

PREFACE

The Book of Ezra tells the story of the return of the exiles from Babylon to Judah, and the re-building of the temple. Drawing on the memoirs of Ezra, it goes on to record his arrival in Judah in 458BC and his work in reforming the life of the community according to the law which he brought with him from Babylon. Tradition looks on him as a second Moses, who established the foundations of post-exilic Judaism.

The Book of Nehemiah draws on Nehemiah's memoirs to tell the story of his period as governor of Judah, firstly from 445-433BC, and then for a second term some years later. It was he who saw to the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem.

For suggestions as to further reading I recommend the bibliography prepared by Father Jean Louis Ska SJ, who is currently professor of Old Testament Studies at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome (see his website: http://www.biblico.it/doc-vari/ska_bibl.html). Go to Section X. I would add *1&2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah* by Celine Mangan OP (Michael Glazier, OT Message 13, 1982), and *Ezra & Nehemiah. Israel Alive Again* by Fredrick Carlson Holmgren (International Theological Commentary, Eerdmans 1987).

This translation is heavily dependent on the NRSV and the work of many scholars.

I thank Father Warrick Tonkin for the time and care he put into reading the manuscript and granting it the 'Nihil Obstat', and Archbishop Mark Coleridge for permission to publish. My prayer is that this Introductory Commentary will enrich your appreciation of these ancient and inspiring books.

– Feast of the Epiphany, 2012

INTRODUCTION

Beauty and Truth

The experience of beauty and the many ways in which we give expression to it arise from defined, delineated and limited experiences. That moment on a bridge crossing the Nattai river. The people there with me. Everything grey in the fading light of dusk. The sudden rush of ducks disturbing the silence as they splash their wings against the water and head off into the gathering night. The cold with the anticipation of a fire and a pleasant night spent with friends. All this and much more makes that moment a treasured memory that sets it apart from other experiences which have since faded and are lost. Nothing abstract and generalised here. Every element precise, and beautiful.

An early morning in Port Moresby after an evening when the full moon had cast its spell over our companionship. A pure white flower had emerged overnight from a place where I would have least expected to see it – a cactus! The surprise, the contrast, the sheer beauty, has left a memory that will not fade – though the flower itself lasted only for a day. Nothing abstract and generalised here. Every element precise, and beautiful. It is always so. It is our limitations that make us special, that set us apart, and it is precisely in our limitations that beauty lies and is revealed.

It is the same with truth. There is a place for abstraction, for general principles, for learning wisdom that can guide one's life. But every time we have an insight into the way things really are (as distinct from the way we are in the habit of thinking about things, or the way we would like things to be) it is by way of insight into a precise, delineated and necessarily limited experience. We gain insight into truth not in spite of our limitations, but in and through them. This is the way things are in the real world.

The Bible

This is the way things were for those who composed the Bible. There is a danger that we could be so fascinated by the notion that what we are reading is inspired by God that we might imagine that the precise, delineated and defined parameters of ordinary human experience are not factors to be considered when reading this sacred text. There is a danger that we could think of the Bible as being dictated by God in such a way that the human limitations of the inspired writers and of the circumstances in which they wrote have no relevance to what we find in the text. We could read the Bible texts as though they came straight from God and share in God's transcendent truth, somehow unrelated to history or to human experience. We could read them as if they expressed some abstract and eternal truth that is equally relevant in every age and to every person, because it comes from God who is unchanging Truth, and whose words, therefore, transcend the limitations of time, place and language.

The Bible is not like that. It is a record of limited human insights inspired by God that real people have expressed to other real people in limited human words and in specific cultural and historical circumstances. There is beauty and truth in the Bible texts. To find them (as distinct from imposing on the text our own preconceived notions) we will need to explore the historically conditioned and necessarily limited human experiences that gave rise to their inspired insights.

The aim of this Introductory Commentary is to discover and express what it was that the inspired authors of the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah intended to say by their words, what their contemporaries understood from these writings, why people found these writings inspiring, and why they cherished them, preserved them, copied them and handed them on. The Older Testament is the fruit of centuries of reflection by people who were convinced that their God, YHWH*, the Lord of creation and the Lord of history, had chosen them in love and had a special mission for them in the world. They believed that there was a special providence guiding their history. They kept reflecting on it to remember God's love and covenant with them, and to discern God's will, as well as to learn from their mistakes, and so become more sensitive, attentive and faithful. They cherished their traditions, including the reflections of those who went before them, but they knew that no words, however sacred, can comprehend the mystery that is God, and so they kept questioning, refining and adapting earlier insights in the light of newer revelation. They believed that it was God himself who was communicating with his people through the events of their history.

Inspiration

It is important to attempt to clarify what we mean when we say that the texts are 'inspired by God', for our understanding of inspiration will surely affect the way we read the texts, if not consciously then certainly unconsciously. We begin with four preliminary considerations.

The first is the importance of recognising that revelation and inspiration are not restricted to the biblical texts and their authors. As Paul says: God 'desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth'(1Timothy 2:4). Jesus assures us that God wants everyone to 'have life and have it abundantly'(John 10:10). It follows that God must constantly be revealing himself to everyone, and inspiring everyone to respond to grace in the most liberating and creative way, special to each person. Pope John-Paul II expresses this simply in his encyclical *The Mission of the Redeemer* when he writes: 'Every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit who is mysteriously present in every human heart'(n.29).

