

Israel's Faith after the Exile

Before the exile, Israel had been too much like all the other nations. Instead of living a distinctive lifestyle based on the Law and trusting God for their defence, they had lived like the surrounding nations, adopting their worship and standards of life and relying on political alliances for security. During the exile, some of Israel's leaders, like Ezra and Nehemiah, realised that this lack of obedience and distinctiveness lay at the root of Israel's problems and they began to lead the community in a new direction. The remedy was to build a life based on strict adherence to the Law and to keep the nation pure.

However, this meant that the pendulum could easily swing too far the other way. Concern for purity and distinctiveness could easily become a rigid exclusiveness in which the Law rather than the God who gave it became the focus of attention and Gentiles were hated and feared. This was the situation of the Pharisees and those who thought like them in Jesus' day. For almost the whole time between the return from exile and Jesus' birth, Israel was living under foreign rule. They still thought of themselves as slaves and still waited for the return of the exiles. The vision of Isaiah of Babylon for a nation reaching out to all nations with its Law was lost again. The Messiah, when he came, would be a deliverer who would rescue Israel from foreign domination and make her as great as in the time of his father, David.

In this last section of Old Testament readings we see the beginnings of this trend in Ezra and Nehemiah, two reflections of late Jewish piety in Esther and Daniel and two protests against exclusiveness in Jonah and Ruth.

Day 323. Psalm 93; Nehemiah 9 - 10; Ezra 9 - 10

The Cost of the Law

Psalm 93

The Lord is King over the whole earth.

Nehemiah 9 - 10

These chapters follow the story of the reading of the Law in Nehemiah 8. The reaction of the people, led by the Levites, was first praise and then confession. The Law brought out the contrast between the grace of God to Israel and their ingratitude and disobedience. Echoes of the Torah abound in the prayer, such as the description of God in 9:17, drawn from Exodus 34:6, and the graciousness of God in the wilderness in 9:21, quoted from Deuteronomy 8:4. Knowledge of the Law applied this way was the main nourishment of post-exilic piety.

The prayer also established the continuity between the post-exilic community and Israel's history, mentioning the patriarchs, the exodus, the gift of the Law at Sinai, the wilderness wanderings, the conquest, the judges and the prophets. Through all this, the community discerned the teaching and guiding of God's "good Spirit" (9:20,30; see Psalm 143:10). Yet at the present time, the people of Israel were still slaves (9:36).

The outcome was a binding agreement to keep the Law, sealed by a curse and an oath. Specially mentioned were the obligations to avoid intermarriage with other nations, to keep the Sabbath, and to maintain the worship of the Temple (10:28-end). These were becoming the most important signs of Jewish distinctiveness. Here we see the seeds of the exclusiveness of Jesus' day, in which Samaritans and Gentiles were treated with suspicion and even hatred. The weakness of the whole commitment was the possibility that it might be understood as a bargain, in which Israel looked to God for freedom in return for obedience.

Ezra 9 - 10

Exactly how these chapters relate historically to Nehemiah 9 - 10 is not clear, but logically they reflect a later development. Having entered a

commitment to keep themselves pure, the Israelites had failed to carry it out. The "holy race" had been mingled with the surrounding peoples (9:2).

Like that in Nehemiah 9, Ezra's prayer looked back to the failings of the pre-exilic community. But here, even more than in Nehemiah, the prayer has the nature of "representative confession": Ezra does not simply recall the guilt of Israel's ancestors; he identifies with it and takes it on himself. It is not just "they" who sinned but "we" and even "I" (9:6-7). Because of the sin of past and present generations, Israel was still in slavery. Some "little relief" (9:8) was to be found in that this slavery was not as burdensome as that under Pharaoh in Egypt, but it was slavery nevertheless.

The solution adopted was the drastic one of sending away the wives and children from all foreign marriages (daughters who had "married out" were already lost), and Ezra 10 relates the story of how agreement was reached. In its concern for the "holy race" the passage does not tell us about the fate of the women and children who were thus separated from their husbands and fathers.

Day 324. Psalm 71; Nehemiah 11 - 13

The Dedication of the Wall

Psalm 71

An old man's prayer of confidence in God.

Nehemiah 11

The leaders were conscious of Jerusalem as the "holy city". This is how the prophets such as Zechariah had portrayed it. It was important that the city was populated and in particular that the priests, Levites and Temple servants were on hand to fulfil their duties.

Nehemiah 12:1-26

An important list of priests. 12:10-11 names six high priests, beginning with Jeshua, the "Joshua" of Zechariah 1 - 8, who was high priest at the time of the rebuilding of the Temple in the 520s. Eliashib was high priest during Nehemiah's second period of governorship in the 430s (13:4,28), so Joiakim fits in to the 90 years in between. The historian Josephus says that Jaddua was a contemporary of Alexander the Great, whose conquests in the east began in 334 B.C. This suggests that the next three names cover the 100 years or so following Nehemiah and that the Chronicler, living about 350 B.C. would have known Jaddua as high priest.

