

Israel in Exile

Promises of Restoration

This section covers the literature of the exile, as Israel re-evaluated their faith after the disaster of the fall of Jerusalem.

It includes the songs of the book of Lamentations, probably written as part of the worship in the devastated Temple during the exile, in which the worshippers acknowledge their guilt and that of their predecessors and look humbly for restoration.

It includes Ezekiel's vision of a renewed and restored Temple at the centre of Israel's life and worship.

Another priestly work is the 'Holiness Code', a compilation and updating of the Law, setting out a just and reverent way of life for the future.

Finally, it includes the incomparable prophecies found in chapters 40 – 55 of Isaiah, usually known as 'Second Isaiah', which include the passages describing the call and work of the 'Servant of the Lord'.

Day 260. Lamentations 1 - 2

Mourning for Jerusalem

The Fall of Jerusalem was a dreadful experience for all who went through it. The siege lasted 11 months. By the end of it the people were reduced to starvation, some even eating their own children, and the city full of the stench of the dead and dying. When the Babylonians finally broke through, the king and his sons were killed, the leaders carried off, women and girls raped, the walls torn down, the Temple ruined, and its priests and prophets either killed or taken into exile.

For the people left behind as well as for those taken into exile, the blow was a devastating one. Josiah's reforms, in which worship outside Jerusalem had been suppressed, had made the city even more important. Jerusalem and its Temple were the dwelling place of God. The promises of his presence and protection were regularly recalled in worship (Psalm 46:1-7). But now the Lord had abandoned his people and his city. What was to be their response? Where were they to find God in all that had happened?

Lamentations consists of five poems composed perhaps 10 years after the fall of Jerusalem. They were probably used in the bi-annual commemorations of its destruction mentioned in Zechariah 7:3-5. Not only did they express the mood of the pilgrims in the ruins of what had once been the glorious Temple, but they provided a reflection on the meaning of what they see and helped to direct their hearts in response.

Lamentations 1

The opening verses give a vivid description of Jerusalem's reversal of fortune. The deserted city is described as a queen, now abandoned by friends and reduced to slavery (1:1-4). No one cares and no one is willing to help (1:12,17,19).

Description leads straight into explanation. Her downfall is the Lord's doing (1:5). It is his punishment for her sin (1:5,8,9). Some at least might have been tempted to abandon belief in God or to turn to the gods of Babylon, Bel and Marduk, who had just been victorious. But the authors of Lamentations find a different cause. The city which had enjoyed God's favour is now experiencing his wrath (1:12-15). The God who brought them

good is now bringing them evil because of their sins. What they are experiencing is their own guilt, which clings to them (1:9).

Like many of the psalms, the first poem ends with a prayer that God would repay the enemies who now gloat over them.

Lamentations 2

The second song opens with a vivid description of Jerusalem's destruction. The Day of the Lord has come but it has brought doom and destruction not to his enemies but to his own people (2:1,22). The Lord has not only withdrawn his protection (2:3) but actively encouraged the enemies of Jerusalem, so as to become her enemy himself (2:4,5). King, priests, law, prophets, palaces, walls and gates, all the familiar features of life in the city are gone. The elders who remain wear sackcloth, the ravished women are ashamed (2:10) and children go hungry (2:11-12).

All this took place because the people failed to take heed of the warning they were given. The priests and prophets deluded themselves in their confidence (2:14). The words God gave long before were ignored (2:17). It is he who has brought about Jerusalem's ruin now (2:7).

The writer's emotions as he contemplates the situation are sorrow and torment (2:11). But even in the darkest of times there was hope. Confident that these very emotions are acceptable to God in worship (2:19), he calls on Jerusalem's people to turn their sorrow into a prayer. Unlike the first, this poem concludes with an appeal for mercy (2:20-22).

Day 261. Lamentations 3 - 5

Waiting for Mercy

Lamentations 3

Chapters 1, 2 and 4 are acrostic poems in which each of the 22 verses begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet in order. This device helped the worshippers to repeat the songs by heart and also expressed a sense of completeness. In chapters 1 and 2 each section is made up of three couplets. Chapter 3 takes these formal features even further, expanding the three lines of each section to three verses, all three beginning with the same letter. The same elaborate formality is found in psalm 119, which has 22 sections of 8 verses, each verse beginning with the same letter. In both, the elaborate form is used to express very deep feelings.

The chapter begins by picturing God as an enemy. He had brought darkness on his people (3:2,6), imprisoned them (3:5,7-9), and injured them like an invading army (3:10-11,12,13,16). But he had also assaulted their inner feelings, torturing and wounding them (3:5,15,17,19-20) and bringing them to the brink of despair (3:18).

Yet it was by allowing themselves to entertain these feelings that Israel found hope springing to life again. In their grief, they remembered the mercy of God, his compassion and his faithfulness (3:21-23). They openly confessed, "The Lord is my portion," (3:24). The "portion" was the family land-holding, the source of life and hope for the future, their home and their inheritance.

In this time of despair, Israel resolved to wait patiently for the time of mercy to come (3:24,26). Through the song, they accepted that bad times and good times, joy and sorrow, reward and chastening, all come from the Lord (3:32,38,39). They did not need to plan or do anything to win his favour other than wait in hope and a penitent spirit.

Accordingly, verses 40-42 are a prayer of repentance, followed in verses 43-54 by a further plea for mercy. In verses 55-58, prayer turns into the assurance of having been heard, and finally in the light of this confidence to a plea for judgement against the enemies who now persecute them (3:59-end).

Lamentations 4

With its vivid descriptions of the conditions of the siege, this may be the earliest of the five poems. It emphasises the contrast between Jerusalem before the siege and her present condition, the change from riches to destitution (4:1,2,5,7-8). In particular the priests and prophets, the ministers of the holy place, had become defiled and unclean (4:13-16) and the experience of hardship and privation had turned compassion to heartlessness (4:3-4,10).

What no one believed came to pass (4:12). The people of Jerusalem had been hoping for relief until the last minute (4:17-19), putting their faith in the presence of the Lord's anointed king (4:20). Instead, God has poured out his wrath, as he had said that he would (4:11).

But because the disaster was seen as a merited punishment, there was hope. A punishment is fitted to the crime. It does not go on for ever. The day would come when Jerusalem would have been punished enough. She could hope for eventual mercy (4:22), whereas Edom, the enemy of God's people, could not (4:21-22).

Lamentations 5

This is the shortest of the songs and not in the form of an acrostic. It may also be the latest. The impression is that Jerusalem's punishment has lasted a long time, longer than a generation (5:7), and the prayer of the community is that God would call them to mind at last (5:20-22).

Day 262. Psalm 85; Ezekiel 40 - 42

The New Temple

Psalm 85

A prayer for restoration.