Of course, it is one thing for God to reveal himself. It is another for a person to recognise and respond to the revelation. When Jesus expresses his delight that God has revealed himself to 'little children'(Matthew 11:25), he is not saying that God is not revealing himself to others. Rather, he is delighting in the fact that there are those who are open to receive and welcome the revelation: those who are 'poor in spirit'(Matthew 5:5), 'humble'(Matthew 18:4), 'meek and humble of heart', like himself (Matthew 11:29). When we inquire about inspiration we are not looking for something found only in the Bible. Rather, we are looking for what makes the inspiration and revelation that we find in the Bible so special.

*spelt thus throughout to highlight the fact that it is a proper name, and in deference to Jewish practice of not pronouncing the divine name or writing it in its pronounceable form. When they read YHWH, they bow their head and say the word 'adonāy ('Lord').

Inspiration

Secondly, while it is true that the claim that the texts are inspired and reveal God is not subject to any scientific proof, it is also true that it is not an arbitrary claim. It is based on experience, for the texts have been found to be inspiring, and have helped people live beautiful and truthful lives by any standards that we might reasonably apply. People have continued to experience a special link between these texts and their experience of God. In the final analysis, the claim is an expression of how a community understands itself. Jesus' words apply here: 'You will know them by their fruits'(Matthew 7:16), as does his invitation: 'Come and see'(John 1:39).

Thirdly, we note two statements from the New Testament on the subject of inspiration. One is from Paul who writes to Timothy: 'All scripture, inspired by God, is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness'(2Timothy 3:16). Paul is speaking of the 'Old Testament' (an expression used by Paul in 2Corinthians 3:14), and he is encouraging Timothy to draw inspiration from the sacred scriptures, for they are useful in living a life that is faithful to God, and useful also in teaching others.

The second statement is from Peter who states that 'no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God'(2Peter 1:21). Philo, a Jewish writer of the first century, makes the same point: 'A prophet has no utterance of his own. All his utterances come from elsewhere. They echo the voice of Another'(Who is the Heir, 259). We have an example of this in Jeremiah, who tells us that he is tired of the rejection he experiences when he relays to the people what comes to him in his prayer. Yet he has to speak, for, as he says: 'within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot'(Jeremiah 20:9). Jeremiah is conscious of *speaking* out of his communion with YHWH – something the false prophets failed to do (see Jeremiah 23:22). The concept of inspiration is applied also to the *written* text. We are told: 'Jeremiah called Baruch son of Neriah, and Baruch wrote on a scroll at Jeremiah's dictation all the words of YHWH that he had spoken to him'(Jeremiah 36:4). We think, too, of the prophet who could say: 'The Spirit of YHWH is upon me'(Isaiah 61:1) – a text with which Jesus identified (see Luke 4:21).

Peter's statement and the above texts give us some insight into certain experiences of individual prophets and into some of the material found in the prophetic scrolls. However, there is no justification for generalising and seeing the prophetic experience as a model for inspiration throughout the Bible. Much of the Bible, including the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah, does not claim to be the words of prophets.

Fourthly, it is clear that Jesus has profound respect for the sacred scriptures. He states that 'Scripture cannot be deprived of its validity'(John 10:35), and he warns against failing to obey it (see Matthew 5:19). This does not mean, however, that Jesus or his disciples judged the Older Testament to be the last word of God on any issue. Quite the contrary. Jesus' disciples saw him as the fulfilment of God's promises to them, such that all previous expressions of God's revelation had to give way before the revelation offered in Jesus. Jesus did say: 'Not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished'(Matthew 5:18). But he also said that now that the law is 'accomplished', now that it has reached its goal, all that is imperfect must give way: 'It was said to you of old, but I say to you ...'(Matthew 5:21ff).

Having made these preliminary points, let us now try to understand what it is we are claiming when we say with Paul that ‘all scripture is inspired by God’ (2 Timothy 3:16). Firstly, we are not claiming that inspiration means that God dictated the words that the inspired authors wrote. There were times when the prophets experienced something close to this. We read in Jeremiah, for example: ‘YHWH put out his hand and touched my mouth; and YHWH said to me, “Now I have put my words in your mouth”’ (Jeremiah 1:9). On another occasion Jeremiah was told: ‘Take a scroll and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you’ (Jeremiah 36:2). However, even then, the words written by Jeremiah were Hebrew words with their own necessary limitations. If God is going to inspire someone to speak the truth, God must choose a limited, real, human being. There are no others from whom to choose. Furthermore, what the prophet had to say was directed to real people with their own real limitations of language, culture and experience.

We might wish it were otherwise. We might wish that the truths inspired by God in the sacred scriptures connected us immediately to God in such a way as to give the reader a share in God’s absolute truth. For then we would not have to undertake the task of finding out what it was that the inspired authors were actually saying, or how they were understood by their contemporaries, or why their words were treasured, copied and handed on. We cannot, however, avoid this task, for the inspired texts guided people to live their lives in their real world. They did not remove them (and they do not remove us) from it.