Darius the Persian (12:22) is probably Darius III, who was defeated by Alexander in 331. 12:24 demonstrates the tradition of responsive praise, which is the origin of the responsive tradition of cathedral singing.

Nehemiah 12:27 - 13:3

In 12:31, the compiler returns to the diary of Nehemiah, which he left in 7:6 and to the dedication of the newly built wall. This suggests that all the material in between has been inserted and the dedication left to form the climax of the book. Two parties of singers go round the wall in opposite directions, meeting up in the Temple for the climax of the event (12:31-40). The route of the first group suggests that at one point they cut through part of the city, perhaps because the wall was too steep (12:37). As explained in the introduction to Ezra and Nehemiah, the mention of Ezra in 12:36 may be unhistorical.

The Chronicler has added to the account of the dedication of the wall a summary of the re-establishment of the Levites and Temple singers "in the days of Zerubbabel and Nehemiah" (12:44-end) and another reading of the Law resulting in the exclusion of foreigners (13:1-3).

Nehemiah 13:4-end

The remaining part of chapter 13 describes Nehemiah's second term as governor, possibly about 430 B.C. and the problems he tackled. These are closely related to the oath of 10:28-end. The community had failed to provide adequately for the Temple or to keep the Sabbath and had allowed foreign marriages. The priests and leaders had been just as lax as the rest of the people. Nehemiah took the lead in challenging these abuses for the glory of God.

Day 325. Psalm 121; Esther 1 - 5

The Jewish Queen

Psalm 121

God, the preserver of Israel.

Esther 1 - 5

The story of Esther was written for the Jewish feast of Purim to explain the origin of the feast (see 3:7). Whatever the facts which gave rise to the story, in its present form the book sets out not to record history but to tell a tale. With many ironic and humorous touches, it portrays the luxury and vanity of Gentile civilisation and holds it up to ridicule. It also reflects the consciousness of the Jews of the prejudice against them because of their distinctiveness (3:8). Although he is never mentioned by name, God is clearly present as the guiding hand of Providence and the protector of the Jews. The story-teller belongs to the tradition reflected in the story of Joseph (Genesis 37 - 50) and Solomon's succession (2 Samuel 11 - 20; 1 Kings 1 - 2) in which God works through human decisions and the events of everyday life.

Chapter one introduces the first main character in the story, the emperor Ahasuerus or Xerxes, the most powerful man in the world, and pokes fun at him for his pompousness, weakness for drink and the stupidity of his counsellors. It also portrays his contempt for women and compares it with the respect for women as the centre of family life in Jewish culture.

Vashti showed a proper spirit by refusing to submit to her husband because of the arrogance of his command. In the next chapter this is contrasted with the care with which Mordecai had brought Esther up, the concern he shows for her and her obedience (2:7-11). Both Esther's entry to the harem and the plot of 2:21-23 and Mordecai's part in foiling it are vital in frustrating Haman's plot later. Before it has even begun, God is already working to protect his people.

The next major character to be introduced is Haman the Agagite. As a descendant of the Amalekites, Haman was already the enemy of the Jews (1 Samuel 15:2,32-33) and Mordecai's refusal to give him honour provokes him to anger. The purpose of throwing lots to decide when the massacre of

the Jews was to be was to find an auspicious time (3:7). But every Jew knew that the result of the lot was always in the Lord's hand (Proverbs 16:33). The king is influenced again by one of his courtiers and the city of Susa is bewildered by the apparent pointlessness of the plot (3:8-11,15).

Mordecai, when he hears of the plot, urges Esther to do what she can to prevent it. Help will come from the Lord anyway, since he is their protector, but perhaps Esther is the appointed means by which he intends to bring it (4:14). Believing God is in control, he and all the Jews fast and pray for the success of Esther's intercession (4:16) and the first answer to their prayers comes when she is accepted by the king (5:2).

Meanwhile, Esther's invitation puffs Haman up even more, but as the Jews knew, pride comes before destruction (Proverbs 16:18).

Day 326. Psalm 30; Esther 6 - 10

The Jews' Revenge

Psalm 30

A prayer of thanks to God for saving his people from death.

Esther 6 - 10

The crisis of the story has already passed when the king accepts Esther's plea and extends the sceptre towards her in 5:2. In the second half of the book, the Jews enjoy their success. In two especially funny scenes, the vanity of Haman's pride is exposed and he reaps the reward for enmity of the Jews.

But first, at a crucial point in the story, divine Providence again plays a part. The king, unable to sleep, asks for the annals of the court to be read to him and hears the very part in which Mordecai exposed the earlier plot against him (6:1-2). Haman, entering at just that minute, is forced to be the means of giving to Mordecai the honour he thought was meant for himself (6:3-11). His fate is already prefigured and his friends warn him of the futility of opposing God's people (6:13), but like Pharaoh when his magicians warned him that he was up against the finger of God (Exodus 8:19), his heart is hardened and he cannot turn back. Besides it is too late: Esther's banquet is about to begin.