Ezekiel 40 - 42

Ezekiel's final vision was given in 572 B.C., some 20 years after the first (1:2; 40:1) and 14 years after the fall of Jerusalem. In the years between he had seen in a vision the glory of the Lord leaving the Temple (10:18-19), had heard of its destruction (33:21) and had prophesied that God would be a temporary sanctuary for the exiles in Babylon (11:16). Finally, he had foreseen the return of the exiles to Israel and had prophesied that God would dwell in their midst once again (37:26-28). For a priest, the presence of God in the midst of his people required a Temple. So Ezekiel gave to the exiles a vision of a new Temple to rekindle their hope of a time of restoration to come.

The vagueness of the description of Jerusalem in 40:2 is rather like the reference to "a figure like that of a man" in 1:26. This and its position on the top of a high mountain emphasise the visionary quality of the message. The purpose of the detailed measurements given by Ezekiel's angelic guide was not to serve as a blueprint for a future rebuilding but to emphasise the beauty and symmetry of the Temple plan. Like the priestly description of the Creation in Genesis 1, Ezekiel's description of the Temple emphasised order and purpose. Everything had its place and function and everything fitted perfectly into an overall design.

The gateways were not only imposing but also guarded and Ezekiel gave considerable space to their description. This was because they separated the different levels of holiness. Passing from the city into the outer court of the Temple, from the outer court into the inner court, from there into the Temple itself and finally into the Most Holy Place (41:4) was to make a journey through successive degrees of holiness. The guards were to ensure that no unauthorised people encroached on the presence of God at each level of holiness. Each of the gateways had steps (40:6,34,49) so that each level was higher than the one before.

The Temple itself was the same size and shape as Solomon's Temple except that the cubits were "long" cubits, slightly bigger than the ordinary measurements. The walls were lined with wood throughout and decorated with palm trees and cherubim (41:16-20) just like the inside walls of Solomon's Temple (1 Kings 6:15,29) which Ezekiel would never have seen, but would have known about. There is no mention of the gold which overlaid the interior of Solomon's Temple from floor to ceiling (1 Kings 6:20-21).

The rooms built into the side of the Temple itself were to enable the priests to perform their duties without infringing the law of holiness. Once an animal was offered as a sacrifice it became holy and had to be stored only in a holy place (42:13). The holy garments which the priests wore for worship likewise had to stay within the inner court (42:14). The rooms were for the priests to change their clothes and to store and eat their portions of the offerings. The whole Temple area was surrounded by a wide area, 500 cubits square, to "separate the holy from the common" (42:20).

Day 263. Psalm 24; Ezekiel 43 - 45

The Holiness of the Temple

Psalm 24

Only those with pure hearts may approach the Lord to worship him.

Ezekiel 43 - 45

The vision of chapters 40 - 42 was of an empty Temple waiting for the Lord's return. With everything ready for him, the glory of the Lord arrived to make it his home once again. This was to be the place where he would dwell among his people (43:7; see Exodus 25:8).

The holiness of God meant that the Temple and everything in it were holy and must not be defiled. This is why Ezekiel so emphasised the entrances to both the Temple itself and its inner court (43:10-11; 44:5-9). Each entrance led to a new level of holiness and excluded those who did not belong there. Only Israelites were allowed to enter the outer courts and only priests were allowed to enter the inner court. Foreigners were totally excluded (44:9).

The demand of holiness also meant that the priesthood was restricted to the family of Zadok, who had been priests in Jerusalem before the exile. This was the outcome of Josiah's reform, in which all the shrines outside Jerusalem were suppressed. Although the priests from the country shrines were meant to come to Jerusalem, not all did so (2 Kings 23:8-9). In Ezekiel's vision, all the descendants of the country priests were to be downgraded to Levites and excluded from the priesthood proper because of their association with idol-worship before the exile (44:10-16).

The lives of the priests were to be strictly controlled to make sure that they did not become defiled (44:17-end). They were to have no land of their own because they were to have no other work besides the service of the Temple (44:28-end). Their homes surrounded the Temple area (45:1-5), just as in the wilderness the priests camped in front of the east gate of the tabernacle (Numbers 3:38).

Government was to be in the hands of the priests (44:24). There would no longer be a king, but only a prince and he and the nobility were prevented from oppressing the people by having their own allocation of land instead of taxing the people to maintain the palace and government (45:7-12; contrast this with 1 Kings 4:7-19). Before the exile, the king's palace was situated right next to the Temple and the king had his own separate entrance (1 Kings 7:1-12). The relative size of the two buildings made the Temple as much a private chapel for the king as the centre of worship for the nation. Now all that was to change. No longer was the prince to defile the holiness of the Temple by living next door (43:7-9). Instead, he was to be subordinate to the priests and had specific duties in the Temple (45:17-end; 46:1-15).

Day 264. Psalm 46; Ezekiel 46 - 48

The River of Life

Psalm 46

The Lord reigns in peace over all nations from his city in Jerusalem.

Ezekiel 46

After the regulations for the priests, Ezekiel saw the people coming to worship in the restored Temple. They were to be led by the prince who provided from his own territory the sacrifices for the nation as a corporate whole. They were to approach only as far as the eastern entrance to the inner court and must stand there to worship while the priests performed the sacrifices within the court itself. The regulations in verses 9 and 10 are to make the movement of such a large crowd easier to control. The laws about the prince's inheritance in verses 16-18 were to ensure that not too much of it was lost, since it had to provide the animals for the sacrifices on the Sabbath and at festivals. The year of freedom or Jubilee is mentioned in Leviticus 25:8-17, part of the priestly law-code.

Ezekiel 47:1-12

Now the ideal or dream-like quality of Ezekiel's vision begins to appear. Jerusalem's ancient traditions included the river of life which watered the city (Psalm 46:4). In his vision, Ezekiel saw the river issuing from the Temple itself (47:1). It began as a trickle and got deeper the further it went from the Temple (47:3-5). Everywhere the river went it brought life. Reaching the Dead Sea, it actually made the Salt Sea fresh (47:8) and its water teem with life (47:9). The trees standing alongside it, fed by its water, were like someone who makes the Law their constant study: always in leaf and regularly bearing fruit (47:12; Psalm 1:3; Jeremiah 17:7-8). Moreover the leaves had healing qualities (47:12). The elaborate layout of the Temple and its closely regulated rituals were not empty, stifling and repetitive; they were to be the means by which God would dwell among his people and bring them life.

The tradition of the River of Life is taken up in the New Testament. John's gospel sees it streaming from the side of the crucified Jesus in the form of the Holy Spirit (John 7:37-39; 19:34-35), remembering that the crucifixion is

when Jesus was "glorified" (John 7:39; 17:1). In Revelation, the river flows from the throne of God and the Lamb. The trees on either side are named as the Tree of Life and the leaves are for the healing of the nations (Revelation 22:1-2).

Ezekiel 47:13 - 48:end

Ezekiel drew on the priestly traditions of Numbers 34:1-12 and Joshua 15:2-4 for his description of the boundaries of the land. The northern and southern boundaries he described are more or less those of Solomon's kingdom (47:15-17,19), but the eastern boundary excludes the Transjordan completely (47:18). Despite the fact that it had been Israelite territory from the time of the Conquest, the land east of the Jordan was not part of the promise to Abraham. The presence of Israelites here had also led to fears of schism and apostasy (Joshua 22).