The model of an individual prophet speaking out of his inspired prayer is of little help when we ask about inspiration in regard to the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Those who composed the text did so in Judah probably some time in the fifth century BC. Their aim was to record the significance for the Jewish worshipping community of the contribution of two central figures from the middle of the fifth century: Ezra the priest and Nehemiah the governor.

These two books are the closest we get in the Hebrew Bible to what today we would call history. Of course, as with every book of history, those responsible for the texts had their own special perspective on events, and it will be our aim to attempt to discern what this perspective is.

History and Truth

We are right to expect to find truth when we read the texts of the Sacred Scriptures. In the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*) issued in 1965 by the Second Vatican Council we read:

Those divinely revealed realities that are contained and presented in sacred Scripture have been committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Holy Mother Church, relying on the belief of the apostles, holds that the books of both the Old Testament and the New Testament in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical because, having been written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church (n.11).

History and Story

The document goes on to explain that inspiration relates to what the inspired authors *assert*:

Since all that the inspired authors, or sacred writers, *assert* should be regarded as *asserted* by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture, firmly, faithfully and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures ... Seeing that, in sacred scripture, God speaks through people in human fashion, it follows that interpreters of sacred scripture, if they are to ascertain what God has wished to communicate to us, should carefully search out the meaning which the sacred writers really had in mind, that meaning which God had thought well to manifest through the medium of the words (n. 11-12).

Truth is found in the judgment. We communicate truthfully when what we *assert* expresses the way things are, as distinct from the ways we think they are, or would like them to be. The hard-earned gains of empirical science have rightly made us take great care that our judgments are based on discerned data. We want to know ‘the facts’ and are loath to trust those who start from abstract principles and deal out what they claim to be ‘truths’ without being able to ground them in tested experience.

There are many ways of communicating truth. The writing of history is one way. It involves the careful establishing of the data (what actually happened), as well as a careful attempt to express something of the significance of what happened. Of course, there are limits to the writing of history. We cannot possibly express everything that happened, and the kinds of answers we give are dependent on the kinds of questions we ask, and the perspective from which we approach the past.

The writing of history held an important place in the ancient world, as we see in the following statements from the Newer Testament. The first is from the opening words of Luke’s Gospel. The second is from the opening words of the First Letter of John. Luke writes:

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

John writes:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands.

Today we have strict expectations of the style and method which we judge appropriate for historians. While we expect historians to be imaginative in the way they arrange their material, they should present the ‘facts’ without adornment. Writing of ‘history’ in the ancient world allowed for more liberty of expression, but there were criteria to which historians were expected to adhere. In his *The Histories* (12.4c), the Greek historian Polybius (died c.122BC) asserts that it is best if a historian writes about matters which he has personally witnessed. However, he acknowledges that this is not always possible.

Since many events occur at the same time in different places, and one man cannot be in several places at one time, nor is it possible for a single person to have seen with his own eyes every place in the world and all the peculiar features of different places, the only thing left for a historian is to inquire of as many people as possible, to believe those worthy of belief, and to be an adequate critic of the reports that reach him.

Lucian of Samosata (died 180AD) agrees with modern historians in stating that ‘the sole task of the historian is to tell things just as they happened’ (*How to write history*, n. 39). However, a little later he writes: ‘If someone has to be brought in to give a speech, above all let the language suit the person and the subject . . . It is then that you can exercise your rhetoric and show your eloquence’ (n. 58). Thucydides (died c.400BC), a contemporary of the author of Ezra-Nehemiah, allows historians to compose speeches, but only after careful investigation and only with the aim of giving ‘the general sense of what was actually said’ (*Histories* 1.22.1).

Those responsible for the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah were interested in history, in the sense that they were interested in real people and their lives, but their aim was to connect their contemporaries with the precious religious insights that had come down to them from their ancestors, and they wrote to encourage fidelity to tradition. There are many historical facts presented in these books. However, they leave many of our questions unanswered. We need to remember that historical details are given only as witnessing to the presence and action of YHWH in their history.

Back to Inspiration

When we read these texts, it is important that we, too, are open to God’s Spirit inspiring us to see the implications of the sacred text for ourselves and for our world. Surely inspiration must be speaking about the presence of God’s Spirit guiding people in their lives and in their teaching, including those who created the source material, those who edited the final text and those who welcomed it as a true (though, of course, necessarily, limited) expression of their faith convictions. For, in the final analysis, it is the community of believers that recognises the texts as inspired, because it is the community that continues to find them inspiring. We might think of Beethoven being ‘inspired’ to compose the music. At times we might find a particular conductor ‘inspired’ in the way he can bring the best out of the orchestra and translate the wonder of the score in a striking way. Finally if no one finds the music or the performance inspiring, it is unlikely to long survive. Those responsible for the texts that we experience as inspired wanted their contemporaries to listen to the past so as to listen to the ways – at times the surprisingly new ways – that God was inspiring them to live now. The texts are religious texts intended to encourage fidelity and prayer. Saint Augustine insists that all the scriptures are there to provoke love – and we could add gratitude, repentance, praise and joy.