At the banquet, Haman the wicked becomes Haman the fool, unjustly suspected of molesting the queen when he only wanted to beg for mercy (7:7-10). Esther's plea in 7:4 means that as slaves the Jews could be of some benefit to the empire, but if dead they could not. The last twist of fate arrives when the king is told about Haman's gallows just as he considering what to do with him. Like the enemies against whom the Jews had long prayed, the trouble the wicked man planned has fallen on his own head (Psalm 7:14-16).

Haman falls and Mordecai is exalted to take his place. Now follows the foiling of the plot in which the same thing happens on a world-wide scale. Instead of being marked down for destruction, killing and annihilation (3:13), the Jews inflict all these things on their enemies (8:11). The fear of the Jews spreads throughout the empire (8:17) and the fear of Mordecai falls on the officials (9:3). 8:17 is the earliest mention of people converting to Judaism. The sorrow of the Jews has been turned into celebration (9:22; Psalm 30:11-12). In fact the whole of the last two chapters, telling of the origin of the festival of Purim, is pervaded with the atmosphere of celebration (8:16-17).

Day 327. Psalm 131; Ruth

Ruth's Loyalty

Psalm 131

The psalmist acknowledges her dependence on God's constant loving care.

Ruth

In the Hebrew Bible, Ruth is not included as one of the historic books, but with the "Writings". It is a folk-tale from Bethlehem, preserved because the main characters stand in the family line of David, told and re-told down the generations. In the period after the exile it would have special significance for two reasons. First, it exalts the ancient traditions of Israel, such as gleaning, levirate marriage and the "go'el" or "kinsman-redeemer", expressions of ancient wisdom and sources of stability in unstable times. Secondly, the story of a foreigner who chose to become a member of God's people and was welcomed as such acts as a counterbalance to the excessive exclusiveness of the period following Nehemiah and Ezra's reforms.

As young widows, Orpah and Ruth would have been free to remain in Moab and look for husbands among their own people, but Ruth declares her loyalty to Naomi and with her to the land, the people of Israel and their God (1:16-17). Without a man to stand for them, Naomi and Ruth were not only poor but powerless (2:13). Their only protection was the God who appeared to be the author of their misfortune (1:20-21). Yet Ruth was content to entrust herself to that protection (2:12).

Boaz's prayer that God would honour such faithfulness was already on the way to being answered and he was to be the means. Attracted to Ruth by her reputation and her gentle assertiveness, he provides protection, drink and food (2:9,14). The success of her first day's work (2:17) is a first sign of God's blessing.

Encouraged by Boaz's generosity, Naomi carefully chooses the time for Ruth to make her bold move. In the visit to the threshing floor, she was offering herself to Boaz as a sexual partner and wife if he would take her (3:9). By so doing, she demonstrates confidence in his integrity and declares her willingness to honour her dead husband by seeking levirate marriage

rather than acting as a free agent (3:10), at the same time reminding Boaz of his responsibility (3:11-13).

The marriage is concluded, and the elders demonstrate their acceptance of Ruth with the prayer that she become like Rachel and Leah, the ancestresses of Israel, and Tamar, the ancestress of the tribe of Judah, who had boldly reminded Judah of his responsibilities under the law of levirate marriage (Genesis 38). A Moabite is accepted into Israel and becomes the great-grandmother of its greatest king.

As the bride redeemed by her "go'el" she stands for God's people as a whole, whose husband and redeemer is God (Isaiah 54:5), and is a sign of the time when the Bride will be drawn from many nations. (Revelation 21:2).

Day 328. Psalm 103; Jonah

Jonah's Lesson

Psalm 103

The abounding compassion of the Lord for all he has made.

Jonah

Jonah is recorded in 2 Kings 14:25 as the prophet who foretold the extension of the territory of northern Israel to its fullest extent in the reign of Jeroboam II. His record as a prophet of aggressive nationalism makes him a fit subject for this story, written much later, to question the exclusivism of a later age.

Jonah is ordered to deliver an oracle against the wicked city of Nineveh and refuses. At this stage we are not told why. It is one he should have been eager to give. Surely, the destruction of Nineveh was exactly what he would desire the most. Instead, he joins a Phoenician ship sailing in the opposite direction, to Spain. However, the Lord demonstrates what every pious Jew knew, that he is the God who made the sea and the land (1:9) and that he has power over them. Not only can Jonah not escape from his presence (Psalm 139:7-10), but prayers to other gods do not avail against him (1:5). At his name, the pagan sailors fall into great fear (1:10). Their efforts to save Jonah demonstrate a natural piety, which turns into fear and trust when they witness the power of the Lord (1:16). Thus, the opening scene reminds the audience that God is the Creator of the whole earth, a just judge, to whom all people are responsible, and shows pagans recognising his power and his justice.

The following scene is one of death and resurrection. Using the conventional images of the psalms (eg. Psalm 18:4-6; 42:4-7; 54:6-7), Jonah prays for deliverance. Both the depths of the sea and the belly of the fish are images of the grave (2:2,6,7). In his descent and his rescue, Jonah traces the path of God's people in the exile and return. The exile had been a grave for God's servant, from which he had been rescued to see the outcome of his suffering (Isaiah 53:9-12). Called to be a light to the nations, the means by which the Lord's "torah" should come to distant lands (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6), the

servant had been punished for his failure and brought back from the dead to glorify God (Isaiah 43:8-13).