Ezekiel placed the tribal territories in rectangles, with no reference to the geography of the land or their previous tribal portions. The concubine tribes, Dan, Naphtali, Gad and Asher, sons of Rachel and Leah's maidservants, were to be furthest out (48:1-3,27). The two Joseph tribes had separate and neighbouring allotments (48:4-5). Judah and Benjamin, the two tribes who had been faithful to Jerusalem, were nearest to the city (48:7,23). Verses 8-22 are an expansion of 45:1-8 describing the sacred portion, with the land for the priests and Levites and the prince.

Verses 30-end are an appendix describing the gates of the city, one for each tribe. This time the Joseph tribes were to have one gate in order to make way for one for Levi (48:31-32). Finally, the name of the city was to be, "The Lord is there." The promise of Emmanuel, God with us, would be fulfilled for ever (Exodus 25:8; Psalm 46:7,11; Isaiah 8:9-10).

The Holiness Code

Leviticus 17 - 26

The Holiness Code is a collection of legal material, like the "Book of the Covenant" (Exodus 20:22 - 23:end) and Deuteronomy. It was probably made just before or during the exile, but like all such collections includes material which is much more ancient. The Holiness Code shares with Ezekiel a concern for the holiness of God's people. The reminder of God's holiness comes in like a refrain at regular intervals (19:2; 20:7,26; 21:8,23; 22:16,32-33) and even more often the simple declaration, "I am the Lord." Israel's conduct is to be governed by the character of God.

The Holiness Code includes laws relating to both worship and everyday life. Chapter 17, for example, deals with the holiness of blood, chapter 18 with the holiness of sex. Another of its features is an emphasis on the Sabbath (19:3,30; 23:3; 25:2; 26:2,34-35). Although the sabbath law went back to ancient times and is important in Deuteronomy, it came to prominence as a distinctive mark of Israel after the exile.

Like Ezekiel's vision of the restored Temple, the concept of holiness set out in the Holiness Code was another of the defining influences on the community of Israel after the return from exile.

Day 265. Psalm 115; Leviticus 17 - 19

Laws of Holiness

Psalm 115

Israel is distinct from other nations in worshipping the true God instead of idols.

Leviticus 17

From earliest times, the strict regulation against eating blood was a distinguishing mark of the worship of the Lord (Genesis 9:4; Acts 15:20). The blood of an animal was its life and all life belonged to the Lord (17:11). Since it involved the shedding of blood, all slaughter was a sacred occasion. The purpose of this regulation was to ensure that whenever a beast was slaughtered it was offered to the Lord and not to idols (17:5,7).

The law of blood preserved here is much older than that of Deuteronomy 12:15-19 which permits slaughter outside the one central shrine, but it was preserved by the priests and placed at the head of the collection in the Holiness Code. It is the basis for the detailed regulations which governed sacrifice found in Leviticus 1 - 7.

Leviticus 18

Another distinction between Israel and its neighbours lay in the holiness of sex. For Israel, a man and his wife were "one flesh" (Genesis 2:24) so both his own and his wife's blood relations were also of one flesh with him. The subject of the chapter is not marriage within the prohibited degrees but unchastity in a culture which allowed polygamous marriage. It emphasises that even though committed "within the family" these sins against marriage were blameworthy.

18:16 does not prohibit levirate marriage, in which a man married his *dead* brother's wife, but adultery. 18:18 looks back to the sad story of Rachel and Leah (Genesis 29:31-32). In the context of a chapter on sexual fidelity, 18:21 probably refers to the practice of giving children to a shrine to become sacred prostitutes. Homosexual relations were also associated with temple prostitution and so "detestable" (18:22).

Sexual unchastity was the reason God had intervened to punish the natives of Canaan. It is a sin against the spiritual bond of man and wife and so against the identity he has given us. The fact that in our society sexual unfaithfulness is seen as being relatively unimportant reflects an almost complete absence of genuine spiritual insight.

Leviticus 19

Chapter 19 is a compilation of social and religious regulations in which the order appears random, with no attempt at editing or arrangement. Yet the mixture of religious and social laws and of legal sanction and moral obligation conveys a sense of wholeness in which there is no division between different aspects of life. All come equally under God's supervision.

The Ten Commandments figure prominently and respect for parents appears at the head of the list. We know from Deuteronomy 5:16 that this was regarded as a guarantee of social stability. Here in Leviticus it is supplemented by a requirement of respect for all older people (19:32).

The impartiality and availability of justice for everyone, rich and poor alike is another foundation of stability in society (19:15). Here it is linked with a prohibition of actions or attitudes which will lead to the law-courts: slanderous gossip, endangering life and nursing grudges (19:15-18). The laws even teach in a rudimentary way how to deal with anger and hate and from this reflection arises the positive law of love as the measure of right conduct towards all people, not simply the neighbour as in 19:18, but even the alien. Leviticus anticipates Jesus' answer to the question, "Who is my neighbour?" by requiring equal care for the stranger as for the native born (19:10,34).

Day 266. Psalm 113; Leviticus 20 - 22

Ritual Holiness

Psalm 113

The Lord's goodness to the poor.

Leviticus 20

Israel was to be a nation set apart for the Lord. They were to avoid many of the religious practices of the Canaanite inhabitants of the land, including in particular pagan worship and occult practices (20:1-7,23-end).

Holiness also meant that sex, the power of life, was to be honoured and directed to its right purpose. Serious abuses, for which the death penalty was decreed, included sex with close family members, same-sex sexual relations and bestiality. These are not simply lumped together; they are defined, in some cases as "perversion" or "confusion" as when a man and his father have sex with the same woman (20:12), in some as "detestable" or "repugnant" as in the case of homosexual sex (20:13). In no case is the temptation or desire condemned, always the action.

Leviticus 21

The priests were to be even more holy than the rest of the people, abstaining from nearly all mourning rites including the shaving of their heads (21:1-6) and only marrying a virgin (21:7-9,13-14). Priests with bodily defects were still priests since they are sons of Aaron, so they were to have a share in the offerings but they were not allowed to sacrifice (21:16-23).

Leviticus 22

Priests had a responsibility to maintain the holiness of everything offered to the Lord. The stories of Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10:1-2) and Hophni and Phinehas (1 Samuel 2:12-17,27-34) served as warnings of how serious it is to ignore or overstep the bounds of God's holiness.

Sacrifices to the Lord were to be of the best that people had to bring. Although the rule is slightly relaxed in 22:23, in general no animal less than perfect was good enough for God. He is worthy of the best we have to give him. A "burnt offering" (22:18) was a slaughter sacrifice in which the whole animal except the fat and blood was given to the Lord and burnt. A "fellowship offering," "peace offering" or "sacrifice of well-being" (22:21) was not burned. It was presented to the Lord and then shared among the worshippers, with the priests receiving a designated portion.

Day 267. Psalm 111; Leviticus 23 - 24, 27

Festivals and Vows

Psalm 111

Praise for the glory and majesty of God, his compassion and covenant love. The response of his people should be to fear him and keep his laws.