God’s inspiration is everywhere. God’s grace bears its marvellous fruit wherever people are attentive to this inspiration and let it guide them. What is special to the texts of the sacred scriptures is that the people of Israel (not just individual Israelites) considered them to give expression to God’s action among them and so to their faith. Disciples of Jesus continued to see the sacred writings of the Older Testament in this way in so far as these writings reached their fulfilment in Jesus.

Inspiration

To say that the material we are about to study is inspired is to accept that there was indeed a special divine providence guiding the people of post-exilic Judah (Yehud), and that this providence encompassed the writings which the community accepted as giving a genuine understanding of God's action in their history. As the Second Vatican Council states, we can be confident that these texts express 'without error *that truth which God willed to be put down in the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation*' (*Dei Verbum*, 11). Before all else the Bible is a truthful, though imperfect, statement of God's faithful love, and how we need to respond to this love.

The Jewish community included Ezra and Nehemiah among the texts that they considered foundational, and continues to experience God's inspiration through them. If we are to be open to the movements of God's Spirit as we read these texts, if we are to read these texts in the spirit in which they were written and preserved, and be guided in our response to God's will in the changing circumstances of our lives, we must do all we can to understand what the texts aimed to say and why they were preserved and handed down to us.

While doing all we can to read the texts of the Older Testament within their own context, it remains important that the texts be read from within the faith community to which they belong. For Christians, this means to read the texts in the light of Jesus, the one in whom God's word was made flesh, and in our reading to be guided by his Spirit. Yet even here, this is not enough. Even with the help of Jesus walking with them the disciples on the road to Emmaus did not understand the meaning of the scriptures till they encountered Jesus 'in the breaking of bread' (Luke 24:35).

It is at the Eucharist, when Jesus' disciples assemble, that the texts have their proper place, just as they were read when the people of Israel assembled in the temple or the synagogue to remember and to celebrate their faith.

Those who claim that the sacred scriptures are inspired are not claiming that they are free from error in areas that are not central to the witness that they give of God's action in the history of Israel and of how the people ought to respond. It is essential also to recognise that even in this their central thrust, they are human documents and, as we shall hope to show, they are not free from mistaken assumptions that were part of their time and their culture. However, with all these necessary limitations, they continue to inspire, for in their precise beauty they reveal God.

To say that these texts are inspired is to say that God was guiding his people, and that this guidance includes a special providence in guiding the writings in which their history is expressed. In much the same way Christians trust that the Spirit of Jesus is with us guiding us to the fullness of truth (see John 16:13; Matthew 28:20). The authority of scripture lies in the power these texts have to transform people's lives.

Who wrote the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah?

The first six chapters of the Book of Ezra write of the return of the exiles from Babylon and the rebuilding of the temple. The rest of Ezra and the Book of Nehemiah draw largely on the memoirs of these two men. Ezra, a scribe and a priest first visited Yehud in 458BC (see Ezra 7:7-8). The Persian government had no interest in imposing any religion on the many and varied peoples in its vast empire. Its strength, however, was its highly developed and efficient organisation. Subject peoples could follow their own laws, but the central government wanted a record of what those laws were. It was also determined to ensure that the laws of a province did not interfere with trade or taxation. It seems that Ezra was sent to Yehud as part of this policy. He brought with him a document that had been worked on in Babylon which covered basic aspects of law and cult (see Ezra 7:6, 12, 21). With input from the leaders in Yehud, there developed the basic constitution of Yehud which we know as the Torah.

Nehemiah was sent from Babylon to govern the province of Yehud. His governorship began in 445 (see Nehemiah 1:1; 2:1; 5:14) and ran till 433 (see Nehemiah 5:14; 13:6). He returned for a second term some time before 424 (the end of Artaxerxes' reign; see Nehemiah 13:6-7). There is no record of when his second term ended.

H. G. M. Williamson, in his book, *Israel in the Books of Chronicles* (Cambridge University Press, 1977) speaks for an increasing number of scholars, when, after comparing the style of the Books of Chronicles and the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah for over twenty pages, he concludes (page 59):

The evidence from style now available does not compel us to accept that these books are the work of a single author.

The Chronicler was re-writing the story of the kings of Judah probably at the end of the fourth century BC. In this commentary I will be working on the hypothesis that those who edited the memoirs of Ezra and Nehemiah and put them in context were working many decades before the Chronicler.

Yehud 538-458BC

The author of the Book of Ezra devotes the first six chapters to an account of the return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon, focusing especially on the rebuilding of the temple, which had been destroyed in 587, and the restoration of the cult. Yehud was a small part of the Ebed-Nahara satrapy of the Persian Empire. This satrapy covered the vast area west of the Euphrates River. In 538, having been welcomed into Babylon as a liberator, Cyrus issued an edict that the exiles from Judah could return home, with financial support to rebuild their temple (see Ezra 1:2-4; 6:2-5). They were led by a man called Sheshbazzar. He is called a 'prince of Judah' (Ezra 1:8), which may imply that he belonged to the royal family. Though he is described as 'governor' (peḥāh; Ezra 5:14) it is not clear that Yehud was at this stage an independent unit in the satrapy. Cyrus entrusted him with the return of the Temple vessels (1:7-11) and he began repairing the Temple (5:14-16).