Accordingly, a chastened Jonah obeys the Lord's command and goes to Nineveh. His message is barely a sentence long and consists only of a pronouncement of judgement. Nevertheless, Nineveh repents. All put on sackcloth and the king orders a general fast, to include even the livestock. In fact, Nineveh is doing exactly what Joel had urged God's people to do (Joel 2:12-14). And whereas the Phoenician sailors saw in the Lord a just and powerful Judge, the citizens of Nineveh appeal to his compassion. As a result the city is spared.

Only now, in the light of the repentance of Nineveh, which should have been good news, do we learn the reason for Jonah's former disobedience and his present resentment: he does not want the Lord to spare the wicked! Jonah is a man of impeccably orthodox belief: in God as sole creator (1:9) and in his mercy and compassion (4:2; see Exodus 34:6-7), but he displays all the wrong attitudes. He wants the grace of God, which he himself has experienced in his deliverance from the sea, to be reserved for his own people. In this scene, Jonah is a rather poor reflection of the exhausted Elijah (4:3; 1 Kings 19:4), and just like Elijah, God answers him with a question (4:4,9,11; 1 Kings 19:9,13), a question which the readers or hearers of the story have to answer for themselves. Should God be just and compassionate to his enemies as well as his own people?

Thus, Jonah is a parable, a story that ends with a question which puts its hearers on the spot (see Luke 10:36) and makes them judge their own attitudes and conduct. Jonah has been a reflection of the exclusiveness of the post-exilic community and they are asked to see themselves in him and decide accordingly.

Daniel

Like Ruth and Jonah, Daniel consists of stories about characters from the past told to make a point in the present. It can be fairly accurately dated to 164 B.C., a time when the Jews were experiencing severe persecution from the Seleucid king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes. An account of this persecution can be found in the book of 1 Maccabees in the Apocrypha (1 Maccabees 1:41-end). The Maccabean revolt of that time is mentioned in Daniel 11:32-35.

Daniel is not one of the prophetic books but, like Ruth and Esther, belongs to the "Writings". The reasons for dating it much later than the time of the exile are very strong. It contains words in Aramaic which did not exist until the 2nd. century B.C. It portrays the "Chaldeans" as a class of wise men, which was not the case in the time of Nebuchadnezzar but was in the 2nd. century. Clearest of all, the descriptions of world history in chapters 8 and 11 grow very much more detailed for the reign of Antiochus but at a certain point (8:25; 11:40) they become both vague and inaccurate, indicating a change to genuine prediction.

If this date is accepted, we must realise that the original author and his readers never believed the stories of Daniel and his friends to be genuine history, nor are the visions to be taken as genuine prophecy. Instead, the book was written as a tract for the time to encourage Jews who were standing firm under persecution. It is a commentary on political pride and ambition, portraying God as the ultimate ruler in the kingdoms of the world and sovereign even over the powerful kings who threatened the Jewish people with extinction.

Day 329. Psalm 26; Daniel 1 - 2

A Call to Faithfulness

Psalm 26

The prayer of a man determined to keep the Law.

Daniel 1

The first chapter introduces the main characters and sets the scene for the rest of the book. Daniel and his friends are attempting to remain loyal to their Jewish heritage in a hostile foreign environment. Under pressure from Antiochus, many Jews began to abandon their way of life and adopt Greek culture. The Temple was defiled, reading the Law banned and having children circumcised punishable by death. Nevertheless, some chose to die rather than be defiled by foreign food (1 Maccabees 1:62-63). The food may have been defiling because it contained unclean meat, would not have been prepared according to kosher regulations or have been used in idol-worship.

Nebuchadnezzar's officials find that the ritually pure diet chosen by Daniel and his friends does them more good than the king's choice food, and they are allowed to keep on eating it.

Daniel 2

Both here (2:1) and in 1:1 the errors in dating indicate the late date of the book. The siege of Jerusalem came at the end of the reign of Jehoiakim, not in his third year, and in the eighth year of Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 24:1-12). Besides, Daniel and his friends had already been trained for three years before chapter 2 begins (1:5,18).

To tell the king what his dream had been as well as interpret it is beyond the ability of Nebuchadnezzar's wise men. Their power falls short just as that of the magicians of Egypt had done (2:10-11; Exodus 8:19). But in answer to the prayers of his friends, God gives Daniel the same dream (2:17-19). Like Joseph before Pharaoh (Genesis 41:16), Daniel does not claim the power himself. It is God who interprets dreams (2:27-28). He it is who has both wisdom and power, who sets up kings and deposes them (2:20-23).

The head of gold is obviously intended to represent Nebuchadnezzar himself (2:36-38). Equally obviously, the legs of iron represent Alexander the Great, who smashed his way to victory in the space of a few years (2:40) and whose kingdom was divided on his death between his generals Antigonus, Ptolemy and Seleucus (2:41-43). This means that the bronze kingdom must be the Persian empire, which preceded Alexander, and the chest and arms of silver stand for the Median kingdom, which is actually unhistorical, occurring only in Daniel and other books dependent on it (5:30-31).