Leviticus 23

The double introduction (23:2,4) and ending (23:37-38,44) show that this is a composite chapter illustrating two stages in the development of the festival calendar. Originally, the feasts reflected the agricultural calendar. Unleavened Bread, with which Passover was connected from earliest times, marked the beginning of the grain harvest (23:4-8). The first fruits of the fields had to be presented to the Lord along with a thank offering (23:9-14). The Israelites could not eat of the harvest before acknowledging that all they had was God's gift. The Feast of Weeks or Pentecost marked the end of the grain harvest (23:15-21). The Feast of Tabernacles again celebrates the bringing in of all the good things God has given. This time it was the fruit of the trees which formed the centre of the celebration (23:40). Palm branches were waved at regular intervals during the recital of Psalm 118. This was what the crowd were doing, quoting Psalm 118:26, when Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

To this outline have been added the Feast of Trumpets (23:23-25) and the Day of Atonement (23:26-32), a solemn assembly at the Feast of Tabernacles (23:33-36) and the whole calendar has been prefaced by the Sabbath (23:3) as a weekly day of rest and assembly, the pattern for all the other feasts. The Feast of Trumpets is now the Jewish New Year, the counting of the months having changed since Old Testament times. With the Day of Atonement, it came into prominence as a time of fasting and self-examination after the exile. The solemn sacrificial ritual for the Day of Atonement is given in Leviticus 16.

Leviticus 24

Lamps were kept burning in the Temple and the "shewbread" was always kept before the Lord, being renewed regularly.

The story in 24:10-13,22 records an exemplary punishment for infringing the holiness of the Lord by blaspheming. To it have been added brief regulations on proper retribution. The requirement of "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" (24:20) imposes a *limit* on the extent of retribution beyond which the injured party may not go, thus maintaining strict justice.

The Israelite penal system was based on a philosophy of just retribution. Detering others from crime and reforming the criminal are outcomes which may be hoped for from any punishment, but without the requirement of just retribution and/or restitution to undergird it, any punishment is severely unjust.

Leviticus 27

A chapter added as an appendix to the Holiness Code because it deals with people and animals vowed to the Lord, which were holy.

In earliest times people could be dedicated to the Lord as a vow, as in the case of Jephthah's daughter (Judges 11:30-31) and all first born sons belonged to the Lord (Exodus 13:1; 22:29). Unlike the surrounding nations, Israelite tradition began very early to frown on such sacrifices and people were regularly redeemed instead (Exodus 13:11-15). 27:1-8 lays down the considerable prices at which people were to be redeemed, with a concession for those too poor to afford it.

Clean animals vowed to the Lord were holy and could not be redeemed (27:9-10). Unclean animals, houses or land could be redeemed at 20% more than their value (27:13,15,19). If a field had been bought and was not part of a family's land, it returned to its original family owner at the Jubilee. Fields which were part of family land and were not redeemed at the year of Jubilee remained the property of the priests for ever.

A "devoted" person or object was under the sacred ban and belonged to the Lord. This dates back to the practice in early warfare of giving all spoil to the Lord (Joshua 6:17-19). It could not be redeemed (27:28-29).

Day 268. Psalm 112; Leviticus 25 - 26

The Sabbath Principle

Psalm 112

God blesses those who live according to his Law and treat others with generosity.

Leviticus 25

One of the features of the priestly tradition is the importance of the Sabbath. Whereas the compilers of Deuteronomy traced the institution of the Sabbath to the Lord's deliverance of his people from slavery in Egypt (Deuteronomy 5:15), for the priestly lawgivers, the principle of the Sabbath was an integral part of creation and a reminder of the holiness of God (Exodus 20:11). Leviticus 25 updates some of Israel's most ancient laws, including the Sabbath year (Exodus 23:10-11), the freedom of slaves (Exodus 21:2-11, also updated on different principles in Deuteronomy 15:12-18) and the institution of the "go'el" or redeemer, according to two great principles: those of stewardship and the Sabbath.

Everything God's people enjoy and even their very selves belonged to God and were a gift from him (25:23,55) and they were responsible to him for the way they used them. The Sabbath day forced everyone to stop work on a regular basis and to give a rest to their animals and hired workers (Exodus 20:8-10). The Sabbath year (25:1-6) reminded them forcibly of their dependence on God's provision (25:18-22). The year of Jubilee placed a limit on the amount a person or family could accumulate by work, good management and good fortune. No one could work his way into a position to be independent of God's blessing, nor could he acquire complete power over the well-being of another Israelite. Israel's economy was not to be undergirded by a work ethic like our own, but by a "rest ethic" in which space and time both to worship God and enjoy the fruit of one's labours was compulsory.

Leviticus 26

Picking up the law of 19:30, the priestly compiler of the Holiness Code saw neglect for the Sabbath and the sanctuary at Jerusalem as the twin underlying causes of the exile (26:2).

God's desire was to pour out his blessings on his people, including prosperity (26:4-5,9-10) and "shalom" or peace, which here has a more restricted sense of rest and security (26:6-8) and to live among them. 26:11-12 provide a hint of a return to the unbroken fellowship experienced in the Garden of Eden, where God walked with the first man and woman (Genesis 3:8). But if they were disobedient he threatened not simply to withdraw his presence and his blessing, but actively to punish them. The compiler remembers the plagues in Egypt (26:16), the attacks of Israel's enemies in the days of the judges (26:16; Judges 6:3-4), the drought of the days of Elijah (26:19-20) and more recently the terrible experience of the siege and capture of Jerusalem (26:29,32).

All these have befallen God's people as a result of their neglect of his commandments. But the punishment also served a wider purpose. The high places had been defiled and false worship ceased (26:30-31). The land could now enjoy the rest it had been denied (26:34-35). Moreover, God had not forgotten his covenant. In the tradition of Hosea and Jeremiah, the writer appealed to the exiles, in their state of shock and disillusionment (26:36-39) to turn from their sins and those of their fathers and be humble before God (26:40-42). He had not forgotten his people. Rather, he wanted to bring them back home with changed hearts.

Second Isaiah

Isaiah 40 - 55

The context, style and message of these chapters is completely different from the earlier chapters of Isaiah. The messages are given to God's people in exile. The date is shortly before 538 B.C. when Cyrus of Persia took over the Babylonian empire and introduced a new policy of sending all the displaced citizens of his new domain back to their homes. The prophet looks at these political developments and sees in them a sign that God is about to fulfil his promise to bring the exiles home. But with their hopes shattered (Ezekiel 37:11) they were unwilling or unable to believe him (42:18-20; 46:12-13; 48:1-5).

No one knows who the prophet was, but there are many links between him and Isaiah of Jerusalem, which help to explain why his words have been incorporated in the book of Isaiah: a vision of the glory and holiness of God, the centrality of Jerusalem in God's purposes and a confidence in God's sovereignty even in the worst of times.