The Yehud to which the exiles returned was a very different place from the Judah they had been exiled from some sixty years earlier. As the map on page 15 indicates, the Edomites, under pressure from the Nabatean Arabs had occupied southern Judah, and the population had been drastically reduced and impoverished.

Return from exile

Not surprisingly there were those in Judah who were reluctant to welcome the returning exiles (see Ezra 3:3; Zechariah 8:10). They were not happy to hand back the land they had occupied. The mixed population in Samaria, north of Jerusalem, did not want to revert to having a strong neighbour on their southern border. The zeal of the returning exiles met with strong resistance and their attempts to carry out their mission of rebuilding the temple were thwarted (see Ezra 4:4-5).

Cyrus was killed in battle in 530 and was succeeded by his son, Cambyses, who died rather mysteriously on his way back from a successful campaign in Egypt in 522. Darius claimed the throne. It took him some years to consolidate his power, but once successful he issued in a century of stable political leadership. Darius reigned from 522-486; Xerxes I from 486-465 and Artaxerxes I from 465-424.

Among the returning exiles were Zerubbabel and Jeshua (Ezra 2:2). At some stage, they played a leading role in setting up an altar and re-establishing the cult (see Ezra chapter 3). They did this in spite of local pressure (Ezra 3:3) and strong resistance from the Samaritans (see Ezra 4:1). Zerubbabel is described as the 'son of Shealtiel' (see Ezra 3:2, 8; 5:2; Nehemiah 12:1; Haggai 1:1, 12, 14; 2:2, 23), and so the grandson of King Jechoniah. The Ezra scroll does not indicate his position in Judah, but he is called 'governor of Judah' in Haggai 1:1, 14; 2:2, 21. The prophet Haggai is mentioned along with the prophet Zechariah in Ezra 5:1; 6:14.

When Zerubbabel arrived in Yehud is not clear. What is clear is that it was King Darius who supported the rebuilding of the temple after nearly twenty years of inaction (see Ezra chapter 6). The temple was completed in 516BC, 'on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius' (Ezra 5:15).

In *The Hebrew Bible* (Fortress Press, 1985, page 430) Norman Gottwald writes:

With the death of Cyrus's successor Cambyses, a major uprising shook the Persian Empire. As part of an effort to pacify the empire, Darius decided to launch a more serious drive to recolonize Judah as a strategic military and political salient on the frontier with troublesome Egypt.

It is not surprising that the presence of King Jeconiah's grandson in Yehud awakened a desire for a restoration of the Davidic kingship (see Haggai 2:23). The prophet Zechariah is confident that the dire situation in Jerusalem and Judah will be reversed when YHWH returns. Like Haggai, Zechariah is confident that YHWH will bring in a new order, for YHWH is 'YHWH of hosts' (1:3), the 'lord of the whole earth' (4:14). Unlike Haggai who looks to Zerubbabel to restore the Davidic dynasty, Zechariah speaks more vaguely of a coming 'Branch' (3:8; 6:12) of the Davidic line, who will be YHWH's instrument in reconstructing the temple. His vision is more expansive than Haggai's in that he sees other nations as joining Judah in YHWH's new order (2:11; 8:20-23).

A number of factors need to be kept in mind if we are to understand something of the situation of Yehud in the period after the exile. One is the dramatic loss of population. Most of those who were dispersed to Babylon or Egypt never returned. Another is that Yehud was landlocked, surrounded by unfriendly neighbours and was of little economic interest to Persia. Yehud remained economically stagnant through till the middle of the fifth century.

This highlights the extraordinary achievement of such a small population living in such a depressed environment. Everything being equal, it is a wonder that the Jews in Yehud did not disintegrate and disappear, as did many of the small nations around them.

We should also consider the change in the place of the temple in the life of Jerusalem. Prior to the exile the temple was closely linked with the king's palace. The ordinary populace came to it only on special occasions. This changed after the exile. There was no king, and the temple functioned as Jerusalem's social and economic, as well as religious, centre. The local leadership of the Jews was in the hands of a governor, the temple priests and the leading landowners.

Then there was the problem of taxation. The Persian empire was built on a tightly controlled public service, to facilitate trade, and to ensure the collection of taxes. Like other subject peoples, the people of Yehud had to support the king, the satraps and the local governors. Added to this was a temple tax for the support of the temple building and the cult.

We have no evidence to assist us in ascertaining when or how Zerubbabel's governorship ended. Persia may have lost confidence in him because of the local desire to reconstitute the Davidic kingship (see Haggai). The only governor in the first half of the fifth century whose name we can be confident of is Elnathan (not mentioned in the Bible, but known from an inscription). The high priests who succeeded Jeshua in the same period were Joiakim and Eliashib (see Nehemiah 12:10).

The key international factors that influenced Yehud throughout the fifth century were the increasing power of Greece, the attempts of Babylon and Egypt to achieve independence from Persia, and Persia's response in strengthening its presence in Yehud and the adjoining states. In 490 the Athenian army repulsed the Persians at Marathon. In 480 the Greek city states defeated the Persian navy at the Battle of Salamis. Throughout the 80's the destabilizing effect of the Greco-Persian wars was felt throughout the Persian Empire, including in Yehud.