The stone cut by no human hand represents a kingdom God was about to set up (2:44-45; see Isaiah 28:16). The later chapters also express the expectation that at the time of greatest crisis God would intervene to save his people and give them a lasting dominion over the whole earth. In fact, this hope was never fulfilled. God's intervention came about in an entirely different way. But as we shall see, the message of Daniel was to play a vital part in the life and teaching of Jesus and the early Church.

Day 330. Psalm 27; Daniel 3 - 5

"The Most High Rules"

Psalm 27

Confidence in God in the face of enemies.

Daniel 3

Although Antiochus Epiphanes did set up an image of the god Apollo it was not in Jerusalem and the Jews were not required to worship it. The problem was the general pressure on loyal Jews to give up the practice of their faith or risk losing their lives. The elaborate style of this chapter suggests that it was written as a story to be told and retold to strengthen the faith of those loyal Jews. The author exalts the God of the Jews over all gods. He is the Most High God (3:26; see Genesis 14:19; Deuteronomy 32:8; Psalm 18:13) who gives all nations their inheritance and is able to rescue his servants from even the most powerful of rulers (3:15).

The global scale of the confrontation is emphasised by the repeated list of "satraps, prefects, governors, counsellors, treasurers, justices, magistrates, and all officials (3:2,3) which then changes in verses 4 and 7 to "peoples, nations and languages". The issue is one for the whole world. Will they worship the image of political power or the God of heaven? And who is stronger, the emperor who demands worship or the God who is entitled to it? For Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, it is better to remain loyal to God and die than to abandon him and live (3:16-17).

Like the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, the three suffer not only on behalf of the Jewish nation but on behalf of all nations to deliver them from false worship. After their suffering they are restored to life and see the result of their suffering in the emperor's decree (Isaiah 53:10-12).

In the mind of the author, the figure "like a son of the gods" (3:25) is one of the "host of heaven" who always attend on God (1 Kings 22:19; Job 1:6; Psalm 148:2), an "angel" (3:28), "messenger" or "watcher" (4:13,17,23). Christians have seen in this incident the presence of the Son of God with his servants in times of persecution.

Daniel 4

Despite the vindication of the servants of God in chapter 3, Nebuchadnezzar's decree did not go very far. It is a long way from forbidding anyone to blaspheme Israel's God to acknowledging him as the true and only ruler in heaven and earth. The result of this story of Nebuchadnezzar's dream and madness is to lead him to extol and honour the one true God.

He learns that the Most High God is sovereign in the earthly realm. Before him, the most powerful ruler is nothing (4:35; Isaiah 40:15-24). Even Nebuchadnezzar's universal dominion (4:22) is his by God's gift (4:17). At the end of the story, having been urged to repent (4:27), he recognises that humble worship is better than pride (4:37). The rule of God in political affairs is a constantly recurring theme of both Old and New Testaments (Genesis 15:12-16; 17:20; Deuteronomy 2:4-5,9-12; Psalm 2; Isaiah 10:5-19; Amos 9:7; Habakkuk 2:2-4; Matthew 28:18; Acts 17:26-28).

The form of chapter 4 is different from the previous chapters - a letter from King Nebuchadnezzar, although the account slips into a commentary on the letter in verses 28-33. This suggests that the different stories may originally have circulated separately.

Daniel 5

Belshazzar has failed to learn the lesson his father learned (5:18-21), and is removed from his kingdom (5:22-28).

Why Daniel's reward was to become third highest ruler in the kingdom (5:16) is a mystery, perhaps the result of the writer's shaky sense of history. Three Dariuses ruled the Persian empire at various times, but none could accurately be called "the Mede".

Day 331. Psalm 91; Daniel 6 - 7

The Coming of the Son of Man

Psalm 91

God rescues those who trust in him.

Daniel 6

Although Daniel was innocent of any crime except that of being faithful to the Law of his God (6:5), the satraps wanted to get rid of him so as to stop him being placed over them (6:3-4). Darius, who loved Daniel because of his righteousness, nevertheless had to get rid of him because of the law, which could not be changed. Under this law, he, a king, had tried to take over the privileges of God (6:6-9). Daniel was sent to his death and a stone placed over the mouth of the lions' den, sealed with the king's own seal (6:17). However, like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, Daniel was rescued from certain death by the intervention of an angel (6:22). This theme of resurrection culminates in 12:1-3.

In the mind of the author, Daniel represents the righteous people of God, unjustly condemned because of their faithfulness to the Law. His intention was to encourage his readers to stand firm in the face of persecution. Christians may see in Daniel an image of Jesus, unjustly condemned to prevent him becoming the ruler of his people, buried in a tomb with a stone over the entrance, but raised from there in the early morning. Darius points to the "old Adam", ruler of the earth but aspiring to the privilege of God alone (Genesis 3:4-5), approving the good but a prisoner of the law of sin and death. Like the Law of the Medes and the Persians, which seemed unalterable, this Law is now set aside because of the resurrection of Jesus (Romans 7:21 - 8:2).