The book consists of separate poems which would originally have been spoken, perhaps during the regular meeting for worship, which was the precursor of the synagogue. The poems are reminiscent of the psalms, and there are striking parallels between some parts of Second Isaiah and some of the psalms (compare 50:6-8 with Psalm 129:1-4; 55:12 with Psalm 96:11-12). They have been arranged, probably by the prophet himself, into a coherent order beginning with the prophet's call and message (40:1-11) and ending with a description of the coming return from exile (55:12-13). Throughout the book the main themes, such as the sovereignty of the Lord, the sureness of his word and the unbelief of Israel, occur over and over again, combined in different ways.

The climax of the message comes with the release and return of the exiles foretold in chapter 55. Another change of context from chapter 56 onwards makes it likely that chapters 56 - 66 are another, later collection, usually known as Third Isaiah.

Day 269. Psalm 148; Isaiah 40

The Lord, the Sovereign Creator.

Psalm 148

Praise to the Lord, the Creator of the earth.

Isaiah 40

The opening verses introduce the tone of the prophet's whole message. It is to be a message of comfort. Although from time to time he upbraids his hearers for their lack of faith, there is no threat of judgement. Instead, he wants the exiles to understand that the fall of Jerusalem and their long captivity has been a punishment, which will soon come to an end. The time of wooing predicted by Hosea has finally arrived (40:2; Hosea 2:14). The exiles had served their punishment and were about to be set free.

The sign of a true prophet was to have stood in the council of God and heard him deliberate with his servants there (1 Kings 22:19-23; Isaiah 6:1-8; Jeremiah 23:18,22). Like his great predecessors, Isaiah of Babylon had stood in that council and heard the voice of God not only declaring his purpose (40:3-5) but calling for a messenger to make it known on earth (40:6). A road is to be prepared through the desert from Babylon to Jerusalem so that the exiles may return by it. But their coming will be the coming of God himself (40:3). His glory, that is his essential nature, was to be revealed to the whole earth (The glory of the Lord was also a key feature of the call experience of Isaiah of Jerusalem: Isaiah 6:3).

The prophet was called to announce what was about to take place (40:6). First he reflects on the certainty of the word of the Lord. God has spoken and is sure to bring it to pass, in fact it is the word itself which will make it happen (40:6-8; 55:10-11). The message is that Jerusalem and all the cities of Judah will see the Lord returning in triumph (40:9; 52:8-9). His arm is being revealed, his sleeves rolled up ready for action (40:10; 52:10; 53:1).

In the remainder of chapter 40 the prophet sets out the first of four grounds for confidence that he was about to act in this way: the Lord who promised to release his people is the Creator of the whole universe. Creation shows that his power and understanding are beyond human grasp (40:12-14,22). This is the same message as that found in the climax of the book of Job in

chapters 38 and 39. In addition, Isaiah draws on the second commandment and gives a theological justification for it. There are to be no images of God because he is incomparable (40:18,25). The gods of Babylon might appear to be splendid and powerful but they are nothing but idols. It is the Lord, the God of Israel who made the world and who rules it. Beside him the power of the nations is nothing (40:15-17,23-24). Even the stars on which Babylon's astronomers depended were his creation (40:25-26).

In view of all this, Israel should be confident. By 538 they had been in exile for a third generation and many must have despaired of ever returning (40:27). But the prophet wanted to give them hope; God had not forgotten them and was powerful enough to save them (40:28-31).

Day 270. Psalm 147; Isaiah 41:1 - 42:13

Israel is God's Chosen Servant

Psalm 147

The Lord, the Creator of the whole world has revealed his Law to Israel, chosen them as his own people and is now releasing them from exile.

Isaiah 41:1 - 42:13

The first ground of the prophet's confidence in the Lord was that the Lord alone is Creator of the world. The second is that he has revealed to the prophets what he is about to do. The Lord challenges the nations to say which of their gods has been able to foretell the rise of Cyrus, whose empire was growing rapidly and threatening the defeat of Babylon at any time (41:1-4). Standing in the tradition of prophets like Jeremiah who had not only foretold the exile and the reason for it but also foretold its end after two or three generations, Isaiah of Babylon sees in Cyrus the means of God's promised deliverance. Other nations may tremble at the news of his conquests (41:5-7) but Israel has no need to do so. Israel is the Lord's chosen servant, the offspring of Abraham to whom his promises were made so many generations before (41:8-10).

Here the argument pauses for two poems expanding on this new theme of Cyrus's coming conquests. In the first, the prophet assures Israel that God is with her and will help her and make her victorious (41:11-16). The second introduces the theme of living water (which is related to Ezekiel 47:1-12). The desert will bloom as rivers and pools provide drink for God's people on their journey to Jerusalem (41:17-20; 43:16-21; 55:12-13).

The fact that the Lord has foretold through his prophets what is about to take place proves that it is he who has done it. Not only have the idols of the nations failed to foresee the coming events (41:22) but they are powerless to do anything, good or bad (41:23), in contrast to the Lord who does both (45:7). It is the Lord who has stirred Cyrus up (41:25) and the Lord's prophets who have foretold it (41:27; 43:8-10).

Why should this be and what does it imply about Israel? It is all because Israel is God's chosen servant (41:8-9; 42:1,19; 43:10; 44:1), his treasured possession (42:1; Exodus 19:5-6). Israel is the nation on whom he has

poured out his Spirit and to whom he has entrusted the Law, the revelation of his own character. Her task is to make that tradition of Law available to all nations. She will not do this aggressively by conquest, but persistently by witnessing to the truth (42:2-4). God's purpose in choosing Israel was to make her a light to all the nations he had made (42:5-7). She is to open blind eyes and free them from imprisonment to false gods and oppressive rulers, although now it is Israel herself who is both blind and imprisoned (42:18-19). God's covenant is not with Israel alone: she herself is to be a "covenant", that is a promise, to all nations (42:6; 49:8), because God has chosen her as the means to the salvation of the whole world.

The response to this amazing revelation of God's purpose is a psalm of praise (42:10-13) in which the prophet invites all nations to sing the praise of the Lord, the victorious one.

Day 271. Psalm 100; Isaiah 42:14 - 44:8

The Lord's Love for his Servant

Psalm 100

God's people remember that they are his and praise him.

Isaiah 42:14 - 44:8

The prophet's aim was to convince the doubting exiles that their release was coming. He had set before them two grounds of confidence. First, the Lord is the only God, the sole Creator of the world (40:12-31), and secondly Israel's prophets alone foretold both the exile and its eventual end (41:25-28) and now he, as their successor, was foretelling the imminent conquest of Babylon by Cyrus. In this passage he introduces his third great ground of confidence: the Lord's love for his people which never fails.

"For a long time" (42:14) nothing has happened and the exile has run its course. The Lord has been like a woman in pregnancy waiting for the time to give birth. But now he is about to lead his people out of exile. These people are blind and deaf (42:16,18-20), they do not understand that they have been punished to demonstrate the Lord's righteousness (42:21). He gave them the Law and they failed to keep it so he punished them (42:22-25).