Babylon became to all intents and purposes independent in 481. This would have had an effect on the Jews who remained behind there, and also on those living in Yehud. Likewise, the defeat of the Persian army in 458 by Egypt, backed by the Athenian navy. However this revolt was suppressed by the satrap of the trans-Euphrates satrapy, Megabyzus. The 50's was a decade of constant struggle between Persia and Egypt. This led to an increase of Persian control in Yehud and neighbouring regions – something that needs to be remembered when we are reading material composed in Yehud in these years.

A number of the prophetic scrolls appear to have been composed during the fifth century. It is likely that Obadiah was composed some time in the first half of the fifth century. Zechariah 9-14 and Joel may also fit best there, perhaps in the 50's. Malachi speaks of a 'governor' (1:8), not a king, and there is a functioning temple (1:6 - 2:3). The connections between the concerns of Malachi and the concerns expressed in the Book of Nehemiah, yet his apparent ignorance of Nehemiah's divorce legislation (see Nehemiah 13:23-27), suggest that Malachi may fit best in the middle of the fifth century, in the early period of Nehemiah's governorship.

The fifth century

Malachi and Nehemiah share a concern to provide for temple sacrifices (Malachi 1:6-14; see Nehemiah 10:32-39; 13:31); for tithes (Malachi 3:8-12; see Nehemiah 10:37-39; 13:10-14); and for appropriate marriage partners (Malachi 2:10-12; see Nehemiah 11:23-27; also Ezra 9-10). Both Malachi and Nehemiah object to the way the disadvantaged are exploited (Malachi 3:5; see Nehemiah 5:1-13).

The Book of Jonah may well have been a protest against the policies of both Ezra and Nehemiah who sought to have foreign wives and their children banished from Judah as a means of helping to 'purify' the nation (see Ezra 9-10; Nehemiah 9:1-5). Nehemiah would not be pleased with a satirical presentation of a rather bumbling Jewish prophet and God showing compassion for the people of foreign Nineveh.

Just after the defeat of Persia by Egypt and Athens, Artaxerxes I sent Ezra to Yehud. Ezra, a scribe (civil servant) and a priest, arrived in Jerusalem with a group of returning exiles in 458 (Ezra 7:7-8; see page 11).

In 445 Nehemiah was sent from Babylon as governor (see already, page 11). He was commissioned to re-construct Jerusalem, to re-populate Judah and Jerusalem and to establish the rule of law based on the injunctions of the Torah. Nehemiah aroused public opinion against harsh creditors (Nehemiah 5:1-13). He also favoured Judahites who were ex-exiles against those who had remained behind. He considered the exiles to be 'holy seed', purified in exile. The Samaritans under the governor Sanballat, appointed by Persia, consistently opposed Nehemiah, especially when he began fortifying Jerusalem.

In Yehud in the 5th century a Jew was determined by birth, hence the importance of 'racial purity', and the injunctions against mixed marriages. A Jew was characterised by loyalty to the Torah and support of the Temple. It was deemed important for the Jews to identify what it was about them that was special. The covenant with YHWH was, of course, the most important element in this, but accent was also put on sect-specific laws such as the Sabbath laws, the cult laws and the food laws.

Writings from the early Persian Period (500-400BC)

A major change in thinking is obvious when we compare the writings of this and later periods with those of the pre-exilic and exilic prophets.

Firstly, in the pre-exilic period when Judah was ruled by its king, the injustice that troubled the prophets came from within the state of Israel, and the prophets attacked the leaders who were able to do something about the situation. In post-exilic Yehud, the major injustices were perpetrated by dominating foreign powers: Persia in the fifth century, and later Greek-Egyptian, Greek-Syrian, and Roman. What could a small community do about these injustices?

Unlike the other religions of the ancient Near East, which were bound into the circular movement of the seasons, the religion of Israel was a 'linear' religion. They saw themselves as a people living in history, a history that was guided by God towards a goal determined by God. Israel saw itself as having a special role in the movement towards this goal.

In this sense the religion of Israel is essentially 'eschatological'. This was always the case. It became especially significant in the Judaism of the period after the exile, the Judaism lived by the people of Yehud.

Those who were striving to keep the spirit of the people alive did not pretend to see in their circumstances the seeds of hope for a renewed Israel. They encouraged their people to look beyond history to an intervention of their God, YHWH, the Lord of nature and the Lord of history. Only such an intervention could liberate them and bring about the fulfilment of God's promises.

They kept alive the writings of the past, and gave new life to them by applying them to the new circumstances in which they found themselves. They kept pointing the people to look beyond their present experience of hopelessness and powerlessness, to a faithful God who would keep his promises and the covenant that made them God's special and treasured people. Their sense of mission was neutralized, as they came to feel insignificant in the vast empires that engulfed them. The prophets encouraged them to take their delight in the Law, to attempt to keep it perfectly, and to wait for God to act.

Those who introduced, incorporated and commented on the memoirs of Ezra and Nehemiah were witnessing to YHWH working through Ezra and Nehemiah to build a community that was faithful to the covenant as expressed in the Torah.