Daniel 7

Chapter 7 is the central and most important chapter of the whole book, summing up the stories of chapters 1 - 6 and further expanded in the visions of chapters 8 - 12. Like Daniel in chapter 6, another human figure is surrounded by wild beasts until God intervenes to give judgement in his favour (6:20-22; 7:9-14). This is the "one like a human being" who is later

identified as the representative of the "holy ones of the Most High" (7:13-14,18).

In chapter 7, the beasts represent the same four world empires as the statue of chapter 2, ending with the powerful and terrifying kingdom of Alexander the Great which crushes, devours and tramples under foot (7:7). This kingdom is divided between several rulers (exactly which kings are thought of as the ten horns is uncertain) including one "little horn" speaking boastfully, a picture of Antiochus Epiphanes, the oppressor of God's faithful people.

The image of God as Judge has deep roots in Israel's tradition and is expressed in psalms such as 7,9,50,96,97 and 98. Psalms 50:3 and 97:3 describe the fire which comes from his throne, though the description of the throne with its flaming wheels owes much to Ezekiel's vision (Ezekiel 1:15-18). The result of God's judgement is that the fourth beast is slain, while the others are allowed to live (7:11-12). The little horn, who has been allowed to oppress God's people for three and a half "times" (see also 4:23,25,32, where periods of time are dealt with in the same way) will also lose his power and be destroyed (7:25-27), while the authority of God's kingdom (4:34; 6:26) is entrusted to his holy ones (7:27). They will rule over the first three beasts, who have been allowed to live but without their power (7:12).

The author's expectation is that before very long, Antiochus will be defeated by divine intervention and universal authority be given to God's faithful people, the very ones who are now enduring persecution.

The "Son of Man"

In newer, inclusive language versions of the Bible, the Hebrew words *ben adam* are usually translated by a phrase such as "mortal" or "human being". Literally, however, these words mean "son of man", and are translated in this way in older versions. The figure of the "human being" or "son of man" who appears in Daniel 7 is of great importance for our understanding of the Bible as a whole and especially the ministry of Jesus. Of all the titles Jesus used about himself, "the Son of Man" is the most frequent.

In several places in the Old Testament, the phrase "son of man" stands simply for the frailty and mortality of humankind in contrast to the power and majesty of God (Psalm 8:4). Ezekiel is regularly called "son of man" (Ezekiel 2:1; 3:1 etc.) and in Numbers 23:19 "son of man" is used to contrast the constancy of God with the inconstancy of human beings. The title is also used of the king, the man who represented God's people (Psalm 80:17). The king was also known as God's son and anointed one (2 Samuel 7:14; Psalm 2:7; 84:9; 89:26).

In Daniel, the Son of Man has both these senses and more. Frail and mortal, he is the representative of the "holy ones of the most high", God's oppressed people (Daniel 7:13,27). The "coming" of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven stands for the time, which the author of Daniel thought would soon come to pass, when God would intervene decisively to defeat the kingdoms of the world and restore his own people to a position of sovereignty and power. This meaning is taken up and developed in later books of Jewish apocalyptic writing.

Although it is possible that Jesus used "Son of man" simply to mean "I" or "me", it is much more likely that he had Daniel 7 in mind, especially as he quoted the crucial verse at the crisis point of his ministry, the trial before the Sanhedrin (Matthew 26:64; Mark 14:62; Luke 22:67-69). Jesus' answer to the high priest brought together the three titles, Messiah, Son of God and Son of Man. He was claiming that all are fulfilled in him.

The majority of occasions on which Jesus referred to himself as the Son of Man are concerned with his suffering and glory (Matthew 16:21-17:12; Mark 8:31-end). In addition, Mark 10:45 brings the title together with the figure of the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah 53 who suffers on behalf of many.

The author of Daniel looked to God to intervene at what he saw as the crisis of world history, to give judgement in favour of his own people, and set them free. In fact, none of this took place. The Maccabean revolt had only limited success. By the time of Jesus, the Jews were again under foreign domination. Instead the intervention the author expected took place in the Person of Jesus, who took on the role of Son of Man, Son of God and Suffering Servant, summing up the calling of God's people and fulfilling it in his willing acceptance of suffering. Through that suffering he offers freedom and life not only to God's ancient people, the Jews, but to his people throughout the world.

Apocalyptic

The visions of Daniel 7 - 12 are examples of a new type of writing which flourished between about 200 B.C. and 300 A.D. It is known as "apocalyptic" from the Greek word for "revelation" or "disclosure".

The key features of apocalyptic writings are:

- a vision (although sometimes the "vision" is given only in verbal form as in Daniel 9) including many symbolic or allegorical elements;
- the vision is usually given to a venerable figure from the past (other Jewish apocalyptic writings use Enoch, Abraham, Baruch and Ezra);
- it often involves a journey through heavenly realms, encounters with angels and demons and glimpses of the throne of God;
- it is interpreted by an angel, who explains the correspondence between the heavenly symbols and the earthly reality, thus revealing the purpose of God;
- the human recipient (situated in the writer's past) is usually told to stand fast and wait patiently and sometimes to conceal the revelation until the time of which it speaks (the time of the writer himself).