"But now" (43:1) the punishment is over. Israel is God's chosen people and he will not abandon them. He himself is their "go'el" or "redeemer" (43:14), the one who stands up for them in court and rescues them from being sold into slavery. He has been with them in their punishment (43:2) and is going to set them free (43:1-7). God will do this to demonstrate to the whole world that he is the only God (43:10-11), the one who reveals, saves and proclaims (43:12). He has revealed his Law to Israel, saved them from Egypt and is saving them now, and has proclaimed all this through the prophets. Israel should have been his witnesses by living the way of righteousness given to them in the Law (42:1-4). Because they failed to do this they become his witnesses in a different way, by being punished to vindicate God's righteousness and then redeemed to demonstrate his love.

The release from exile will be like a new exodus only better (43:16-21; 51:9-10; 52:12). Just as God made a way through the sea to bring his people out

of Egypt so now he will make a way through the desert to bring them out of Babylon. They have made no sacrifices to him during the exile and so have made no atonement for their sin (43:22-24). Nevertheless, God will blot out all their sin (43:25-28). He has chosen them as his beloved (the meaning of the name "Jeshurun" in 44:2) and is about to help them. In 44:3 the theme of living water is linked with the Spirit. The God who pours out water on thirsty ground (41:17-20; 43:19-21) is the one who pours out the Spirit on his people (42:1; 44:3) giving them life just as water gives life to the plants and animals.

This tremendous act of salvation for an undeserving people calls forth the divine declaration: this is the character of him who is the First and the Last, the only God (44:6-8).

Day 272. Psalm 97; Isaiah 44:9 - 45:end

All Nations will Worship the Lord

Psalm 97

A vision of the Lord enthroned in heaven, the God of the whole earth. Idol-makers are put to shame as he reveals his power and his righteousness.

Isaiah 44:9 - 45:end

Having set out three grounds of confidence in the Lord's purpose to set Israel free, the prophet now becomes much more specific about the means by which it will happen. He has already referred to Cyrus as the conqueror from the east (41:2,25); now he introduces him by name as the instrument of salvation. The prophet of Babylon stands squarely in the tradition of his great predecessor, Isaiah of Jerusalem, who saw the Lord as sovereign over the whole earth, using the nations as instruments of his purpose (10:5-19; 37:22-29). But Isaiah of Babylon builds on this insight by exploring what this means for the relationship between the Lord and the Gentile nations.

The first step in this process of thought is the polemic against idol-worship, already introduced in 40:18-23 and 41:5-7,21-24 and now given a major poem of its own (44:9-20). Israel's tradition of both law and prophecy firmly rejected any representation of the Lord (Deuteronomy 5:8-10). To someone raised in this tradition the argument that the idol is not intended as the actual god would be merely hair-splitting. Worship without images expresses a fundamental truth. The Lord is the Creator of everything in heaven and earth. He is not to be compared with anything that he has made (40:25-26). Besides, from his observation of Babylonian religion, the prophet knew well that once they became a focus of devotion idol-worshippers did identify the images with the gods themselves.

It is not the idols but the Lord who has made everything (44:24), who has sent his prophets to proclaim what he is about to do (44:25-26), who brought his people out of Egypt (44:24,27) and is now about to save them by means of the emperor Cyrus (44:28). Cyrus is even called the anointed one, the "Messiah", in words that echo Psalm 2, which exalts the Davidic king in Jerusalem (45:1-3). Cyrus himself was a Zoroastrian, a religion based around the struggle of two equal forces of good and evil, light and

dark. But the Lord is much greater than anything which Cyrus worships. He is the true author of both light and dark, good and evil, and even though Cyrus does not acknowledge the Lord, the Lord is going to use him to accomplish his purpose (45:4-7).

Despite the breadth of his vision and the ringing tones in which he proclaimed it, the prophet found it difficult to make the dispirited exiles believe him. He upbraids them for doubting what God has said he is about to do (45:9-13). Since he alone is Creator of the world, he alone is sovereign in the political sphere, using even the greatest empires to do his will, surely a time must come when all nations acknowledge him as the only true God, the Saviour of the whole world, and Israel as his chosen people (45:22-25). The prophet believed that this would take place as a direct result of the salvation of Israel from exile. In this he was disappointed. Many more difficulties lay in store for Israel before the coming of Jesus, the faithful servant and the true Messiah, who will be the one to whom every knee will bow (Philippians 2:6-11).

Day 273. Psalm 66; Isaiah 46 - 48

Doomed Babylon and Rebellious Israel

Psalm 66

Praise to God who saves his people in trouble.

Isaiah 46 - 48

The prophet contrasts the gods who have to be carried by their worshippers with the God who carries his people (46:1-4). Babylon's gods will soon be carried off into captivity (46:2). The Lord is not to be compared with idols. In the days of the monarchy he proclaimed through the prophets what was about to take place and then brought it to pass (46:9-10). This time it will be the same (46:11) even though Israel do not believe it (46:12).

So confident is he of Babylon's coming defeat that he begins a taunt song against her. She has been used as an instrument to punish Israel (47:6) but has not realised that it is the Lord who allowed her to do so. In her arrogance she has usurped the place of God himself, taking his title, "The One who Is" and applying it to herself (47:8,10). Soon the "eternal queen" (47:7) will be widowed and lose her children (47:8-9) even as Jerusalem, now widowed and desolate, finds herself remarried and her children returning (54:1-8). All the so-called knowledge and wisdom of her astrologers and magicians will not be enough to save her (47:9-14).

But if the Lord's intention to save Israel brings judgement on Babylon it also exposes her own rebellious past. After two generations of waiting (42:14) God is bringing his "righteousness" or "vindication" near (46:13) and measured against that righteousness Israel does not do very well. When in the days of the monarchy the Lord revealed through the prophets what he was about to do and then brought it about, Israel paid no attention. Instead they carried on worshipping idols of their own, just as worthless as those of Babylon (48:4-5). Now God is doing it again, bringing his "ally" Cyrus to carry out his purpose (48:14) and again they are not listening (48:6-8). If only they had listened to him before all would have been well with them (48:17-19). As it is, God is acting not because Israel deserves it but for the sake of his own good name (48:9,11). A new exodus is about to take place in

which the Lord will sustain his people in the desert just as he did of old (48:20-21).

Day 274. Psalm 29; Isaiah 49 – 50

The Prophet's Call to the Servant Community

Psalm 129

Israel rejoices when the Lord frees her from oppression.

Isaiah 49 - 50

In 49:1-6, the Servant of the Lord speaks directly to the "coastlands" and nations to whom the Lord has chosen him to bring justice (42:1-4). But here there is a puzzle: in 49:3 the Servant is named as "Israel", but in 49:5 and 6 he has a mission *to* Israel. Clearly then, the Servant in this passage is both Israel and someone else at the same time. What seems to be happening is that the prophet, seeing that the exiles fail to understand his message and are unable to fulfil the vocation of God's Servant, takes on the mantle of the Servant himself. His own life and his words represent to Israel the shape of their calling. He has been called by the Lord from birth for a special purpose which has been concealed until now (49:1-3). When it appeared that God's purpose was coming to nothing he was discouraged but he continues to trust in God for his proper reward (49:4; see 40:10). And now the Lord gives him a new mission - to restore the community of Israel and to become a light to all nations (49:5-6).