Judah (Yehud) after the exile



Factors to remember in reading ancient texts

In his *Introduction to Reading the Pentateuch* (Eisenbrauns 2006), Jean Louis Ska highlights factors that we, as modern readers, need to be aware of as we read the text (pages 165-183). I will note three of them here. The first is that, for the authors of the Torah and for those for whom they wrote, the value of anything is directly related to its age: the more ancient, the more value. This is not something that we moderns see as obvious. For the ancients it was of primary importance. This is why genealogies are so important. They establish the antiquity of a family or an institution. This is why they begin their legislation so often with: 'YHWH said'. They want the readers to reflect on the origins of their faith and to read the text as expressing insight into the essence of the revelation that brought them into being in the beginning. Much of the Torah is an imaginary reconstruction of the Wilderness Period, for the authors wanted their contemporaries to relate their experiences with that of the first generation of Israelites. The monarchy had failed, but the religion of Israel went back well before the monarchy. The temple had been destroyed, but the cult went back well before the temple. Assyria, Babylon and Persia had proved more powerful militarily than Israel, but it was YHWH, the God of Israel, who created the universe and the nations – all of them.

A major problem facing the returning exiles is that those who had not gone into exile resented their return. The returning exiles wanted to reclaim their land – land that others had occupied in their absence thinking that they would never come back. The returning exiles identified closely with Moses and the people who had escaped from Egypt. Those who had stayed in the land identified with Abraham. A key reason for composing the Pentateuch was to form a united people. It was imperative that both groups come to see that the God who revealed Himself to Moses is the 'God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob' (Exodus 3:6).

Linked to this respect for what is ancient is the essentially conservative stance of the authors. For them ancient laws and customs could not be eliminated even when circumstances required their updating. Whatever may have happened in earlier times, the leaders of post-exilic Judah were anxious to be completely faithful to God's will, so they were meticulously careful not to attempt to harmonise the material that they inherited, even though some of it no longer applied to their changed circumstances. After all, such was their faith in God's presence and action among them that they considered their laws and customs to have a divine origin: a faith expressed in the words 'YHWH said'.

A third and related factor was their desire to demonstrate that the ancient traditions had an ongoing value for their contemporaries. They preserved the ancient material, not as museum pieces, but because they saw it as a revelation from God and they trusted that it could still guide them. We will see how they attempted to point this out in the way they told the stories and in the way they commented on the text. They did not want their contemporaries to get caught up in nostalgia for the past. It was important that they live now in a way that was faithful to God and that would avoid the mistakes of the past for which they had paid such a high price. It follows from this that, though we have some uncertainty as to how much written material the authors of the text received from earlier generations of writers, we should be confident that the post-exilic authors have a vision of Israel/Judah that transcended their own experience and their own time.

Defective concepts of God

We began this Introduction by pointing out that beauty and truth are always precise, delineated, defined. We then examined what we mean when we claim that the Bible is inspired. Now, in the light of what we have written about the necessarily limited views of those inspired by God to compose these texts, we should look at some of the main limitations of understanding that pervade the literature we are about to study, both in regard to their way of conceiving God, and in their way of understanding the appropriate human response to God's revelation. I am encouraged to do this by the words of Karl Rahner: 'Theology can create openings for adventures of the mind and heart, if we have but the courage to embark upon them, and both the courage and the humility to retrace our steps as soon as we become aware of having erred' (*Inspiration in the Bible*, page 7).

There are as many concepts of God as there are minds that conceive, for God cannot be observed directly, put to the test, and made subject to human comprehension and definition. Many concepts of God are clearly erroneous: the so-called 'god' who controls the world from outside; the so-called 'god' who is exalted at the expense of humanity; the so-called 'god' who upholds vested interests, who justifies the successful, who supports apartheid, patriarchy, hypocritical piety, immature dependency and infantile illusions. 'God' can be a projection of our fears: another word for fate, the stars, demons. 'God' can be a projection of our needs for self-indulgence, prestige, or power. 'God' can be a support for our insecurity, anchoring a meaningless life in submission to a power-object.

We should not expect the authors of the Pentateuch to be completely free from some of these erroneous ways of thinking. As we emphasised when we looked at inspiration, if God is going to inspire someone to communicate a truth, God is going to have to inspire a limited human being. There are no unlimited human beings to inspire! We do not have to assume that the authors of the texts we are going to study knew everything about everything, and, if we are going to appreciate the truth that they were inspired to write, we need to be aware of where their thinking was limited. Three key areas stand out.

Monotheism

In the texts we are studying, YHWH as conceived is a very Israelite God. Only one God was to be worshipped, YHWH, not the gods of foreign nations, or the gods of Canaan. True, in the post-exilic period, the idea of monotheism was in the air, but how thorough was it? Genuine monotheism includes the amazing insight that the mysterious divine presence with whom we experience a profound communion is the one 'God' present and revealed in different ways in different cultures.

Enemies of Israel are enemies of God

A second assumption found throughout much of the Hebrew Scriptures is that the enemies of Israel are also the enemies of God: 'Have no dread or fear of them. YHWH your God, who goes before you, is the one who will fight for you' (Deuteronomy 1:29-30; also 3:22; 20:4); 'I will be an enemy to your enemies and a foe to your foes' (Exodus 23:22; see Numbers 31).