Apocalyptic writings bring together some of the features of the later prophets. Ezekiel 40 - 48 and Zechariah 1 - 8 include visions with a heavenly interpreter. Isaiah 56 - 66, Isaiah 24 - 27 and Zechariah 9 - 14 see an intensified conflict between good and evil and a final transformation of the world. But while the prophetic writings are usually poetic, with a number of short pithy sayings, apocalyptic writing is long, complicated and usually in prose, with none of the directness of prophecy. Even more important, the prophets looked for God to act in the present world. The "Day of the Lord", whose roots go at least as far back as Amos (Amos 5:18-20), was a day of judgement on the wicked but not the end of the world. In contrast, the apocalyptic writers all look to a decisive intervention at some time in the future leading to the end of the present age.

Moreover, for the prophets the future was usually still open. What was to happen depended on the response of those who heard the word of the

Lord. In the apocalyptic writings God's plan is fixed, and the day of judgement and all the events which lead up to it already decided. This change was probably the result of increasing pessimism, the beginning of which we have already glimpsed in the later prophets. Between the time of Alexander the Great and Antiochus Epiphanes Jerusalem had been fought over and captured at least ten times, God's people remained under foreign rule, and there were no signs of the return of the exiles predicted by the prophets. The righteous saw themselves as a small and oppressed group, whom nothing but an intervention of God and a new age could save.

Day 332. Psalm 90; Daniel 8 - 9

The Seventy Weeks

Psalm 90

To God historical time is like the blink of an eye. He sees the end from the beginning and is able to bring his will to pass.

Daniel 8

The vision of chapter 7 with the coming of the Son of Man is the first of a series. In chapter 8, the ram with two horns symbolises the empire of Media and Persia, first introduced in Nebuchadnezzar's dream of chapter 2. These empires are violently thrown down by the goat, Alexander the Great, whose progress from his native Macedonia is so fast that his feet don't even touch the ground (8:5). Killed at the height of his power, Alexander's empire is split four ways: the kingdoms of Macedonia and Greece, Asia Minor, Egypt, and Syria with Babylonia and the further east.

From one of these kingdoms comes another horn, Antiochus Epiphanes, ruler of the kingdom of Syria, whose kingdom included the "Beautiful Land" of Israel (8:9). In his arrogance, Antiochus attempted to change the worship of his subjects, including the Jews (8:10), setting himself up against the Prince of the host, God himself (8:11). It was the compromise and apostasy of the leading Jews, who agreed to adopt Greek customs and worship (8:12), which enabled Antiochus to succeed. The daily sacrifices of the Temple ceased (8:12) and an image of Zeus Olympius (known to pious Jews as the abomination of desolation) was placed on the altar. Daniel is told that the period of desolation during which no sacrifices are made will be 2,300 days (8:14) and that at the end of that period Antiochus will meet his end at God's hand (8:25).

As in most apocalyptic visions, Daniel is told to seal up the vision and keep it for the time of the end, the author's own time (8:26).

Daniel 9

It is significant that according to the stories Daniel is living at the time of the exile, the last time the regular sacrifices of the Temple had ceased. The exile had come about because of the rebellion of God's people, and the

pious Jews who supported the Maccabees saw rebellion in the actions of the Jewish leaders and their supporters. Daniel's prayer is an echo of those of Ezra and Nehemiah (Ezra 9:5-end; Nehemiah 9:6-37) and an invitation to the loyal Jews to appeal to God in the same way, on the basis of his great mercy rather than his people's desert (9:18).

By the second century, Jeremiah's prediction of 70 years was firmly established as the length of the exile (9:2). Yet Jerusalem was still being trampled down, the exiles had not all returned and God's people were still being oppressed. In the light of this, Daniel 9 reinterprets the 70 years as 70 "sevens" or "weeks of years" (9:24). We have to remember that the author's grasp of history was actually rather hazy. The empire of the Medes, for example, has very little historical basis. The 70 sevens are divided into three periods: 7 sevens, 62 sevens and 1 seven. The 7 sevens begin with the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. and end with the fall of Babylon and first return in 538, almost exactly 49 years. The "anointed prince" of 9:25, during whose time Jerusalem was rebuilt probably refers to Joshua or Zerubbabel or both, even though the period of the rebuilding was actually the 520s. The 62 sevens cover the period from then until the "cutting off" of an "anointed one", probably the murder of the high priest Onias III in 170 B.C. even though this gives less than the required 434 years. His death introduces the last period of seven years during which war like a flood will pour over Jerusalem (9:26), as took place in 168 when the city was invaded, and desolations are introduced with the offering ceasing in the middle of the seven.

For the author, the present time is the time of final battle of Ezekiel 38 and 39 and Zechariah 14, when the Gentiles will invade the city immediately before God intervenes to save it. Accordingly, he looks forward to the decreed end being poured out on Antiochus within a short time (9:27).

