ezekiel 37:15-end

Finally, Ezekiel predicted the reunification of the divided kingdom, Israel represented by Ephraim, once its most powerful tribe, and Judah under its Davidic kings, and repeated again the promises for the renewal of the covenant as a covenant of "shalom". Having seen the departure of the presence of God from the sanctuary (11:22-23) and having promised the exiles that God would be a sanctuary for them in exile (11:16) he now saw God's sanctuary in the land once again, and his presence among his people for ever (37:27-28).

The last verses of this chapter prepare for the vision Ezekiel was given some 13 years later of the restored sanctuary in chapters 40 - 48. But before that chapters 38 and 39 take up the theme of the judgement of the nations at Jerusalem.