A God who controls the world

A third assumption is that God controls nature and history, such that happenings that are judged to be good are seen as expressions of God's blessing, whereas happenings that are judged to be bad are seen as expressions of God's disapproval and punishment. This way of looking at things permeates the texts we are studying. The basis for this misunderstanding is their way of thinking of 'power'. In our human experience power is often abused. It is often expressed as control. When the authors think of God as 'Almighty', declaring their faith that there are no limits to God's power, they have not yet come to the insight (so clear in the life and words of Jesus) that God is love, and consequently that the power God has is the power of love. It is God's love-power that has no limits, not God's exercise of control. No wonder it was difficult for Jesus' contemporaries to see God's 'almighty power' revealed in the one who was crucified on Calvary. Paul recognised this as 'a stumbling block for the Jews' (1Corinthians 1:23).

When, as adults, we experience someone attempting to control us, we do not experience this as love. While love is demanding, and is willing to challenge and correct, it never controls. Love respects others as sacred and respects their freedom. Love does not (cannot) protect us from suffering the consequences of our misuse or abuse of freedom, for love loves; it does not control. The idea of God controlling is so embedded in our psyche that we have to be determined if we are to listen attentively to Jesus, and watch him reveal God as precisely not controlling. Jesus wept with disappointment over Jerusalem; he did not reorganize it. He could see what would happen to the city if people did not change, but he did not punish it. Jesus pleaded with Judas; he did not take control. Throughout the texts we are studying there is a clear assumption that God is the one ultimately deciding what happens.

In saying that God does not control the world we are not saying that God is doing nothing. God loves. This is the love of which Paul speaks: 'Love has space enough to hold and to bear everything and everyone. Love believes all things, hopes all things, and endures whatever comes. Love does not come to an end' (1Corinthians 13:7-8). We have come to see that creation is free to evolve according to the natural interaction of its energies. God does not intervene to cut across this. God is constantly acting in creation, – by loving. When creation is open to God's action, beautiful, 'miraculous' things happen. This is the way God has chosen creation to be: an explosion of love, and so an explosion of being that is free and not determined. We experience this.

When we open ourselves to welcome God's providence, divine love bears fruit in our lives. Closing ourselves to God's gracious will is what we call sin. God respects our freedom even when our choices hurt us and hurt others. But God continues to offer healing, forgiving, creating love. Many of the texts we will be reading state this, and state it beautifully, but they are not consistent, and the way the authors understand God's relationship with the world is quite different from the way we have seen it through the life and teaching of Jesus.

Not a controlling God

Jesus' contemporaries assumed that a person was blind because he was being punished for sin (see John 9:2). They assumed Jesus was being punished by God when they saw him being crucified. They were wrong. We no longer assume that things happen because they are either directly willed or directly allowed by a God who controls everything. If we are looking for what God is doing we have learned to look for love. We do not – or at least we should not – assume that it was God who determined that Jesus would be crucified. He was crucified by people who chose to resist God's will. What God willed was that Jesus respond in love, and that is what happened, because Jesus chose to listen and to respond to grace.

The authors of the texts we are about to read understood miracles as divine intervention, rather than as examples of what happens when we human beings open ourselves to God's constant loving action in our lives and in our world. To use Jesus' image, the sun and the rain are constant and are offered to everyone. 'Miracles' are what happens when we open ourselves to the 'sun' and the 'rain' – when we welcome God's action and allow God's grace to bear fruit in our lives.

The understanding present in the texts we are about to read is still shared by many. Some still want God to intervene when what we should be doing is opening ourselves to love, and helping others to do the same. If we were to do this, think of the 'miracles' that would happen in this world: miracles that only love can make possible. Jesus revealed God as love. God's love is all-powerful. We can pray, like a child, for whatever it is we desire, so long as we open ourselves to love and allow love to work its purifying and energising effect in us and in our world – so long as we conclude our prayer, as Jesus did, with the words: 'Not my will but yours be done' (Mark 14:36).

In the course of history these texts have inspired people from every culture. Their meaning has also been covered over, much as wood is covered with layer upon layer of paint till we have no idea of its native beauty. People continue to use the texts to claim divine authority for their own prejudices and unexplored assumptions. The texts have purified cultures. Cultures have also accommodated the texts to support their failure to be converted by them. We cannot avoid bringing our own assumptions to the text in the questions we ask of it, and so in the answers we find. But at least we must make the effort to check what we claim as our insights by examining the meaning of the words used – the meaning then, not now – and the literary forms, and the way the editors chose to link their sources.

The authors of Ezra and Nehemiah invite us to continue the process of interpretation. As they recorded the contribution of Ezra and Nehemiah to the restoration of their community they were asking: 'What is the essence of being in a covenant with YHWH'.

I hope that something of a response to this question will emerge for you who choose to reflect with me on these books. It has been my pleasure and privilege to be guided by the scholars who have devoted their time and talent to guiding me. Let us listen together to words that, under God's inspiration, were composed by scribes who were determined to be faithful, whatever the cost, to the faith they had inherited.