Day 333. Psalm 94; Daniel 10 -12

The Resurrection of the Martyrs

Psalm 94

The Lord defends the righteous against corrupt rulers.

Daniel 10 - 12

In the climax of the book, the final vision recounts the events of recent world history in greater detail and confidently predicts the downfall of the oppressor and the vindication of God's people, though some of them must wait until they have given their lives before seeing the ultimate victory.

The man of 10:5-6 is the source for conventional pictures of angels, the wings coming from 9:21, which mentions Gabriel's flight. It is also the background to John's vision of the risen Lord in Revelation 1. The idea that each nation has its guardian angel has a long history (Deuteronomy 29:25-26; 32:8-9). Here, the warfare and political intrigues of earth have a heavenly counterpart in the struggle of angels with one another (10:13,20-21; 12:1). The delay in the answer to Daniel's prayer is due to this heavenly warfare.

This time there is no allegorical vision, only a straightforward recital of historical facts, beginning with the last king of Persia, Darius III (11:3). He was defeated by Alexander, whose empire was in turn broken up among his commanders (11:4). The first king of the South was Ptolemy I of Egypt, whose general took control of the Syrian kingdom, becoming Seleucus I (11:5). The alliance between Egypt and Syria was much later, in 250 B.C. when the Egyptian princess Berenice was given in marriage to Antiochus II. Within a short time, Antiochus, Berenice and her son all met their deaths by poison (11:6). To avenge her death, Berenice's brother Ptolemy III invaded the Syrian kingdom, returning through Palestine with the booty including many captured idols (11:7-8).

Revenge for this defeat on the part of Syria had to wait until the time of Antiochus III. In 217 Egypt was triumphant at Raphia (11:11-12), but Antiochus consolidated his power and in 204 or 203 attacked again (11:13). At the battle of Panion in the north of Palestine he was victorious and this victory ensured that Palestine remained under Syrian control (11:14-16).

Having defeated Egypt, Antiochus sealed an alliance with Ptolemy V and gave him his daughter Cleopatra in marriage (11:17). He then tried to extend his power in the north into Europe until stopped by the Romans (11:18) and eventually died on an expedition to the east (11:19). Antiochus successor, Seleucus IV inherited a kingdom impoverished by war and concentrated on building up the treasury (11:20).

Seleucus was succeeded by Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who was not the lawful heir and was strongly suspected of trickery in securing the crown (11:21). To cement his success, Antiochus embarked on a policy of forced hellenization, requiring all his subjects to adopt Greek culture. In Jerusalem, the high priest Onias III was murdered in 170 B.C. and the party friendly to Antiochus gained the succession of the priesthood (11:22-23). Antiochus defeated an Egyptian army sent against him, taking the opportunity to enrich his supporters by distributing the booty (11:24). After his success in Palestine, Antiochus carried his campaign into Egypt, tricking Ptolemy VI and returning with more booty (11:25-28). A second invasion was not so successful, being thwarted by the appearance of a Roman fleet, and on his return in 168 B.C. Antiochus plundered Jerusalem (11:29-30).

By 167, the Greek party were firmly in control in Jerusalem, the daily sacrifices had ceased and an image of Olympian Zeus placed on the altar (11:31). Antiochus' policies were opposed by the Maccabees, the "wise" of 11:33. To "know" God (11:32) means to have a real personal intimate relationship with him, one which leads to action. Despite their loyalty, the Maccabean party were defeated and many died, though their deaths added a few less wholehearted supporters to the cause (11:34-35).

Meanwhile Antiochus went from strength to strength, identifying himself with Zeus Olympius and stamping out any worship but that of Zeus (11:36-39). At this point, the author turns from history to prediction. The time of the end is soon to arrive (11:40) and as predicted in Ezekiel 38 - 39 it will come when the leading world power invades the holy land, sweeping all before him (11:41). The author predicts a campaign deep into the heart of Egypt, from which he will return, alarmed by rumour, dying in the holy land at the place of the final battle as predicted by Joel 3:2 (11:45).

The defeat of Antiochus will be followed by great tribulation ending with a general resurrection to judgment (12:1-2). The idea of God's book of life has

a long history (Exodus 32:32-33; Psalm 69:28), but the circumstances of his time lead the author to make a decisive step forward. Surely God could not ignore the sacrifice of those who had given their lives in loyalty to the covenant. These are the suffering servants of God, who lead many to righteousness (12:3; Isaiah 53:11). They must be rewarded, if not here then in a future life and God's justice be vindicated by the fate of the wicked. Thus, this chapter signals a relatively new element in Jewish belief by predicting a resurrection of the righteous, of whom Daniel is to be one (12:13).

In fact, Antiochus did shortly meet his death, though not in the way predicted, and the daily sacrifices resumed. The timings of 12:11-12 suggest some adjustment to the time at which God's intervention was expected (12:7) until the fever pitch of expectancy died down with the resumption of normal religious life. But the book of Daniel remained as a testimony to the hope of God's people in time of trial.