Chapter 49 also introduces another change. In chapters 40 - 48 God's people are addressed as "Jacob" or "Israel". In chapters 49 - 55, apart from 49:1-6, the name changes to "Jerusalem" or "Zion". Although the book as a whole ends with a promise to the exiles (55:12-13), the focus seems to move from Israel the community in exile waiting for release to Jerusalem the forsaken city waiting for their return. Throughout the first part of the book the Lord has spoken of Israel as his Servant (41:8-9; 43:10; 44:1-2,21; 45:4; 48:20). Now, as we have seen, the picture becomes more complex. In chapters 49 and 50 the prophet himself takes on that role, and finally in chapters 52 and 53, the devastated city of Jerusalem.

The Lord himself answers the declaration of the Servant by promising that he will bring the exiles back home (49:8-26). Jerusalem thinks she is forgotten, but the Lord has remembered her (49:14-16). So many exiles will return that there will hardly be room for them all (49:20-21). Jerusalem will

reassign the desolate places of the land and in so doing will become a covenant to the peoples once again (49:8; see 42:6).

Speaking now to the exiles the prophet challenges their belief that their mother, Jerusalem, has been divorced. Instead, the exile was a punishment, which is now coming to an end (50:1-2; see 40:2). But the exiles refuse to believe. Perhaps some of them, whose lives in exile were comfortable and settled, resented and opposed the prophet's message. So the prophet replies. He is called to be a teacher who has learned from the Lord the word that sustains the weary (50:4-5; see 40:29-31). This means he has to endure suffering and rejection, just as has Jerusalem at the hands of the nations. And like Jerusalem, he looks forward to his vindication (50:7-9; see 41:10; 43:2).

In the light of this, the prophet addresses the exiles again (50:10-11). Will they obey the servant and be faithful to the Lord's call, or will they reject it and walk by the light of their own faithlessness?

Day 275. Psalm 98; Isaiah 51:1 - 52:12

The Lord Bares His Arm

Psalm 98

This psalm contains many of the themes which the prophet uses in the passage for today: the arm of the Lord, bringing salvation, justice and righteousness to Israel and through them to the whole world; and the rejoicing of creation as well as God's people at his marvellous acts.

Isaiah 51:1 - 52:12

The prophet's message arose from a deep awareness of the traditions of God's people. This gave him the power to formulate a new message for the crisis facing his generation. In this passage, he appeals to the experience of Abraham (51:1-2; see 41:8) and to the exodus from Egypt (51:10; 52:12; see 43:16-21). In 54:9 he will remind them of Noah and in 55:3 of David. In 51:9 he also refers to the ancient creation story in which the god El fights with the dragon Rahab and uses her defeated body to create the world. It is the Lord rather than El who is the divine Creator, victor over the sea and all the forces of chaos and rebellion.

All but two of the messages in this section begin with the words, "Listen," "Hear," or "Awake." The prophet calls the exiles, who are blind and dull of hearing (42:18-20), to pay attention to his message (51:1,4,7). He calls the arm of the Lord to wake up and get dressed ready for action (51:9). His holy arm which he has bared in the sight of all nations (40:10; 52:10) is going to bring his "torah" of justice and righteousness to all (51:4-5; Psalm 98:1-3) by setting his people free (51:9-11; 52:10-12).

In 51:17-23, the prophet picks up some words of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 25:15-29). Israel has drunk to the full the cup of the Lord's wrath; now it is time for her tormentors to drink it. Instead, Jerusalem is to be comforted by God her creator and protector (51:12-16). Human life is fragile and even the physical world decays, but the salvation he is about to bring will be eternal and unshakeable (51:6-8,12; see 40:6-8; 54:9-10). The result will be everlasting joy and gladness for Jerusalem and the returned exiles (51:3,11; 52:9).

Finally, the prophet calls Jerusalem to awake and dress herself in her best clothes (52:1), perhaps for a festival (52:9), perhaps for worship (52:1,11) but perhaps for the coming wedding when the Lord renews his love (54:4-8). The watchmen on the walls of the city look out and see the messenger approaching with the news that the exiles are on their way (52:7-8). Meanwhile the exiles are getting ready to leave, consecrating themselves to carry the sacred vessels back to the Temple (52:11; see Ezra 1:7-end). The return will be a new exodus without the haste of the first and, like the first, the Lord will go with his people on their journey (52:12).

The Suffering Servant

Isaiah 42:1-4, 49:1-6, 50:4-9, 52:13 - 53:end

These four passages, speaking about the servant of the Lord, both focus the message of the rest of the book and introduce the theme of patient suffering in the service of God. For many years there has been a dispute about who the prophet thinks the servant is. Confusion arises in particular because in 49:3 he states expressly that the servant is Israel, whereas in 49:6 the servant has a mission *to* Israel.

On the one hand, the servant appears to be an individual. Many of his experiences are those of a prophet. The Lord puts his spirit in him and gives him a ministry of teaching (42:1-4). He was called before he was born, as Jeremiah was (49:1; Jeremiah 1:4-5). He has the word of the Lord in his mouth, like a sharp sword (49:2). He wakes each morning to be taught by the Lord (50:4); and 53:7-8 are a close verbal echo of Jeremiah 11:19, describing the prophet's suffering. Is the prophet describing his own experiences as he suffers rejection by his people or those of Jeremiah who foresaw both Jerusalem's punishment and its restoration?

On the other hand, Israel is frequently spoken of as an individual, for example in Psalm 129:1-4, where she complains of her enemies ploughing upon her back, a passage reminiscent of Isaiah 51:23. Then there is the undoubted fact that outside the servant songs Israel is explicitly spoken of as God's servant (41:8-9; 43:10; 44:1-2,21; 45:4; 48:20). Besides that there are many more subtle links with what is said about Israel or Jerusalem and what is said about the servant. In 49:2, for example, the servant is given the word of the Lord and hidden in his hand, just as Jerusalem is in 51:16. In 40:10 Jerusalem is promised God's reward; in 49:4 the servant waits patiently for his reward.

The role of the servant is crucial for the prophet in answering the question, Why did Israel, God's chosen people, have to suffer so much? Unless he can answer this question, he cannot convince the doubting exiles of God's goodness and love towards them. So in the person of the Servant he portrays the vocation of the people of God to bring the justice and teaching or "torah" of the Lord to the whole earth. Although the nations and the

coastlands eagerly wait for this teaching, the Servant must necessarily endure rejection and suffering. His role is to stand for God in a world that has rejected him. Israel/Jerusalem has been chosen to bring the Lord's "torah" to the nations and is suffering because she has failed to do it, but is now to be redeemed in order to complete her vocation. And because of her unfaithfulness the prophet is called to endure the same pattern of patient suffering as he represents their vocation to an unwilling people.

For the early Church the vocation of the Servant was fulfilled in the suffering of Jesus and the writers of the New Testament are virtually unanimous in identifying Jesus as the Servant. At Jesus' baptism the voice of God from heaven quoted Isaiah 42:1 (Matthew 3:17). Matthew 8:17 quotes Isaiah 53:4 as fulfilled in Jesus' healing ministry and in 12:18-21 Matthew quotes extensively from Isaiah 42. In Acts 8:26-end, Philip finds an Ethiopian in his chariot reading Isaiah 53, joins him, explains how it refers to Jesus and baptises him as a Christian. And 1 Peter 2:22-25 is a lengthy quotation from Isaiah 53, referring it to Jesus.

It is also very likely that Jesus himself believed he had come to fulfil the vocation of the servant. In Mark 10:45 he refers to himself as coming to serve and to give his life as "a ransom for many", just as in Isaiah 53:12 the servant dies to bear the sins of "many".

The Servant thus portrays the vocation of God's people in all ages. Originally given to Israel, perfectly expressed in the life of Jesus, this calling now devolves on the Church and gives shape to its ministry. Jesus told his disciples that they must take up their cross and follow him. Like Jesus, God's people will also find themselves called to suffer to bring the knowledge of God to a sinful world.

Day 276. Psalm 102; Isaiah 52:13 - 53:end

Why the Lord's Servant Has to Suffer

Psalm 102

The psalm begins like the prayer of a sick man for healing. However, from verse 12 it appears that the sick man is in fact Jerusalem, crying to the Lord for mercy and the return of the exiles. The prayer is made on the basis of the Lord's power and faithfulness (102:25-end) and the worshipper looks forward to the Lord's name being glorified among the nations when the prayer is answered (102:15,21-22).

Isaiah 52:13 - 53:end

The prophet has carefully edited his spoken messages to present three grounds for confidence that the Lord is about to act to set his people free: his power in creation, his faithfulness to his word, given through the prophets, and his love for his people. One major question remains to be answered and to this he has been leading up throughout the book so far: Why, if God is so powerful and loves his people so much, should they have to suffer? In this, the last and longest of the Suffering Servant Songs, the answer is given.

In 52:13-end the Lord is speaking about the city of Jerusalem. The message continues from the preceding verses, which look forward to the return of the exiles and the restoration of the city (52:7-12; see 44:24-end). The servant will be raised, lifted up and exalted and this reversal of fortune will stop the mouths of the kings of the nations because for the first time they will realise what God has been doing (see also 49:7)

In 53:1-6 the kings themselves speak. They have recognised that the arm of the Lord is to be seen not only in the deliverance of the servant (40:10; 51:5; 52:10) but in his suffering (53:1). Up to now they have overlooked him, thinking him unworthy of their notice; they have avoided him because he seemed to be doomed to suffering (53:2-3). But now they realise that all this suffering was on their behalf. It was because of the sins of the nations, because each went his own way without the knowledge of God, that Jerusalem, God's own servant has been punished (53:4-6).

Israel had been entrusted with the law, the revelation of God's character, so that by living a life based on that law all nations should come to recognise the righteousness, justice and mercy of God (42:1-7). But Israel has failed to live up to the "torah", God's teaching. The city of Jerusalem, which should have been a shining example to the whole world, had become corrupt and her worship defiled (Isaiah 1:21-28). Israel had failed, so the Lord resolved to use his servant Jerusalem in a new way. He would still be the servant and still a witness to the whole world, though without knowing it and without co-operating in what God was about to do (42:18-end; 43:8-13). He would display his righteousness by punishing Jerusalem and his mercy by restoring her, thus redeeming his good name which her people had profaned by their unfaithfulness.

So Jerusalem was "stricken for the transgression of my people" (53:8). In verses 7-9 it is either the Lord or the prophet speaking. The Servant has been given up like a lamb led to the slaughter who does not know why he is about to be killed (53:7). He is now "dead" or "cut off", which is exactly how the exiles thought of themselves (Ezekiel 37:11), and has been buried in Babylon, among rich and wicked men (53:9).

And all this comes from the Lord, whose will it was both to punish the Servant and to raise him up (53:10). He has made him a guilt offering, a sacrifice upon which is laid the guilt of the sinner so that the sacrifice is killed while the sinner goes free. In this case, the sin was that of both unfaithful Israel and of the nations who did not know God. But now the Servant will see his offspring (53:10; see 49:15-21). He will make many righteous by his knowledge (53:11), teaching them the law (42:1-4) and the word which sustains the weary (50:4). By verse 12 the Lord is speaking again, declaring that because of its trial Jerusalem will have a place with the great nations of the earth (see 52:13).

Day 277. Psalm 96; Isaiah 54 – 55

The Lord's Unfailing Love for Jerusalem

Psalm 96

A call to the whole earth, Gentile nations and physical creation, to praise the Lord and acknowledge his greatness.

Isaiah 54 - 55

At the end of the final song of the suffering servant, the prophet declares that the servant will see the fruit of his suffering and be satisfied, that he will see his offspring and that he will be given a place among the great nations of the earth. These final chapters fill in some of the details of this vision.

First, the prophet describes the restoration of Jerusalem, speaking to her as a barren woman and a forsaken wife. Both of these conditions would have been a source of great shame (54:4). But now the children of Jerusalem are to be restored to her along with many others she has not known (54:1-3; see 49:19-23). Next he takes up Hosea's image of God's people as his beloved but unfaithful wife. In 50:1, he had insisted that she was never divorced. The Lord had rejected her because of her sins and was now about to take her back for ever as her husband and redeemer (54:4-8). The marriage is to be renewed as an unshakeable covenant, as unshakeable as the covenant with Noah (Genesis 9:8-17). Moreover it is to be a covenant of peace (54:10), the same promise made to the exiles by Ezekiel (Ezekiel 34:25, 37:26). It is a promise that the Lord would bless the restored community with his "shalom", giving them forgiveness, prosperity, security and many offspring. Such will be Israel's security and prosperity that the city will be rebuilt as if with jewels. Her children will be taught by the Lord, implying that they will learn the Lord's "torah" or teaching (54:11-13). There will be no more attacks from her enemies because God will protect her (54:14-17). These two images, the city and the bride, are taken up in Revelation to describe the future blessedness of God's people (Revelation 19:6-9; 21:1-2).

Throughout the book, the prophet has been calling on the exiles to hear him (40:27-28; 42:18-20; 44:1-2; 48:1,12,14; 51:1,4,7,21). Now he renews his call to hear the word of the Lord which brings life (55:2-3). God has punished his people, but now he is forgiving them freely (55:1; see 50:1; 52:3). The restoration of the nation will fulfil the promise he made to David. Jerusalem's king was to be a ruler of nations and witness to the greatness of the Lord (Psalms 2,110), and God's Servant Israel/Jerusalem is about to be restored to that role. The Lord is about to demonstrate his mercy and forgiveness (55:6-7; see 40:2), something no one would naturally expect (55:8-9). But the word of the Lord, which the prophet has spoken and collected together, is sure and must be fulfilled (55:10-11; see 40:6-8). God's people will be set free and their return will evoke the praise of the whole creation and glorify the Lord's name (55:12-13).
